

“COMING OUT OF THE INTERNET” LESBIAN AND GAY ACTIVISM AND THE INTERNET AS A “DIGITAL CLOSET” IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Internet as a “digital closet” in the context of Turkish lesbian and gay activism in the 1990s and early 2000s. In its analysis of media and sexual discourse, the article first discusses traditional media, such as the printing press and television. While the printing press and political reforms during the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish republic silenced sexual discourses, television brought them back as part of the new gender regime and disseminated a gender “deviance” model of homosexuality. Against this background, the rest of the article analyzes the metaphor of the Internet as a digital closet as it relates to collegiate lesbian and gay activism. The conclusion reflects on the significance and functions of this media metaphor for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual agency and subjectivities in Turkey, suggesting similar venues of research regarding sexuality and the Arab Spring in the Middle East.

Turkish lesbian and gay¹ activists have utilized the Internet to advance their activism since its inception in 1993. In 2001, however, some activists launched a new campaign titled “coming out of the Internet” to encourage closeted lesbians and gay men, with whom they had been in touch through the Internet, to come out. While still activism-oriented, this campaign put a new spin on the metaphor of the closet and the centerpiece act of visibility (i.e., coming out) of the Euro-American gay rights movement since the middle of the twentieth century by equating

the closet with the Internet, thus attempting to institute the concept of a “digital closet” in Turkey. Others have already written about the digital closet in diverse contexts such as social networking (Alston 2010); online gaming (Kuchera 2009); online pseudonymity and the politics of sexual identity (Phillips 2002); and gay activism in India (Roy 2002); therefore, I do not claim that it is unique to the Turkish context. My concern here is how historical and local media-related dynamics inform this reinterpretation and re-mediation of the central metaphor of twentieth-century Euro-American lesbian and gay existence in Turkey.

The globalization of lesbian and gay identities and the U.S. model of identity politics have caused concerns among scholars. As Dennis Altman (2002, 416) confirms, “The very idea of a universal homosexual category—reflected in the language of an international gay and lesbian movement—is thus a product of globalization.” Scholars within and outside lesbian and gay studies have criticized this complex phenomenon primarily for the assumed universalism and essentialism perceived to be central to these identities² and their misleading application to same-sex desire and practices in other cultures. For example, as early as the beginning of the 1990s, Ann Maria Alonso and Maria Teresa Koreck (1993, 110) stated, “The familiar Anglo categories of sexual orientation—homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual—are culturally specific rather than universal or natural, and cannot be applied to northern Mexican and Chicano populations without misrecognition.” Similarly, Harriet Whitehead (1993, 498) warned, “Cross-cultural investigations of homosexuality have too often been used to support various interpretations of the Western homosexual; thus, studies which posit an underlying identity between the Native American berdache—gender-crosser—and the modern ‘homosexual’ only serve to obscure the berdache’s meaning within Native American culture.”

Other studies of the globalization of lesbian and gay identities built on the critique of assumed universalism and essentialism to draw attention to the imperialistic and neo-colonialist implications of the deployment of these identities in postcolonial contexts. For example, according to Ann Ferguson (1990, 64), “the very *concept* of an international lesbian culture is politically problematic, for the most likely model under which it could come into existence is a cultural imperialist one, of Western lesbian liberation movements importing our notions of

the proper values for a lesbian culture of resistance onto other societies.” Pedro Bustos-Aguilar (1995) criticized gay ethnographers for their imperialistic attitudes toward same-sex populations in Latin America. Most recently, Joseph A. Massad (2007) described the deployment of lesbian and gay identities in the Middle East as yet another instance of Orientalism and neocolonialism and criticized the “Gay International,” his term for the LGBT human rights organizations operating in the region, for “inciting” Western-style (i.e., lesbian and gay) discourses of sexuality in the Arab world.

These critiques, however, neglect to examine how and why these identities are adopted and utilized in local contexts by diverse populations in the Middle East and elsewhere and fail to investigate the role of media in this phenomenon. In her bibliographic essay about “cyber-queer” research, Nina Wakeford (2002) surveys existing scholarship on how computer technologies have changed the way lesbians and gay men find each other and associate in such diverse international contexts as Finland, the United States, Taiwan, and South Korea. Her main critique of cyberqueer research concerns the following:

As a whole researchers have not paid attention to the ways in which Internet interactions are changing the politics of social movements, or even the ways in which social movements themselves are constituted. Even though there has been an interest in how intra-group discussions frame the constituency and norms of the participants, there has been little work looking at the implications of on-line activist resources for local actions. (139)

Thus, through my focus on the digital closet in this article, I investigate the role of media, both traditional and new, in the context of Turkish lesbian and gay activism. I first discuss how traditional media (i.e., the printing press and television) have affected sexual discourses historically in Turkey. This overview serves as a background for my analysis in the rest of the article of how Legato, an intercollegiate lesbian and gay association, used the Internet both as a tool for activism to recruit and train student activists on college campuses and as a metaphor rhetorically deployed to criticize the status quo regarding homosexuality in Turkey in the 1990s and early 2000s and encourage others to come out. I conclude by exploring possible implications for LGBT agency and the recent Arab

Spring in the Middle East. Coverage of the Arab Spring often discusses the role of new media, while marginalizing the issue of sexuality and the ongoing gay rights movements in the region; the unpacking of activist metaphors, such as that of the Internet as a digital closet in the LGBT context in Turkey, presents opportunities to re-inscribe sexuality as one of the central issues into important discussions regarding the current upheavals in the region.

SEXUALITY AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA IN TURKEY

Lesbian and gay identities presuppose a heterosexist sex/gender system that depends on a dichotomously binary view of gender, that is, a seemingly strict and natural division between the biological categories of males and females. Turkey's transition from an Islamic empire into a secular, democratic republic presents one of the most interesting instances of how sexuality and media intersect to inflect transnational discourses of sexuality and identities in a particular national context. Two forms of media are particularly relevant to my discussion in this section: the printing press and television. The emergence and bolstering of mass society as a consequence of the advent of these technologies in Turkey parallels the vicissitudes of the discourses of sexuality, from the disappearance of same-sex discourses at the end of the nineteenth century in the Ottoman Empire, to the rise of heterosexuality in the early republic, to the importation of specifically lesbian and gay sexualities in the 1990s in the Turkish national context.

In his study of sexual discourse in the late Ottoman Middle East, Dror Ze'evi (2005) focuses on the center of the empire (geographically, an area that approximates modern Turkey today, including Istanbul, which was at that time the imperial capital). In his survey of medical texts, shadow theater plays, and erotic literature, "three major loci of Middle Eastern cultural production" (36), Ze'evi demonstrates that same-sex desire and contact were discussed explicitly side-by-side with other sexual practices. At the end of this survey, Ze'evi states,

The discourses in the three types of cultural production described above—medical treatises, shadow theater plays, and erotic books—are bound together by a similar attitude toward sex and sexuality. This

is an attitude that could be characterized as pleasure-bound, male-oriented, and practically uninhibited by religion or morality.... Other textual genres, including jurisprudence and moral literature, often offer a critique of some practices considered transgressions of religious boundaries, but they too share this basic common view of sex and sexuality. Certain sexual practices may be prohibited by divine sanction or man-made law in order to preserve social order, and should even be punished harshly in some cases, but that does not make them deviant, abnormal, or unnatural in any way. This is made clear even by the fact that most authors and compilers of erotica were themselves members of the religious establishment. (43)

The attitude that Ze'evi identifies as "pleasure-bound, male-oriented, and practically uninhibited by religion or morality" confirms Khaled El-Rouayheb's (2005) conclusions regarding the existence of the three discursive strands of same-sex desire and practices (i.e., the role-based strand, the platonic love of human beauty, and the religious-judicial strand) and their permissibility from a religious and cultural perspective in the Arab-Islamic Middle East between 1500 and 1800.³

While both El-Rouayheb and Ze'evi mention Westernization and modernization as reasons for the decline of the discourses of sexuality, including same-sex practices, Ze'evi's focus on the core of the empire stresses Ottoman agency and the printing press as the key factors that determined the fate of these discourses in the nineteenth century. As a result of increased interaction with Europe, the Ottoman Empire initiated a series of reforms to modernize itself, which in practice meant its Westernization, especially regarding its sex and gender norms. During this process, pre-modern discourses (e.g., in the fields of medicine, theater, and the law) of sexuality that portrayed sexual, including same-sex, practices gradually disappeared due to ascending European sexual mores in the nineteenth century (Ze'evi 2005, 44 – 5). In his analysis of how and why the sexual discourse on desire and practices disappeared, Ze'evi identifies the introduction of the printing press in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century as the main factor that transformed Ottoman attitudes toward sexuality, including same-sex desire and contact. The printing press not only increased the accessibility of textual discourse, but also widened the impact of the genre of the travelogue,

both of which led to self-censorship regarding matters of sexuality and the ensuing disappearance of sexual discourse in nineteenth-century Ottoman society. Thanks to the printing press, larger segments of the population had access to books that were previously largely unavailable. This public availability of textual discourse meant that elites controlling the discourses of sexual desire and practices could no longer limit their dissemination, and their response was to censor the available material in order to ease worries regarding the potential chaos that the public's newfound access to these sensitive materials could cause (46).

In addition to increased accessibility to textual sexual discourses, the printing press also made available travelogues written by both Western and Ottoman travelers. According to Ze'evi, from the eighteenth century on, European travelers' accounts were critical of the Ottoman moral codes with regard to same-sex desire and contact, as heteronormalcy was firmly established in Europe (47). In addition, in these travelogues, the existence of same-sex discourse and practices was tied to cultural and political corruption, thus advancing negative, Orientalist judgments about the Ottoman culture. This is how Ze'evi describes the Ottoman reactions to these travelogues: "Ottoman readers were appalled when they looked in the mirror set up for them by this genre. Their state and their society were depicted as a nest of sexual corruption, with a clear link established between homoerotic practices, the failure of modernity, and political weakness" (48). In reaction to these perceptions, the elite began censoring textual discourse of its sexual, including same-sex, content, leading to the disappearance of sexual discourse.

Ze'evi also discusses accounts written by Ottoman travelers who visited Europe and observed a variety of social manners, including those related to gender and sexuality. As these travelers encountered a different approach toward sex and morals, as well as misperceptions regarding the Ottoman culture and its sexual mores, most of them criticized European morality, pointing out its perceived inferiority and deficiencies, such as the lack of gender separation between men and women in public. Ze'evi claims that the clash between the two civilizations, which engendered Ottoman Occidentalism in response to European Orientalism, shut down the sexual discourse, pushing it out of the textual sphere into male and female intimate circles. This caused the formation of a new moral code in the Ottoman world, where heteronormalcy began to be

emphasized as the norm and silence surrounded all other sexual desires and practices, including same-sex ones (49 – 50).

The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after World War I was followed by the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, and the continuing modernization in the form of Westernization furthered the silencing of sexual discourses and the rise of heteronormalcy as the one-party Kemalist (after the national leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) nationalist state intensified its efforts to create a loyal and uniform (i.e., exclusively “Turkish”) citizenry, de-emphasizing differences, including linguistic and sexual. For example, the alphabet reform of 1928, which replaced the Arabo-Persian alphabet of the Ottoman Turkish with the Latin alphabet of “new, purified” Turkish that became the only accepted medium of writing and instruction (Parla 2008), completely severed the ties between Ottoman sexual discourse and the Turkish people by eliminating the need for, and the possibility of, people to learn the Ottoman language and read the textual discourse about the Ottoman heritage of same-sex practices. The end of gender separation and the accompanying rise of monogamous heterosexual coupling in such public spheres as dancing further introduced and instituted heteronormalcy in the fledgling republic (van Dobben 2008), widening the chasm between the Ottoman heritage of same-sex practices and the new republican heterosexual norms.

Turkey’s uneven transition from a one-party state to a multiple-party democracy in the following years, however, has involved much social unrest, political violence, and economic hardship, punctuated by three military interventions in politics in 1960, 1971, and 1980. While the military eventually returned the government to civilian politicians each time, these interventions also silenced different voices, including that of the emerging sexual minorities. According to Hüseyin Tapınç (1992, 46 – 7), the idea of homosexuals politically organizing as part of “ecologists/greens and radicals” emerged in the 1970s in Izmir, but the political climate of the time and the associated military interventions in civilian politics suppressed those efforts through repressive policies. In the mid-1980s, this movement reemerged as part of the Radical Democratic Green Party, which included homosexuals as well as “anti-militarists, atheists, greens, and feminists” (46). According to Tapınç, this political alliance led to “the organization of various political demonstrations, sit-

ins, and hunger strikes (particularly by transvestites) against the brutal oppressions of the police force in Istanbul and the proclamation of the 'gay situation' in public discussions and publications" (47).

While the printing press and the republican reforms replaced sexual discourses with the discourse of heterosexuality, television would change the representation of gender and sexuality in Turkey during the post-military-coup period in the 1990s. Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu (TRT, Turkish Radio and Television), Turkey's first television station, was established in 1964. TRT largely functioned to disseminate the state ideology:

The TRT, despite numerous efforts to make it more autonomous, remained a state monopoly susceptible to government intervention. It was essentially the voice of the state, the medium for the official definition and interpretation of the central Kemalist bureaucracy, that was conveyed to the people. Any challenges to the official ideology were thwarted by a multilevel system of self-censorship. All TV and radio networks operated by the TRT were run from Ankara with little regard for local needs and expectations. (Sahin and Aksoy 1993, 32)

As such, TRT's programming avoided the taboo subject of sexuality as much as possible and emphasized heterosexuality and family.

The establishment of private television channels as part of the larger media globalization at the beginning of the 1990s, however, challenged TRT's monopoly and loosened its hold over the representation of gender and sexuality on television, thus relativizing the Turkish culture:

The new global media have had a big hand in the dissolution of official dogmas and the relativization of Turkish culture.... [T]he contours of the national culture and identity have been redrawn in the process. The new global media were effective in bringing the *other* into Turkey much more convincingly than the official ideology-laden programming of the TRT.... The global stations operating outside the official ideology helped turn Turkey into a shooting gallery of taboos by bringing... gender roles, sex, etc. into the realm of public discussion. Official "untouchables" like... transvestites, homosexuals, radical feminists... paraded through news magazines and talk shows.... Coherence and consistency became as outmoded as the Kemalist principles upon which the republic was

founded. (Sahin and Aksoy 1993, 37 – 8)

Among the specific television personalities that challenged the gender norms in Turkish society during this period, two celebrities stand out: the late Zeki Müren, a queer male singer⁴ who wore makeup and women's clothing and accessories, and Bülent Ersoy, a male-to-female transsexual singer. The specific nature of these celebrities' public images and media representations, however, ironically, further demonstrates the pervasive power of heterosexual norms and the state's attempts to maintain coherence and consistency among its citizenry in the realm of gender and sex.

In their respective discussions of Müren's and Ersoy's highly commercially successful careers, both Martin Stokes (2003) and Rüstem Ertug Altınay (2008) focus on the tactics the two celebrities used to demonstrate the expected conformity to gender norms, even as their visible gender bending played a part in their commercial success. For example, Stokes (2003, 310) discusses what he calls Müren's "astute tactical moves" in terms of his overall public image and his homosexuality. Müren had a long-term male partner, Fahrettin Arslan, which was locally known in Bodrum, a popular touristic town on the Aegean Sea where Müren lived for most of his career (Stokes 2003, 312). Müren, however, never publicly identified as a homosexual; such a declaration would likely have ruined his reputation. In addition, when journalists questioned him regarding his gender ambiguity as displayed by his clothing choices, Müren denied that he was wearing women's clothing. Ersoy engaged in similar tactical moves. According to Altınay (2008), following her sex change operation in London in 1981, Ersoy projected an image of a conservative, Muslim, nationalist, upper-class woman through her conservative widescreen appearances and stage performances, and her frequent references to Allah in her performances and songs. The increasing availability of private television channels in the early 1990s further increased these stars' appearances on television and in print media and, consequently, their need to conform to the audience's expectations regarding heterosexual gender norms in Turkey. This is the reason Stokes argues in his discussion of Müren that Turkish performers such as Ersoy and Müren should be viewed "in terms not of deviance, but of normativity, of gendered decency" (309).

In his comparison of Müren's and Ersoy's use of the Turkish language as part of their overall musical craft (Müren's clear poetic style versus Ersoy's "expressive deviation... fragmenting and dispersing texts to such an extent that their verbal intelligibility is easily lost"), Stokes (2003, 320) interprets the contrast between the two styles as being indicative of Müren's attachment to the nation-building project and Ersoy's detachment from the same project. Considering the role of language reform in defining "Turkishness" in the early and later republic, this interpretation is warranted, but Ersoy's markedly different experience in terms of the state's response to her gender bending is perhaps a better indicator of the limits of her demonstrated attachment and belonging to the nation-building project. For example, Ersoy's sex change operation was seen as a threat to Turkish society; she was banned from performing in Turkey during the military regime of 1980 to 1983. When Ersoy returned to Turkey during the civilian government of the Motherland Party in the 1980s, she was given publicly a pink national identity card (the Turkish national identity card is colored pink for women and blue for men), a clear endorsement of gender identity by the state. However, despite this endorsement and her multiple public appearances on and off television, Ersoy had to be careful. When she criticized the Turkish Armed Forces regarding its handling of the Kurdish conflict in eastern Turkey in 2008, she was accused of belittling the military. In response, she aligned herself publicly with ultranationalists, reinforcing her public identity as not only conservative, Muslim, and upper-class, but also a nationalist woman (Altınay 2008, 222 – 4). Ersoy's experience demonstrates two principles: On one hand, citizens who do not conform to the gender and sexuality-related expectations of the state must find ways of establishing their belonging in the nation, in this case, through conformity to gender and other related norms, or risk facing discrimination and violence. On the other hand, once established, belonging does not last forever and needs reinforcing at critical moments; otherwise, the subject's existing difference, in this case, gender identity, could be used to victimize them.

Müren's and Ersoy's experiences as celebrities who were given relative leeway due to their celebrity status and social class were far from the norm in Turkey; for everyday citizens whose gender identity or sexual orientation differed, physical violence by the state was very real and

unavoidable, especially when those citizens were visible. While homosexuality has never technically been illegal in Turkey, Arslan Yüzgün (1993) reported frequent police violence and other mistreatment toward homosexuals and non-gender conforming citizens, such as transvestites in Istanbul. As Yüzgün mentions, the “gutter press” covered these cases sensationally, usually justifying the violent treatment of the homosexuals (165). Television coverage also projected a similarly sensational approach without serious investigation into this ongoing oppression. Thus, in this manner, the alliance between the mass media, private or not, and the state confirmed the pariah status of homosexuals and transvestites in Turkey in the 1980s and the 1990s.

LEGATO AND THE INTERNET AS A “DIGITAL CLOSET”

Beginning in 1993, the Internet was added to the media repertoire of the Turkish people. While the printing press led to the diminishment of sexual discourses and television brought these discourses back to life under the gender regime of the new republic, the Internet built on the sexuality-related legacy of traditional media by enabling something altogether new: It provided the means by which otherwise isolated individuals with nonmainstream gender identities and/or sexual orientations could connect with each other to form communities. The private television channels had already introduced Euro-American lesbian and gay identities through imported foreign programs such as *Melrose Place*, an American soap opera, set in Los Angeles, California that featured an openly gay character. As viewers were exposed to Western lesbian and gay culture through such programming, they increasingly adopted new identity terms such as lesbian and gay. Together with the legacy of homosexual political organizing in urban areas, this trend led to the emergence of a lesbian and gay culture and communities that have been expanding since the 1990s in Turkey.

The first two LGBT advocacy organizations in Turkey were established in the two largest cities: Lambda Istanbul in Istanbul in 1993 and Kaos GL in Ankara in 1994. From their inception, both organizations encouraged coming out as part of their activism, which included reading and discussion groups, film screenings, print (and later online) publications, interviews with national newspapers, and demonstrations. This

activism sought to provide exposure to Euro-American LGBT identities and to introduce and disseminate the concepts of the closet and coming out in the Turkish context. As an extension of these efforts, in the mid-1990s, Kaos GL helped college students organize on the campuses of Middle East Technical University (METU) and Hacettepe University in Ankara. These student groups reproduced Kaos GL's activism through activities such as reading and discussion groups and the screening of LGBT films as part of on-campus student festivals. Despite these successful local efforts, the burgeoning collegiate Turkish LGBT movement struggled to broaden its scope to include larger populations, since these organizations could not connect to lesbian and gay students across the nation due to the lack of channels to convey the knowledge they had accumulated. In the late 1990s, with the expansion of computer and Internet use in Turkey, some members of local lesbian and gay student groups began using Yahoo! Groups to encourage the formation of similar groups in other Turkish universities. These student groups organized under the name Legato, the acronym for *Lezbiyen Gay Toplulugu* (Lesbian and Gay Association). Widening the scope of the Turkish LGBT cause, this development ultimately led to the formation of a lesbian and gay student culture at universities across the nation, all linked through Yahoo! mailing lists, which connected students with preexisting LGBT subcultures and with Lambda Istanbul and Kaos GL.

My discussion of Legato and its use of the Internet in the remainder of this section is based on one-on-one interviews I conducted with group members in Istanbul in 2003. These interviews are part of my larger research project about eleven Turkish lesbian and gay college students' use of the Internet in forming lesbian and gay student associations in Turkish colleges from the mid-1990s to the beginning of the 2000s. Prior to my presentation and analysis of the interview data, I will first discuss the methods of study.

METHODS

The description of Legato's mailing lists and web site in this article is partly based on my own past usage of these forums as a Legato member. The bulk of the discussion and analysis, however, incorporates data from offline, face-to-face interviews with Legato members. I first attempted

to find participants for this study through e-mail solicitations sent to the Legato mailing lists. These solicitations did not yield volunteers, however, perhaps due to a perceived risk. (Potential contributors might, for example, have worried that the e-mails were intended to identify lesbian and gay persons for the purpose of harassment.) Thus, I found participants for this research through the help of friends who either were involved with activism in Istanbul or knew people who were active in the LGBT community. This manner of finding interviewees led to a research emphasis on activism and related leadership activities.

Eleven people (seven males and four females) aged 20 to 27 participated in this study. The interviews took place in a location of their choosing (such as their office, their home, or a café) in Istanbul during the summer of 2003. During the interviews, which ranged in length from ninety minutes to three hours, I asked the participants questions about their experiences with media and their involvement with Legato and the broader LGBT activist efforts in Turkey. I conducted this study while pursuing a doctoral degree at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. In preparing for data collection, I followed Purdue's guidelines for research with human subjects as established and overseen by its Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to data collection, the Purdue IRB reviewed and approved my research protocol. At the beginning of each interview, I informed the interviewee about the research protocol, and the interviewee signed an informed consent form. The form stated that I would use the data from this research in presentations at professional conferences and academic publications after assigning pseudonyms for the participants and removing any personal information that could disclose their identity; accordingly, the participant names used in this article are pseudonyms. I conducted the interviews in Turkish, and all the quotes from the interview data are my translation, unless otherwise stated. The participants expressed their sexual orientation as "*lezbiyen*," "*gey*," "*biseksüel*" (Turkish transliterations of lesbian, gay, and bisexual), or "*eşcinsel*" (Turkish for homosexual).

In this article, I incorporate interview data from three participants: Nevzat, a gay male; Ünal, a gay male; and Zeynep, a lesbian. These participants were involved with the LGBT movement as students and activists in Ankara or Istanbul, and, as such, they were able to shed light on the beginning of Internet-mediated lesbian and gay activism in Turkey.

While the Turkish LGBT community currently is significantly visible and highly vocal in its activist efforts, these interviews focused on an earlier period of activism during which the current degree of lesbian and gay visibility was not available but efforts in anticipation of it were underway. In addition, despite the visibility of activists, homosexuality is still largely viewed negatively in Turkey, and the existing LGBT community is mostly based in urban areas. Fear of discrimination and potential violent treatment by families, authorities, and other members of society prevents those who identify as LGBT from expressing their sexual orientation publicly outside urban, specifically LGBT, communities. For these reasons, in addition to assigning pseudonyms, I removed any information that could identify the participants, such as their workplace affiliations.

Finally, this research was conducted from the perspective that qualitative studies, such as cyberethnography, should be *for* research participants, not just *about* them (Kirsch 1999). I sent the transcripts of the interviews to the research participants who requested them. I also published an article on Legato titled “Üniversiteli Eşcinsel Oluşum: Kimlik Farklılıkları, Sosyalleşme ve Politikleşme” (The Intercollegiate Homosexual Movement: Identities, Socialization, and Politicization) in the September-October 2010 issue of *Kaos GL*, the bimonthly LGBT culture and lifestyle magazine of the advocacy organization Kaos GL in Ankara (Gorkemli 2010). (First published in 1994, *Kaos GL* is one of the longest-running LGBT publications in Turkey.) Through the article, I shared some of the results of my research on Legato and collegiate activism with the wider Turkish LGBT community.

As an Internet-mediated group, Legato has depended on the Internet from its inception. Individual mailing lists formed the basis of local Legato groups on university campuses; as students began contacting each other through the lists, many attempted to increase Legato's visibility and encourage others to participate offline. For example, in November 1999, Nevzat, a male interviewee, and eleven other students from Bogaziçi University had a meeting in Istanbul, during which they decided that one of their primary goals should be to publicize Legato meetings and encourage others to attend. During the next few months, they publicized Legato through word-of-mouth and e-mail, and by the end of January 2000, Legato Bogaziçi's membership had risen to sixty.⁵

Similarly, there were Legato groups at other schools with varying numbers of members. The first multi-university Legato meeting took place in Istanbul in the winter of 2000, with close to one hundred people in attendance from Bogaziçi University, Marmara University, Istanbul University, Yildiz University, and Istanbul Technical University. At this meeting, the attendees decided to establish an intercollegiate online group on Yahoo! Groups called Legato Ortak Liste (common or shared list in Turkish).

Legato Ortak Liste was created on December 20, 2000 and connected Legato members scattered across Turkey and separated by geographical barriers through a single mailing list. By March 2003, there were 418 members subscribed to this mailing list at sixty-seven schools, and by the end of summer 2003, there were 857 members at eighty-three colleges and universities. In addition to publicizing local activities by individual Legato chapters in specific locales, Legato Ortak Liste was utilized to foster a sense of belonging in Legato members:

When you join Legato Ortak Liste, you receive a message saying “Hi, Legato members!”; you are invoked as one of the Legato members, a gay college student, and gain the sense that there are people like yourself in various places in Turkey. I think this causes you to consider yourself one of them and feel good.⁶

Ünal, a male interviewee, added that on the same mailing list, one could read others’ “stories” about such topics as coming out to the family, which created empathy. He said that such empathy was important when one was undergoing the phase of “accepting oneself,” and that empathy sped up this process, especially if it eventually led to meeting similarly identifying people.

The next major phase of Legato’s development came in 2002 with the launch of its web site.⁷ Since Legato lacked a physical location such as an office, the site was an important means for interested people to find information about the organization. Using search engines such as Google, the site could be located by entering keywords such as “*üniversiteli*” (a Turkish word meaning “affiliated with a university”) and “*eşcinsel*.” The site widened the group’s publicity efforts; it informed both members and non-members about Legato’s goals and history as a collegiate lesbian and gay student group, and included discussion of

LGBT issues in FAQs and other specialized sections. The site was also structured to encourage potential members to take part in Legato's offline activities. Through the online membership form available on the web site, interested people could request subscriptions to the college and intercollegiate mailing lists, which provided information about activities offline, and thus become a member of Legato. As such, the Legato web site served as a "virtual office."⁸ In this manner, Legato used the Internet (both mailing lists and the web site) to provide support to its members, with the underlying expectation that they would eventually come out and participate in Legato's activism offline.

However, not all Legato members chose to profess their sexual identity through activist engagements offline. Regarding the Internet's utility for closeted lesbian and gay Turks, Zeynep, a lesbian interviewee, drew attention to the lack of other channels: "This segment of the population... they do not have any other channels.... There are so many people who have turned away at [the LGBT advocacy organization] Kaos's door six times before they could finally muster the courage to ring the bell at the seventh attempt."⁹ However, she also commented that although activism-oriented members positioned Internet participation as just one step on a path toward activism, they felt that people began becoming complacent after establishing a group of friends.¹⁰ Ünal also acknowledged the continuing importance of the Internet, noting that it had been useful in connecting new and old members and thus maintaining Legato's priorities of publicity, presence, and visibility. However, he also said that he and some other group members were trying to reduce Legato's dependence on the Internet, since it had "become too web-based," and he said that they would like to "get out" of the Internet:

For Legato to "get out of" the Internet, it is necessary for at least 100 of the 500 people on the Legato Ortak Liste (intercollegiate mailing list) to attend meetings that generate ideas and become people who generate ideas; they cannot be people who just talk without any result.¹¹

For these reasons, Ünal insisted that Legato Ortak Liste was not important from his perspective.

Such comments reveal that these activists value offline grassroots activism over Internet-based activism, and, as such, they viewed the Internet like any other means of communication, as a tool that enabled

them to communicate with other lesbian and gay Turks and to support their participation in offline activism. Consequently, in 2001 in Istanbul, Zeynep and her friends helped launch a campaign called “coming out of the Internet” that was intended to echo the concept of “coming out of the closet.”¹² This campaign encouraged some people, with whom they had been corresponding for a time through e-mail, to come out. However, for the larger lesbian and gay population, attitudes concerning homosexuality posed the largest obstacle to coming out, and the Internet, through the anonymity and the invisibility that it provided, continued to appeal to them more than coming out (and doing so for social activism), and thus became more than just a means of communication or a tool for activism: It became a symbol of homosexual oppression for lesbian and gay activists in Turkey.

MEDIA METAPHORS AND LGBT AGENCY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003, 4) argue that metaphors “structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do,” and that they do so within the context of culturally specific discourses. Instituting a metaphor such as the digital closet in another cultural context, then, involves the creation of a new discourse in juxtaposition to existing discourses. When viewed as part of an entire discursive system of gender and sexuality, the metaphor of the digital closet and its rhetorical functions become more visible, thus also conveying its significance in terms of contemporary LGBT agency and subjectivity.

In examining the ongoing globalization of lesbian and gay identities, scholars highlight the importance of considering the transnational functions and iterations of these identities in global national contexts (Altman 2002, Binnie 2004, Champagne 1999, Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002, Grewal and Kaplan 2001, Manalansan 1995, Puri 2002, and Richardson and Seidman 2002). Attending to the metaphor of the digital closet provides one way of analyzing this form of globalization. My discussion so far demonstrates that the silencing of the discourses of sexuality and the institution of a strict gender system that forced those with non-heterosexual orientations to conform to existing gender

norms preceded the current globalization of lesbian and gay identities and the central metaphors of the closet and coming out in Turkey. In such social contexts, those who failed to demonstrate conformity were labeled gender deviant. As Altman (2002) states, the gender "deviance" model of homosexuality that seems to be prevalent in some parts of the non-Western world existed in Western countries one hundred years or so prior to the emergence of the contemporary gay movement (418). Therefore, the globalization of lesbian and gay identities needs to be viewed in connection with the globalization of a gender and sex system into which these identities fit. The metaphor of the closet, then, is one of the ways in which activists counter the locally existing gender deviance model of homosexuality that is used to victimize those with different gender identities and sexual orientations.

While the closet as a metaphor with activist uses functions in this way, the digital closet, as represented by the notion of "coming out of the Internet," has an important linguistic function in the Turkish context. Linguistically, the word "closet" can only be translated into Turkish literally as "*dolap*," which means a wardrobe, a refrigerator, or a kitchen cabinet, depending on the context. This literal translation sounds nonsensical in Turkish when used to connote the Euro-American gay closet. Therefore, equating the closet with the Internet as the digital closet facilitates the expression of an otherwise untranslatable concept. "To come out" is typically translated as "*açılmak*," which means "to open up," usually in the sense of relieving one's emotional burdens by sharing them with someone. This translation conveys the sense of coming out to someone, which could be accomplished through the relatively private act of telling someone about one's sexual orientation; however, it does not convey the more recent meaning of coming out in its sense of public, political identification as lesbian or gay. As a result, the recent metaphor of the Internet as the digital closet also enables the translation of coming out as a public political act when it locates the closet within the virtual space that, as the activists put it, one can "get out of" ("*çıkılmak*" in Turkish) in order to engage in activism.

Another important aspect of the metaphor of the Internet as a digital closet is social class and the concept of multiple "homosexualities" in the Turkish context. The participants in the Legato study were computer- and English-literate college students, most of whom came from

middle-class families. Thus, it is not altogether unexpected that their exposure to Euro-American lesbian and gay culture and its metaphors of visibility would lead to their attempts to institute the same metaphors in the Turkish context. However, scholars (Murray 2002, Tapınç 1992,) note that there are multiple homosexualities in the Turkish context (e.g., role-based (active versus passive) and gender-based (feminine versus masculine) homosexualities, as well as contemporary lesbian and gay sexualities), and Tarik Bereket and Barry D. Adam (2006) point out that while “gay” as an identity category has been in use in Turkey, it is not pervasive, and some men who have sex with men do not consider themselves to be gay. Since social vectors, such as class, education, and geographical location, determine access to the English language and media, particularly the Internet, and 12.33 percent of the Turkish population had access to the Internet in 2003,¹³ the Internet as a digital closet is very much a class-based concept, and its implication of a Euro-American lesbian and gay category is one of the ways in which homosexuality is currently discursively conceived; as such, it is far from the norm at the moment in Turkey.

As a media metaphor, the Internet as a digital closet also refers to the role of economics and nation-states in determining the future of the discourses of sexuality and identity. Altman (2002, 419) warns that despite commonalities among queer cultures in different parts of the world, the institutions and forms of international queer communities will be different based on economic and political space. Similarly, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan (2002) and Peter A. Jackson (2009) emphasize local agency and the role of economic forces (i.e., market capitalism) in relation to international commonalities and cultural differences among global queer cultures. Multiple media, their convergence and divergence, and media metaphors provide ways of studying and explaining the formation of lesbian, gay, and queer identities in specific national contexts. The multiple forms of media examined in this article, ranging from the printing press to television, and finally to the collegiate Internet-based media of Legato, illustrate the increasing differentiation within the media landscape of Turkey, first silencing discourses of sexuality, then creating a strict gender regime, and, finally, providing opportunities for the LGBT population to self-represent and begin to challenge gender norms, heterosexism, and homophobia. This

differentiation is in part an outcome of economic changes in Turkey, especially during the 1980s and 1990s. The 1980s were marked by rapid economic change, from state-directed policies to neo-liberalism and privatization in Turkey; as part of this shift, a nationwide telecommunications infrastructure (phone lines) was built. This was followed by private television channels and the Internet in the 1990s, and Turkey's continuing efforts to enter the European Union led to further economic changes in the form of global economic policies and foreign investment. Turkey's increasing integration into the global market economy transformed the country's media landscape, creating multiple venues that enabled and enhanced LGBT media production. These include the publications of the advocacy organizations Lambda Istanbul and Kaos GL and Legato, which augmented local LGBT agency in creating alternatives to dominant, mass-media representations of homosexuality.

Despite the Legato activists' conflicting views of the Internet in Turkish lesbian and gay activism, their Internet-mediated collegiate activism finally bore its intended fruit in 2007, when one of Legato's original goals, to establish an official collegiate lesbian and gay student organization, finally became a reality. Bilgi University, a private college in Istanbul, allowed the founding of Gökkuşığı LGBT Kulübü (Rainbow LGBT Club) on its campus (Safoglu and Zıhlı 2007). For students across the nation who were members of unofficial lesbian and gay collegiate associations, this was a promising development that elicited mixed responses from other colleges. When Bilgi announced that it allowed a gay student organization in order to ensure human rights-related freedoms on campus, some administrators from other universities responded that they would consider such a request if they received one from their student body, while others claimed that such a request would not fit their criteria for acceptable student organizing or that their students are interested in science and request sports facilities and libraries rather than such organizations (Biliroglu 2007, 6). These responses reveal the extent of, and the future obstacles to, the remaining "identity work" (Gray 2009, 26) as it relates to this collegiate segment of the Turkish society.

The continuing difficulties posed by such campus politics, together with the increasing availability and sophistication of Internet technology, have resulted in collegiate lesbian and gay activists continuing to use the Internet for activism. Outside the collegiate context, other activists

also use it for connecting with other LGBTs. However, the ambivalent view of the Internet as a figure for both agency and oppression has far-reaching implications regarding multiple homosexualities that continue to structure the epistemology of same-sex desire and practices in Turkey and possibly in the rest of the Middle East. Rather than mere replication, Turkish activists' re-mediation of the Euro-American gay closet is essentially a process of cultural translation and modification to engage with existing gender norms in their ongoing search for an alternative to the hegemonic local discourse of homosexuality as gender deviance.

CONCLUSION

This article analyzes the importation and deployment of the Euro-American metaphor of the digital closet in the Turkish context. Approaching this metaphor from the perspectives of the globalization of lesbian and gay identities, on the one hand, and transnational local lesbian and gay activism, on the other, the analysis focuses on the role of media from the end of the nineteenth century in the Ottoman Empire to the end of the twentieth century in Turkey and demonstrates that multiple media played crucial roles in the formation of gender norms and attitudes toward homosexuality. Traditional media (print and television) mediated and reinforced gender norms, and activists used the Internet to form communities and movements, countering these norms and challenging the existing negative perceptions of homosexuality.

Despite the overwhelming influence of globalization in the formation of lesbian and gay identities in different local contexts, the nation-state and nationalism frame the intersections between multiple media, social change, and local identity-based activism, thus underlining the continuing importance of the nation. In addition, while the ongoing Arab Spring has brought worldwide attention to the power and importance of social media, the issue of sexuality has not been a prominent part of the discussions regarding the upheaval in the region. Thus, media globalization, sexuality, and local agency in specific national contexts constitute an important venue of inquiry regarding the Arab Spring.

Finally, a parallel development that was not the main focus of this article, but is nevertheless important, emerged in the analysis: The decline of sexual discourses coincided with the ascension of heterosexual-

ity from the late Ottoman to early republican period in Turkey. Thus, similar to that of homosexuality, the formation of heterosexuality has been influenced by cross-cultural influences, and it is similarly socially constructed. In fact, theorists of sexuality have emphasized that heterosexuality is a no less historically contingent, socially constructed category than homosexuality and that these two categories are historically co-constructed (Jagose 1996, 16 – 7). This is why Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), in her discussion of the epistemology of the closet, argues that the rhetorical function of the closet as a metaphor has been to gloss over the inconsistencies of the seemingly neatly oppositional definitions of homosexual and heterosexual. In other words, at the expense of the diversity in human sexuality, the closet as a spatial metaphor of privacy and sexuality is used to construct a discursive distinction between homosexuals and heterosexuals, defining and redefining the contours of the two in opposition to each other. As such, according to Sedgwick, the closet is a defining figure for both homosexual emancipation and continuing oppression in Europe and North America, since its emergence also contributed to the construction of heterosexuality as the so-called normal, self-evident, and natural counterpart of homosexuality. Therefore, as LGBT identities take root in the Middle East, it is important to pay attention to the ongoing co-construction of homosexuality and heterosexuality, as well as to the role of multiple media, in this process.

NOTES

1. I use the adjectives “lesbian” and “gay” to refer to activism and practices by women and men who self-identify as lesbian and gay, respectively. In addition, I use the acronym “LGBT” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual) when my specific reference to the community includes all of these groups of people. In cases where these identity categories are anachronistic, I use the adjective “same-sex.” Finally, I apply the word “queer” only when contemporary individuals and their practices do not fit the existing categories of normative sexual desires and practices, nor do they identify as LGBT.

2. Prior to this phase of widespread globalization, queer and gender theorists such as Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) criticized lesbian and gay identities for their essentialism and universalism in the context of the United States. These criticisms advocated a social constructionist and performative, rather than essentialist and universal, view of these identities, following Michel Foucault's (1990) influential *History of Sexuality* and his theory of the discursive invention of

the homosexual in nineteenth-century Europe. For more on essentialism versus social constructionism and the development of these theoretical approaches in lesbian and gay studies, see Richardson and Seidman (2002).

3. While his study focuses on same-sex issues in the Arab-Islamic Middle East, El-Rouayheb (2005, 11) emphasizes continuities, noting, "I would expect that many of the points I make (though probably not all) are valid for Turkey and Persia between 1500 and 1800." For more on the three discursive strands of same-sex desire and practices, refer to El-Rouayheb (2005).

4. Since Müren never identified as gay publicly, despite being locally known to have a long-term male partner (Stokes 2003, 312), I use the word "queer" here in its sense of not fitting any established categories of sexual orientation. In addition, my word choice follows Altınay (2008, 212), a Turkish scholar, who also refers to Müren as a queer male.

5. Nevzat, interview by the author, July 16, 2003, Istanbul, Turkey. During the 2007-2008 academic year, Bogaziçi University had 11,027 undergraduate and graduate students. See http://www.boun.edu.tr/government/bu_in_numbers.html (accessed on March 21, 2012). While Legato Bogaziçi's membership of sixty does not seem much relative to this overall enrollment, for a new, and a gay, student organization, this number was significant.

6. Ünal, interview by the author, June 15, 2003, Istanbul, Turkey.

7. Initially located at <http://www.e-legato.org>, the web site has changed hosts at least twice since then. The latest version of the web site was located at <http://www.unilegato.org/>, but it is no longer accessible.

8. Ünal, interview by the author, June 15, 2003, Istanbul, Turkey.

9. Zeynep, interview by the author, July 16, 2003, Istanbul, Turkey.

10. Zeynep, interview by the author, July 16, 2003, Istanbul, Turkey.

11. Ünal, interview by the author, June 15, 2003, Istanbul, Turkey.

12. Zeynep, interview by the author, July 16, 2003, Istanbul, Turkey.

13. See http://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9_&ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nselm=h&met_y=it_net_user_p2&scale_y=lin&ind_y=false&rdim=region&idim=country:TUR&ifdim=region&tstart=-308260800000&tend=1301112000000&hl=en&dl=en&q=number+of+internet+users+in+turkey (accessed on March 27, 2012).

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