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Book Reviews

A STREET CAR NAMED QUEER DESIRE: SUBVERSION OF THE CITY CONTOURS AND “DEVIANT” MASCULINITIES

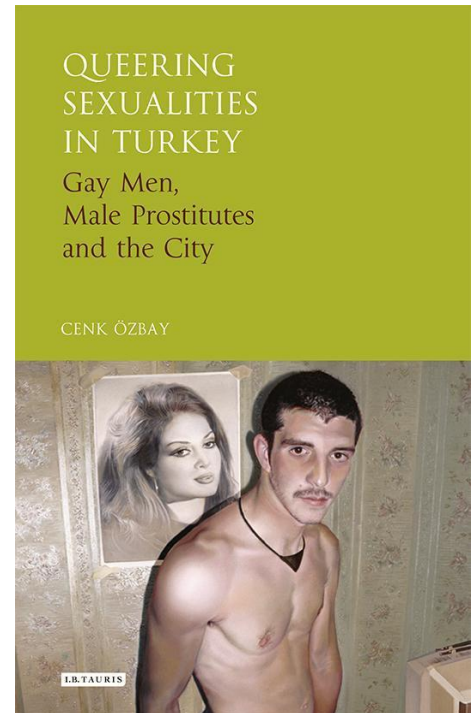
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Ozbay, C. (2017). *Queering Sexualities in Turkey: Gay Men, Male Prostitutes and the City*. London and New York, I. B. Tauris. 194 Pages. ISBN: 978-1-78453-317-5.

[...] ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed.

Perhaps such people could productively be called “queer subjects” in terms of the ways they live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and the economic) that others have abandoned, in terms of the ways they might work in the domains that other people assign to privacy and family

Jack Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives (New York, 2005), p. 9



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Through his elaborative and stimulating work, Cenk Ozbay invites us for a queer quest and a *benjaminian* stroll around the city Istanbul to reconsider its significant focal point or in other words “notorious” city side, Taksim, almost any streets of which might “still” enable alternatives to exist in a particular way for a wide range of identities, to subvert the oppressive policies of the state. As the cultural and historical heart of the city, Taksim has been exposed to various gentrifying processes alongside becoming a symbolic and political maneuvering area for the current government over the last decades. Nevertheless, our encounters with the city still can manifest themselves in a quite creative way outside the heterosexual matrix though the neo-conservative and pious atmosphere of the Turkish context forces the subjectivities to enact vice versa. After all, its “carnavalesque collective spirit” is rooted in our most recent memories under the enforced layers of surveillance (Ozbay, 2015: 873). *Queering Sexualities in Turkey* has a long past behind it. Ozbay has been collecting his eclectic data based on queer sexualities, masculinities, and male prostitution in Istanbul since 2003 through conducting formal and informal interviews with the actors of male sex work, participant observation in public and semi-public spaces, and extensive field notes as a person who is also an observer of and a participant in queer life in Istanbul apart from his researcher position. During his fieldwork, Ozbay faces many risky challenges such as growing conservatism and heteronormativity in public spheres, talking about controversial and sensitive issues, closet nature of nightlife and homosexuality, controversial biases about conducting a research about queer sexualities, and invisibility of the rent boys as they reveal and represent themselves in underground settings. All these challenges require a well-planned and meticulous research process (Ozbay, 2017: 24-25). In this regard, as an outcome of long-term ethnographic fieldwork with his detailed self-reflexive accounts, Ozbay brilliantly examines nocturnal rhythms of the city around Taksim Square, luxury apartments, hotel rooms, Turkish baths, saunas, especially bars and night clubs frequently visited by rent boys, self-identified gay men and tourists, the clandestine and transnational economy of male sex work, interplays of multiple masculinities at the intersection of class, age, education, ethnicities, gender, and sexuality. In this context, the main objective of this review is to present my reflections on the main arguments of the book.

Buying and selling sex has been a quite controversial subject matter to ruminate about. Regarding the social control mechanisms and stigmas attributed to the sex industry around the world, sex work has often been used with derogatory terms such as “prostitution” or mainly associated with either female attributions or human trafficking. Recently having been considered as another line of labour rather than being called “prostitution”, involvements of men with sex work have been forgotten either as a sex worker or a client, and male social actors who sell sex to men have been rarely cited in researches (Scott, 2020: 272). Together with challenges such as insecure work conditions, constant psychological and physical abuse, familial rejections, and so forth, rent boys and gay men develop coping tactics to prevent possible dangers. For instance, rent boys are quite cautious about both their “decent” identities in their community and their involvement in same-sex work which is kept as a secret not to be revealed to their friends, relatives, and neighbourhoods (Ozbay, 2017: 71-72). Thus, being a rent boy signifies the fragile side of their identities and extremely contains a distressful and risky web of relations which should be maintained cautiously even among the rent boys as one of them reproaches about the recruitment of new rent boys: “I told you not to bring everyone here from your neighbourhood. Look at me. I only bring my brother. You may have a fight with one of them in the future and he can go and tell people, including your father, what you do here. *You are playing with fire*. I told you this before. *Don’t play with fire*” (Ozbay, 2017: 71-72).

When they bump into each other, perceiving rent boys as “hungry, uneducated, animalistic and poor peasants”, gay men are highly inclined to manipulate rent boys, make up fake scenarios and identities such as “having a cop brother” in order not to face undesirable situations. Gay clients arrange their private spheres in a way that they even hide their perfumes, toothpaste, and shampoo that can be stolen when rent boys leave their apartments. Their sexual encounters circle around class positions of rent boys and gay men and turn into a demanding game filled with well-thought tactics. In this regard, Veli (aged, 43) remarkably illustrates the differences intertwined with class, age, education in his statements;

“[...] imagine even your age group would not desire me. [...] Cenk, do you think I have another way? I have nothing to do but going for rent boys. Gay culture in this country pushes me to do so. [...] My point is that I have never paid a cent to one of these rent boys. Write this. Veli has never paid them. Is it because of my beautiful face? Surely not. One should use his mind. We are smart, experienced educated people. We are gay people who could survive in this country despite every hardship. [...] Who are the rent boys? Some loser varos boys who could not even complete their education, shaking their dicks in front of us, thinking naively that they were great {at sex} They should not conquer us; we should not let them. You out to know the rules, otherwise, the hunter may be hunted. What would an experienced (kasarlanmis) rent boy say if you go and ask him how much {he charged for sex} at the beginning of the night? Of course, he would say 100 US dollars. Don't rush, wait, hang out, drink something, look at the other rent boys and trigger the competition. At the dawn, they will eventually come near you. They would again ask me for money, a lower amount, I never answer them. [...] I start to tell them the dishes I make. They love it because these people are hungry, they are {poor} peasants.” (Ozbay, 2017: 43-44).

While gay clients set their own tactics within their social domains, rent boys also do not refrain from deploying their own game in the erotic economy of Istanbul:

“[...] There are certain things that you must do, again and again. For example, disguise yourself. Don't tell, don't give information about yourself, not even the phone number, where you live, don't be interested in their {customers'} lives, and don't ask questions about them. You are not supposed to care, right? When they insist on talking, which they always do, look as if you're disgusted and got bored, pretend you're not listening. When they talk, look at the other direction. Everything starts with this attitude. Most gays would fall in love with you just because you act this way [...]” (Ozbay, 2017: 63).

In his overall examination of the literature based on male sex work, Ozbay unfolds the general characteristics of it in comparison with female sex work, as well. He frames male sex work as less exploitative and more egalitarian compared to female one as pimps set and regulate the rules, female sex workers sell, and male clientele purchase. Around the diverse cultural settings, actors of male sex work are young and they push and bargain with the existing normative boundaries of society, masculinity, desire, religion, moral values, and familial ties. Hence, examining male sex work and its nocturnal closet culture is one of the particular ways of understanding how material construction of social inequalities, counter normative responses to cis-hetero patriarchal power and clandestine facet of everyday life experiences manifest themselves in the complicated embodiment of gender and sexual identities. Respectively, Ozbay divides the types of male sex workers into six categories: The ones whose main urge is to steal or blackmail their clientele, *hustlers* who get involved in both stealing and sex work, *part-timers* who are regular

employees but also take part in compensated sex, *professionals* who are eagerly committed to their works, *poverty-driven* sex workers who lack alternatives to survive and, lastly, *gigolos* who can be considered more advantageous as they are able to work in agencies located in the global north. Among these groupings, rent boys can be regarded in the third category as *part-timers* for whom there is no time boundary or an external force that pushes them to do sex work. Therefore, “*agency, choice, autonomy and flexibility*” come into prominence when it comes to sexual interplays between rent boys and self-identified gay men (Ozbay, 2017: 31-32). At this point, one cannot help meditating around the two questions: How can we make sense of non-linear interactions between rent boys and middle-class gay men in closet settings of nightlife? As almost each of them has their own ways of self-making projects bound up with age, class, education, ethnicity, et cetera... and how can we articulate their motivations and agendas?

As we have mentioned above, Ozbay marks that rent boys fall into the third category within the Turkish context. Most of them are young, aged between 16 and 25. When Ozbay digs the meaning of rent boy, young informants who do not have enough experience try to call themselves “having sex for money, a fuck for money, a kind of gigolo or male escorts” (Ozbay, 2017: 107). Out of the accumulated narratives of participants, Ozbay considers them as rent boys who take part in compensated male sex work with a particular emphasis on their heterosexual identity. Through stressing the peripheral distance and perceiving their locations as if life is non-existent in those outskirts of the city, rent boys dwell in lower-class neighbourhoods of Istanbul. This point foregrounds yet another significant symbolic difference created by the socio-spatial segregation which will urge them to elude themselves from the prescribed ways of life. Coping with poverty and social exclusion, Ozbay senses the complaintive tone in the narratives of rent boys since they are not content with their living conditions which are at odds with the “privileges” of the middle-class zone. In this context, feeling inferior can be also seen from the first-person reflections of the interlocutors as Mert (aged 26) states; “we are total *opposites*. Most of them are rich, having good jobs, speaking in foreign languages, educated...They have different lives than what I saw in my family. What they wear, how they talk, they are all intellectuals, clean you know. So, we are *different*, it is not only about the fucking stuff” or as the experience of Emir (aged 20) illustrates; “[...] but I feel there is always an *abyss*. [...] This guy does not even think that this boy has a mother and a father, has a family of his own, lives far away and works for a few pennies” (Ozbay, 2017: 53-55).

They worry about their future projects, being deprived of economic and cultural capitals, low and insecure incomes, and close relations with their friends and especially with their large, crowded families who have recently migrated to the city as they share narrow flats with them. Yet, their will of upward mobility is going to result in having a double life through destabilising margins of hegemonic masculinities and sexuality. In this restrictive physical sphere of their social lives in opposition with the one in Taksim, Ozbay positions the rent boys as “repressed” subjects as they are being controlled, punished, watched under the surveillance of their strongly tied neighbourhood and kinship relations (Ozbay, 2012: 287-288). In order to catch the temporary opportunities in Taksim and seemingly to create a sense of belonging to the middle-class norms, rent boys do not only use sexuality as a mode of survival but also, they bend the indispensable characteristics of masculinity and sexuality which afterward become quite adjustable to differences in an unconventional way, more importantly through turning into queer subjectivities.

When we ask what is queer about the rent boys, they do not seem to fit in the queer aspects of gender and sexuality identities at first hand since they apparently do not claim to resist the binary formulations through

counter-normative performances, or they rather shelter themselves in the safety zone of heteronormativity with an embracing attitude. In this context, it is crucial to remember that the queer approach does not necessarily require focusing on only the identity politics of gay and lesbian personas. Its critical interests and agenda encompass “almost every manifestation of sex, gender, sexuality that imagines itself (*or is imagined*) to be the outside of the normative” (Allan, 2020: 73). In this respect, Ozbay points out at least two crucial characteristics of rent boys. First of all, they identify themselves as either “normal” or “hetero” with a high emphasis though they have sexual intercourse with same-sex subjects. In addition to this, they embrace neither homosexual nor gay identity. As rent boys hold on to values of heteronormativity concentratedly, this might create a delusion on the surface which might implicate that they get involved in male sex work only to earn a living and they continue living their “straight” lives when they return to the “safe” realm of heteronormative masculinity. Yet, the interaction between rent boys and self-identified gay men is filled with moments of *male tenderness*, in other words, *affective intensity*, which “has the potential to create unexpected masculinities or unexpected relationalities between men” (Reeser and Gottzen, 2018: 2) wherever their desire follows as it contains:

“Libidinal drive, erection, ejaculation, touching and other acts during sex [...] emotional (as they constantly influence others’ emotions, play with them and present themselves as unemotional and apathetic, to a certain extent closed to human contact behind a cold mask), aesthetic (as they strive to meet certain standards of manly beauty and the semblance of sybaritic lifestyle), and performative (as they stage a scripted, mediated and exaggerated form of ‘proper’ masculinity and rule its cohesion without failure” (Ozbay, 2017: 37).

Autonomous affect moves beyond our expectations and we cannot calculate its outcomes as it might result in breaking the power of masculinity over the defined male body, crumbling a body and turning it into a more vulnerable being or making it dependent on other bodies, and what is more, affect can be quite dense or such an attack upon normative masculinity that might end up being the winner of a fight through over strengthening it (Reeser, 2017: 111). In this regard, as rent boys and gay men encounter each other whether it is through compensated sex, their on-stage aesthetic male personas in nightclubs, the way how they try to capture the gazes of gay clientele with adopted western gay culture signs or their hidden desires towards same sexual practices, there appear unique moments of *affective intensity* that Ozbay illustrates above. Due to these affective moments, while some of the rent boys who still desire female personas are determined to stay as “straight”, the other ones in the long run even come out as gay men through embracing “*a queer way of life*” (Ozbay, 2017: 38).

Engaging in male sex work and claiming their sexual orientation as heterosexual oscillate heteronormativity towards a more destabilising and flexible way. It can be said that one of the main motivations behind it is their financial instabilities. Secondly, Ozbay claims that rent boys play with the logics of temporal and spatial organizations of heterosexuality (Ozbay, 2012: 282). He builds his theoretical framework upon Jack Halberstam’s perception of queer in time and place. Halberstam defines ‘queer’ as;

“counter normative organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time. ‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. ‘Queer space’ refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it

also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics” (Halberstam, 2005: 3).

In this regard, being awake 24/7 as a queer hub of the city, Taksim offers emancipatory and temporal opportunities to rent boys in which they can have more dominant and pleasure-centred positions through exaggerating their masculinities and sexual performances, following their desire wherever it leads them to, breaking through the boundaries or establishing rules in contrast to the suburb areas in which they are “victimized” (Ozbay, 2012: 287). The liberating spirit of Taksim can also be found in the remarks of rent boys; for example, Deniz (aged 24) states;

“[...] it wasn't like my own place. There, everybody is the same. Our women are covered; everybody works hard. They are tired and pale because of too much work. If you do something different than them, if you become a little bit unusual in terms of your hair or clothes or the music you listen to, people start to chase you and disturb you. They would say, Hey, are you a faggot or what?” (Ozbay, 2017: 105-106).

When looking closely at the manifestations of neoliberal masculinity that rent boys are also subjected to, one of the significant points is the increased awareness of the male subjects towards their own body and body politics (Ozbay, 2011: 193). Representation of their bodies highly matters in terms of charming onlookers. In order to be seen more, while some of the rent boys try to prefer bright colours such as red, yellow, and more preferably white which enables them to shine in the night, other ones stick to the colour black as they think that black makes them look more masculine and mature. Under the surveillance of rent boys and curious gazes of gay men, dance carries a risky potential. To attract clientele without looking feminine, rent boys should not shake their bodies like “belly dancers” and most of them only allow specific parts of their bodies to move such as their arms and legs in a rather emotionless way. Dance is a must, but it needs to be performed carefully while sipping a beer which is the most affordable and masculine beverage. When it comes to consuming alcohol, rent boys should not lose their consciousness to avoid undesirable situations such as having sex without money, losing their masculine and rough stances, or rape as seasoned gay men, who employ various strategies to have sex for free through offering bed and breakfast for rent boys, constantly strive to make them drunk. Besides, rent boys keep their bodies good in shape by staying slim, looking young and athletic with one exception which is not to become a bodybuilder as they speculate around the idea that taking artificial protein supplements and being overly muscled might give harm to their virilities through creating impotency. Body hair is another signifier that is interpreted with various meanings. Being completely smooth might even imply a passive sex-role or waxing the whole body brings the image of a female subject. Due to this, trimming is used by rent boys instead of waxing. However, rent boys try to stay smooth as most of the time having a hairy body is a disadvantage and makes them look older. Another aspect of the material culture of rent boys is their outfits. Commonly a t-shirt, denim jeans, and sneakers are essential ones. Even during the winter times, they prefer to wear their sneakers as another tactic that increases the chance of negotiating for sexual intercourse as it makes rent boys look more vulnerable. Rent boys refrain from wearing shorts even in summer since they do not find it proper enough to be seen as more masculine. With the fear of terminating the essence of masculinity and being labelled as gays or foreigners, they also do not prefer to wear earrings. Being fragrant with an attractive smell is risky but not significant with one condition that it should not be a masculine fragrance as it might evoke the

threatening idea that gay client is not an effeminate one and he might prefer to be active during sexual intercourse since they equate being more masculine with the top only position (Ozbay, 2017: 71-79).

Rent boys highly tend to invent in their entrepreneurial selves in tune with neoliberal logic which demands to be “self-centred, pragmatist, mean, body-conscious, flexible and tolerant to differences from neoliberal male subjects” (Ozbay, 2011: 189). In this context, neoliberal logic leaks into the tactics and attires of rent boys and their interplays with gay men. Each of them begins to use the advantages and disadvantages of their own diverse identities strategically. Another significant example for this point is that although being an Eastern or a member of the Kurdish minority is denigrated politically, socially, and culturally, young Kurdish rent boys are more desired by “the refined, western(ised) ‘decent’ Turkish gay men” as they perceive eastern rent boys uncontaminated by bourgeoisie values, animalistic, closer to nature and more masculine (Ozbay, 2017: 35). Besides, rent boys set the rules of sexual intercourse repertoire. Through avoiding being penetrated and allowing themselves only to be on top, one of the important tactics is to prefer the top only position (active role) during sexual intercourse to exalt their manhood without giving harm to it. While refraining from spoiling masculinity, rent boys also do not hesitate to take risks as they prefer to be involved in unprotected sex. In order to prove their courage, most of them do not use a condom especially when their customers pay more for it (Ozbay, 2017: 81). Heterosexual discourse is another notable catalyst for them. During their interactions, they highly attach importance to exalt their heterosexual identity. For instance, rent boys do not hesitate to use the spectre of female partners and their imagined or ongoing relations with them. To legitimize one dominant position over the rest requires other subjects to assert dominance (Coles, 2008: 243). In this sense, while instrumentalizing their sexual or emotional affairs with women, rent boys also do not forget to humiliate gay clients to exaggerate masculinity; for example, Deniz (aged 24) reflects: “Brother, do not be a faggot (*ibne*). This is the first thing. *Faggots do not like faggots. Faggots like men, real men*. So do not act like a *sissy* [...]. You should always be careful about the other {rent}boys. Do not be close with them because people will talk about it. *They would say you fucked each other; you are also faggots*” (Ozbay, 2017: 129). Seemingly, demonstrating homophobic attitudes do not prevent rent boys from having sexual intimacies with gay men as some of them approve that indeed they take pleasure during sexual intercourse whether it is with self-identified gay men or tourists, yet of course through creating their own client repertoire for the negotiation:

[...] The overall manner of the client, the cuteness of the rent {boy} all affect the negotiated price. Yet again, if he is ugly, older or more effeminate he should pay more. There is nothing he can do. If he is a cute boy, like the tourists, all smooth, then we can go for cheaper amounts. You know, sometimes you should give your penis as a reward. Overall, we make more money with the tourists, sometimes \$50-100. But it is different to fuck a guy who is the age of my grandfather, like he’s 50 years old. That’s torture” (Ozbay, 2017: 51).

As they attempt to exaggerate their heterosexual performances, they prefer to be silent about their homosexual practices. Indeed, the strong desire to be more heterosexual can be read as the will to be more masculine which increases their status in the hierarchy of male sex work as gay clients desire less effeminate and more masculine partners in the male sex market of Istanbul (Ozbay, 2017: 68-69). Other crucial actors of male sex work are transvestite and transgender sex workers who are also mentors of rent boys, and their interactions can be considered a risky one. In order to test their sexual performances and gain more experience, inexperienced rent boys start to have sexual intercourse with transvestites. Yet their

interplays may result in either ending up as friends, partners, and lovers or humiliation of their sexual capacities which should not be revealed to the actors of male sex work (Ozbay, 2017: 80).

In conclusion, being stuck in two distinct lives rent boys can also be regarded as “failing” subjectivities as they do not apparently meet the criteria of the heteronormative capitalistic society in their lower-class neighbourhoods, and consequently, they fail. However, Halberstam attributes valuable asset to the concept of failure despite the ingrained beliefs of the society which indeed provides emancipatory alternatives to social actors through losing, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, and escaping from the standards of success and failure, more significantly finding “a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations” in the abyss. Although outcomes of failure in the first place might be filled with a dense disappointment and frustration as in the example of rent boys as they cannot acquire a lifestyle in their repressive settings, in the long-run failure can be more moving, rewarding, surprising, and undeniably creating (Halberstam, 2011: 2-3). In this regard as rent boys float on the peripheries with their Janus masks and motivations driven by a queer desire, they catch the momentarily temporal and spatial opportunities to live a more pleasure-centred life through dismantling the markers of normative gender and sexual identities in a creative way. Almost all the regulars of nocturnal life demonstrate their own unique articulated masculinity projects at the expense of “subverting” the hetero-normative contours and playing with the “imposed” codes of public morality in their social domains whether their actions are the results of their political interests explicitly or not. More significantly, spatial mobilities and the intimacies between rent boys and their gay clientele laid out by Ozbay signal the turning points for our understandings of the gender and power relations in such a sex-negative culture in which there is a high chance of being stigmatized even when one wants to bring sexualities into the discussion in both inside and outside of Academia. Nevertheless, we can still remark that there is a slightly growing body of research in the case of Turkey coupled with its challenges. Regarding this, *Queering Sexualities in Turkey* can be considered one of the pioneers of the field and as an exceptional work, it reminds us of the significant point that we can still trace the queer geographies and its promising opportunities for our intellectual endeavours.

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