

Nocturnal queers: Rent boys' masculinity in Istanbul

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Abstract

Recently, 'rent boys' have become increasingly visible in the queer social spaces of Istanbul. They come from impoverished areas of the city and engage in compensated sex with other men. In this article, I examine how these heterosexually identified rent boys assemble and perform exaggerated masculinity in order to negotiate the tensions between their local socially excluded environments and an burgeoning western-style gay culture while they conduct their 'risky' sexual interactions with other men. Exaggerated masculinity repairs and masks the subverting effects of compensated sex for rent boys' heterosexual subjectivities and makes them closer to the hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Through intense participant observation and 20 recorded interviews with rent boys and their clients, this study demonstrates how rent boys perform an assiduous self-governance through symbols and implicit meanings vis-à-vis different and contradictory class positions, gender identities, and sexual acts.

Keywords

compensated sex, globalization, homosexuality, Istanbul, masculinities

Recently, 'rent boys'¹ have become increasingly visible in the queer social spaces of Istanbul. Rent boys engage in different forms of compensated sex (Agustin, 2005) with other men. They construct their masculine identities through their clandestine homoerotic involvements. They invent and practice an embodied style that I call 'exaggerated masculinity'² in order to mark their manly stance and deal with the risks that same-sex sexual activities pose for the reproduction of their masculine selves. In this article, I examine how these heterosexually identified rent boys assemble and perform exaggerated masculinity in order to negotiate the tensions

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between their local socially excluded environments and a burgeoning western-style gay culture³ while they conduct their 'risky' sexual interactions with other men.

Male prostitution takes place in different social settings around the world across a wide diversity of class, racial, cultural, and organizational arrangements (see, for example, Aggleton, 1999; Dorais, 2005; Fernández-Dávila et al., 2008; Hall, 2007; Jackson and Sullivan, 1999; McNamara, 1994; Minichiello et al., 2001; Mujtaba, 1997; Schifter, 1998; West, 1993). Male prostitution is but one field of analysis where materiality of social inequalities, secrecies of everyday realities, and informalities of power relations are articulated with bodily and discursive gender and sexual practices. By studying male prostitution we can gain insight into the social dynamics behind how dissident sexualities are experienced and interpreted in the margins of hegemonic masculinities. In this article, I aim to make a contribution to the gap in the field of compensated sex between men of different social classes who embody distinct masculinities in the non-western sexual geographies by using the Istanbul case in which a number of southern sexual cultures such as the Mediterranean, East European and Islamic meet and interface (Bereket and Adam, 2008; Tapinc, 1992).

Jeffrey Weeks' (1981) historical study illuminates that there was no distinct (sub)culture of male or homosexual prostitution during the formation of the modern homosexual identity in the late 19th century in England. On the other hand, Albert J. Reiss (1961) details norms, rules, and codes that govern the interaction between young male prostitutes (peers) and homosexual men (queers) in the late 1950s in Nashville, USA. Reiss' cultural framework of male prostitution corresponds with Maurice Godelier's definition of culture: 'the set of representations and principles which consciously organize the different aspects of social life, together with the set of positive and negative norms and the values that are connected with these ways of acting and thinking' (2003: 180). Timothy M. Hall's (2007) analysis of local forms of compensated sex among men in Prague also employs such a cultural framework in Godelier's sense. This culture forms three loosely defined and flexible groups of men as 'the barfly', 'sex for pocket money', and 'the kept man', using different strategies and entailing multiple subjectivities. In this article, I will follow a similar cultural approach in order to understand how contested identities of rent boys in Istanbul are shaped and stabilized, and through which strategies they navigate their masculine selves.

Rent boys come from lower-class neighborhoods in the outskirts of the Istanbul metropolitan region called *varoş* – a term somehow similar to the Brazilian 'favela' (Goldstein, 2003) and the French 'banlieue' (Wacquant, 2008). Rent boys (aged between 16 and 25) are mostly sons of the recently migrated large families that have coped with dislocation, poverty, and cultural exclusion. They speak Turkish with different regional accents, which show their symbolic marginalization and lack of cultural capital. Through performances of a muted authenticity, rent boys self-fashion their masculinity to produce a niche for themselves within a highly stratified, increasingly hegemonic gay culture in Istanbul. This self-fashioning via the embodied, stylized, continuously refined exaggerated masculinity operates through

an 'outsider within' (Collins, 1986) position amongst self-identified gay men in Istanbul.

Varoş boys narrate a story of authenticity of their 'real' selves while they strive to become rent boys, which they claim is a temporary and transitory position. Exaggerated masculinity is a critical part of this construction in the context of male prostitution. *Varoş* boys transform themselves to achieve the rent boy identity through a discursive process, in which they reiterate the rules and characteristics of being a rent boy, and through a bodily process in which they learn and do exaggerated masculinity. On the other hand, this reconfiguration of authenticity through the creation of a rent boy identity alleviates the socially excluded *varoş* background via the bodily rules and practices that I will detail later. It enables rent boys to connect both materially and symbolically with upper-class milieux through their encounters with local and foreign gay men.

The globalization of modern gayness produced the desire and mechanisms of adaptation of western gay identity, space, culture, and community in the non-western world through a compound process of imitation, hybridization, and reconstruction; while it made different, if not counter, subject positions and subjective mediations available through the fragmented experiences of diversely modernizing societies (Altman, 2001; Binnie, 2004; Cruz-Malave and Manalansan, 2002; Manalansan, 2003; Povinelli and Chauncey, 1999). In the Istanbul case, *varoş* is a highly marginalized social identity regarding the mainstream culture of the middle classes. When they attempt to enter the spaces of the western-style gay venues in Istanbul *varoş* boys are discriminated and rejected in terms of their alterity to the apparently modern, urban, and liberal lifestyles that middle classes have long adopted.

'Rent boy' emerges in the liminal space between the *varoş* identity and the local reflection of the global gay culture: A rent boy neither becomes gay nor stays as *varoş*. Rent boys animate a dynamic process of cultural hybridization and theatrical displays of exaggerated masculinity as a response to double marginalization. While they strategically use their *varoş* backgrounds to underline their masculinity and consolidate their authenticity in order to attract gay men who are supposed to have a fantasy of having sex with heterosexual men, they concomitantly take advantage of their encounters with middle-class gay men and empower themselves in their *varoş* environments. In this sense, the agility of the identity of rent boy permits its subjects to be enriched and strengthened in the symbolic hierarchies that they face in both *varoş* and gay cultures. Masculine embodiment and its deliberate and nuanced uses become crucial in rent boys' symbolic and material culture.

The study

This project is based on ethnographic research carried out between April 2003 and August 2005 in Istanbul. For participant observation, I visited three gay bars where most rent boys meet and find their clients every weekend on a regular basis. All of these bars are located very close to the busy and cosmopolitan city center,

Taksim Square. I also went to the public places around Taksim Square in which rent boys gather and cruise. I took extensive field notes about the people, settings, conversations, and activities that I witnessed. I also tried to read and interpret meanings of bodily codes and cultural symbols that rent boys employ in order to better comprehend how material culture is significant in their self-making process. Content and discourse analysis of the print and visual media as well as brochures of local gay organizations were integral to this research in order to better grasp how homosexuality and male prostitution were represented.

In addition to the informal conversations and acquaintances in these bars, I conducted tape-recorded interviews with 16 rent boys. These interviews were basically life stories (Linde, 1993) and they mostly lasted around one hour. I talked with four gay clients as well. These interviews focused on their interactions with rent boys and gay culture in Istanbul. I transcribed and translated all of the interviews. During interactions with my informants, I articulated that I was neither a rent boy nor a client. I also clarified that I was affiliated with the university and my interest was only for research purposes. The names of rent boys and bars appear as pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of the subjects and the places I studied.

It was difficult and precarious to examine queer sexualities in Istanbul within the context of unswerving conservatism and heteronormativity of the public sphere as well as the underground character of the socio-spatial organization of homosexuality. 'Rent boy' was not a visible figure even when one could reach queer groups and spaces. Although I previously had insightful information about the queer culture of Istanbul,⁴ it required a careful ethnographic plan to regularly frequent the bars, create a sense of familiarity and rapport to talk with rent boys about issues that they were not willing to talk about especially with a researcher.

Varoş as culture and identity

After the 1980 military coup, neoliberal reforms in Turkey transformed both Istanbul's position within the country as well as its own socio-spatial organization. The population in Istanbul has multiplied almost four times and recently approached 12 million people. Urban segregation and social fragmentation escalated and reshaped Istanbul as a space of contestation in which previously silenced social groups including Islamists, Kurds, and queers claimed legitimacy and public visibility (Kandiyoti, 2002; Keyder, 1999, 2005).

Varoş was one of the names given by the middle-class, tax-paying, law-abiding resident citizens of Istanbul, or as Norbert Elias puts it 'the established' (Bauman and Lay, 2001: 33) to the illegal squatter settlement neighborhoods around the city and to the migrant people who built houses and worked in the temporary jobs in the informal sector (White, 2004). The term was used in a sense of borderwork in order to draw boundaries between the Istanbulites, which denotes qualities such as 'modern', urbanized, secular, westernized versus the peasant, insular, religious, uneducated classes that lack certain forms of cultural capital to amalgamate

within the urban culture. In this sense, *varoş* became synonymous with a regressive, 'pre-modern' subjectivity that is abjected and disenfranchised.

In the 1990s, the term *varoş* started to designate urban poverty instead of backwardness and rurality while people living in *varoş* areas were increasingly identified as the 'threatening Other' (Demirtas and Sen, 2007; Erman, 2004). *Varoş* was constructed as a space where fundamental Islamism, Kurdish separatism, illegality, criminality, and violence met. Through media representations, *varoş* was otherized in terms of culture, economy, ethnicity, and politics. Accordingly, the 'dangerous' *varoş* quarters of the city housed beggars, terrorists, gangsters, smugglers, and other components of the informal economy (Etoz, 2000). At the same time, inhabitants of *varoş* reclaimed and appropriated the word as a way to identify their own cultural position distinctly from the Istanbulite. For the first time, '*varoş* culture' appeared not as a humiliating discourse directed towards the *varoş* people, but as a resurgent medium to voice their own subjectivity.

Rent boys are the children of *varoş*. They tactically constitute their identities as *varoş* to underline their differences from their gay clients not only in terms of sexuality but also in terms of class position. In this sense, being *varoş* refers to an embodied cultural difference as well as certain gendered meanings regarding masculinity. Rent boys repetitively state that they are 'real' men because they are coming from *varoş*. In this way, *varoş* is naturalized and linked to an inherent masculinity that gay men do not (and cannot) have. In other words, *varoş* becomes a sign of an uncontaminated, natural, physical, and authentic masculinity, while gay stands for feminine values and norms such as culture, refinement, and cleanliness. In a symbolic order of masculinity, *varoş* boys turn to be 'naturally' and unchangeably masculine while gay men's bodies represent a modern, inauthentic, and imperfect masculinity.

Tactics of masculinity

In addition to the symbolic significance of *varoş* in creating a 'naturally' virile character, rent boys also employ tactics to maintain their masculine identities vis-à-vis gay men. The most important strategy is being 'top only'. Thus, rent boys claim that they engage sexually with other men only when they play the top (active) role.⁵ Protecting their bodies from penetration and becoming sexually available only as tops allow rent boys to reclaim their incontestably masculine identities. The gender of their sexual partner does not make a real difference either for their sexual repertoire or for their erotic subjectivities (for a similar situation among Brazilian male prostitutes, see Parker, 1998).

Another way that rent boys secure their masculinity is their heterosexualizing discourse. When they talk, rent boys position themselves in relation to an imagined girlfriend, fiancé, or long-term lover to-be-married with whom they have ongoing emotional and sexual affairs. When challenged, this discursive heterosexuality and the specter of women enable rent boys to prove their 'real' heterosexual identities. In order to distinguish themselves from gay men and to buttress their masculinity,

rent boys also humiliate and denigrate gay men. It is important to note that rent boys' homophobia is, in most cases, a performative 'utterance' (Butler, 1993) to help maintain their masculine identities. It does not really prevent them from mingling, negotiating, and having sex with gay men in other situations.

Masculinity has always been a contested subject in the construction of queer sexualities in Turkey (Bereket and Adam, 2006; Hocaoglu, 2002; Özbay and Soydan, 2003; Tapinc, 1992; Yuzgun, 1986). However, rent boys' 'top only' positions and homophobic utterances are only one aspect of the exaggerated performances of masculinity. Different than an archetypical macho sexual pose of Latin America (Lancaster, 1994) rent boys do not brag about their sexual escapades with gay men. Instead, they have an evasive manner about their queer sexual practices. In addition to homophobia, the silence of rent boys about their homosexual involvements coincides with the tradition of the strict separation of intimate affairs from public sphere in some Muslim societies as Murray calls it 'the will not to know' (Murray, 1997). Accordingly, rent boys have a will not to divulge.

Within the framework of interpenetrating western gay culture and local constellations of gender and sexuality, masculinity matters for rent boys and gay men on another level: the appeal of passing and acting straight (Clarkson, 2006). Gay men in Istanbul have an increasing obsession with the 'straight-acting' and 'straight-looking' self-presentation, which demands a certain degree of heterosexual masculinity for erotic engagement. This fetishism for the 'more masculine' attributes and bodily gestures contributes to a hierarchy in which feminine qualities, as in effeminate men, are deemed inferior and unwanted, while masculine traits are presented as rare, desired, and superior. The negative attitude towards effeminacy and the desire for more masculine attributes contribute to an exaggerated masculinity to prevail as the 'most masculine', and thus craved, in the gay culture in Istanbul. Rent boys take advantage of this erotic climate and relocate themselves in the eyes of their potential clients. Put in other words, rent boys convert their erotic and sexual positionalities into social and economic capital through their use of the encounter and desire between different masculinities.

The interplay of multiple masculinities

Since gender is conceptualized as a continual 'doing' rather than as a natural 'being' (Butler, 1999: 25; West and Zimmerman, 1987) gendered subjectivities are constituted through 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1999: 33). Gendered subjectivity comes into being via the constellation of bodily performances within the 'regulatory frame' of the heterosexual matrix. Rent boys subvert their regular and 'normal' heterosexual script with male prostitution while they simultaneously

try to re-stabilize it by enacting exaggerated masculinity – a style that requires well-defined gendered performances before different audiences. The omnipresent sense of risk inaugurates the possibility for the exaggeratedly masculine identity to be questioned and imperiled. In this sense, the rent boy's masculinity is a delusional and insecure subject position that needs to be repetitively asserted and proven while it continuously introduces new risks to be contemplated by rent boys in order to achieve their heterosexual and masculine status.

In her seminal works, Raewyn Connell (1987, 1995) demonstrated that multiple masculinities coexist and interact in a society at any given time. The encounter and dialogue between a *varoş* boy and a middle-aged upper-class gay man might be seen as a manifestation of what Connell terms the relations between divergent masculinities. These relations ought to be seen through the prism of power. In this sense, the culturally exalted hegemonic masculinity brings complicity, subordination, intimidation, and exploitation into relations between different masculinities. The exclusion of same-sex desire is critical for the constitution of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000: 83). As a model, an ideal, or a reference point, hegemonic masculinity – in relation to the heterosexual matrix – affects all other ways of being a man including its imitations (as in rent boys) as well as the resistant or alternative versions (as in queer masculinity).

In the eastern Mediterranean region, configurations of masculinities take shape between the westernizing influences of modernity and the history of Islamic culture and tradition (Bereket and Adam, 2008; Ghousoub and Sinclair-Webb, 2000; Ouzgane, 2006). The case of rent boys in Istanbul is not an exception. This study shows that critical elements of the social context including the belated Turkish modernity, uncompleted urbanization and persisting poverty, increasing effects of globalization and cosmopolitanism, Occidentalism and the desire to be western, and the contested meanings of locality and tradition, must be taken into account when one travails to make sense of the ramifications of globalization of modern sexual identities in Istanbul in the 2000s.

Locating rent boys

Place: Taksim Square.

Time: Any evening, especially after 10 p.m.

The crowded Istiklal Street, which is a major promenade connected to the Taksim Square, is full of intermeshing people from all classes, ages, genders, ethnicities, religions, sexualities, and cultures representing Istanbul's social diversity. Among the carnivalesque crowd an attentive eye can notice some young men walking or leaning against walls, checking the passerby. It is obvious for these attentive eyes that these young men, who carefully prepared themselves for the peak hours, reciprocate with curious gazes that can speak the same language of the looker.

Around midnight these young men suddenly disappear from the street. Now, it is the bar time.

After paying the entry fee (around \$10) I enter Bientot, the most famous and much frequented club of rent boys in Istanbul. Bientot is very close to the vivid Istiklal Street, near a well-known transgender dance club and the only gay bathhouse of the city. Bientot, like two other similar bars, is a 'limitative and disciplining' (Hammers, 2008) space in the sense that types of people (i.e. rent boys, transvestites, clients) are set, their roles are prescribed (i.e. who dances, who looks, who buys drinks), and interactions between visitors are stabilized (i.e. negotiations, flirting, cruising, kissing) except very big fights and police raids when the music is switched off and the lights are turned on. Especially gay men (whether clients of rent boys or not) told me that they do not 'have fun' in Bientot as they do in other gay bars and they come here just to see or talk to the *varoş* boys only in the predefined ways that are available to them.

Bientot is full of its regular frequenters: Several single gay men from all ages, some mixed friend groups, several transvestites, and more than 70 rent boys. In general, everyone seems to know each other. Everybody except rent boys drinks and rests on the walls surrounding the dance floor enjoying music (popular Turkish pop songs of the day) while most of the rent boys dance in a unique style without drinking unless a client is generous enough to buy them one. The other two bars with a similar reputation among rent boys, Boogie and SenGel, do not have different spatial and social organizations except that SenGel is larger in terms of space and it is also very popular among Turkish bears who normally do not mingle with gay men and lesbians.

Here is a quotation from my field notes immediately after arriving home from Bientot:

A shocking place . . . High volume of music, really bad ventilation, the smell of alcohol, the smell of sweat, the smell of cologne, the smoke from cigarettes . . . You can't escape from the piercing looks into your eyes. These looks are so masculine, you can tell, but they are also very inviting and flirtatious, which contradicts with the assertive masculinity. The dancing bodies are very close to each other. They are very straight looking like the ordinary boys at the street; but, on the other hand, the male-to-male intimacy of the dance destroys the desired heterosexual ambiance. It seems like they are straight boys in a gay club, dancing together passionately.

A topless waiter with very thin eyebrows asks if I want beer. At every second, another person touches me; it is impossible to trace whom he was. It is very crowded inside. Finding a wall to lean on is the only escape, but it is not possible to escape from the insistent looks, they eventually find and check you out. After a while, I realized that the rent boys around me keep rotating, as long as I don't talk to them. It is very difficult to follow the rent boy traffic. They have lure in their eyes as well as toughness and even threat. Like smells, the feelings I receive from them are hybrid, ambiguous, and atomized. (17 April 2004)

Playing with fire: Elements of rent boys' style

A weekly TV show filmed the gay bathhouse near Bientot with hidden cameras in early 2005. After recording each possible 'proof' of male prostitution (including negotiations for prices and actions) the programmers tried to talk with the manager of the bathhouse about the organization in the bathhouse while he kept refuting that he hired the rent boys. During the interview the camera focuses on a young rent boy, half naked in his towel, arguing angrily with another one about the recruitment of new rent boys that they already knew. He said 'I told you don't bring everyone here from your neighborhood. 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.'

As rent boys have a will not to divulge they certainly want to keep things hidden. Thus, this warning against 'playing with fire' is neither unique to this rent boy nor restricted within the walls of the bathhouse. It offers a useful framework to better comprehend a rent boy's unceasing physical and social negotiations with other rent boys, gay men, and transvestites. Rent boy is a conditional and fragile identity. It surfaces between the contradictory discursive and sexual practices, which subvert the line between homo and heterosexuality. It is a contingent performance that links the *varoş* culture of Istanbul and the ostensibly global gay life-style. It is an interplay of competing working- and upper-middle class meanings and signifiers. Through the incessant play of risk taking, a rent boy invests his heterosexuality as well his social position and kinship networks which are likely to be harmed by an undesired disclosure, as the rent boy quoted earlier fears.

Here, I follow Agustin's (2005: 619) proposition to define and study prostitution, sex work, and compensated sex as a 'culture' to expose the previously under-researched links with systems of inequality and the production of social meaning. Wright (2005: 243) also highlights the 'percolation of queer theoretical concerns' and 'an array of cultural studies interventions' into the sociology of masculinities in order to pose new questions on masculine performances, cultural practices, and 'engenderment' processes that men undertake through the routes of non-hegemonic masculinities in diverse settings. Hence, I frame exaggerated masculinity as a product of the culture of rent boys in Istanbul. Rent boys learn, practice, and transform exaggerated masculinity through the mechanisms of social control and self-governance. The process of the construction and reconstruction of exaggerated masculinity is constantly under risk of disappointment and failure.

As 'discretion was indeed the hallmark of homosexual prostitution' (Weeks, 1981: 129), risk appears three-fold in animating exaggerated masculinity by rent boys. First and foremost, rent boys' involvement with male prostitution should not be revealed to their friends, family, and extended relatives. Otherwise, they cannot sustain their ordinary lives as young, decent, and respected members of their community. On the other hand, while the rent boy reproduces *varoş* culture as corroboration to his 'natural' masculinity, he should also play with and transmute it

symbolically in order to have a subject position within gay culture instead of being abjected. So, the second risk is about not being purely *varoş* but to transform oneself into a rent boy. It is a nuanced middle space between the two unwanted identities that a rent boy must navigate carefully: staying as an unmodified *varoş* or becoming (too) gay. While connecting closely with gay men, rent boys' third risk is about protecting their heterosexuality. Said otherwise, although rent boys have sex with gay men, they are not supposed to have a gay identity. In sum, a rent boy has to control meticulously and manage risk regarding his bodily acts, behaviors, and relations with other people in order not to be exposed while balancing between the discrepant meanings of *varoş* and gay positions. In this framework, I will now outline the elements of how rent boys sustain exaggerated masculinity through their risk-taking activities and their entanglements with different segments of the culture of male sex work in Istanbul.

The body

The first point of risk that rent boys take into consideration focuses on their bodies. Almost all rent boys have athletic or skinny bodies. They say they are physically fit because they regularly play football (soccer) and/or they run. Although the number of gyms in some *varoş* neighborhoods rose recently and these places provide an important opportunity for masculine socializing, most rent boys do not go to the gyms. Their unwillingness is related to three factors. One of them is financial; they simply are not able to pay the fees. More importantly, they think that their gay clients like their bodies as skinny, fatless, and 'toned' and not over-muscular and 'hung'. They also believe that they look younger this way. So, rent boys do not really need to go to the gym for weight lifting sessions. The third reason is rent boys' belief that the pills they would take for sustaining the muscled appearance will eventually decrease the power of their penises and consequently terminate their virilities. They always make jokes about impotency of their over-muscled, body-builder friends. Hakan (aged 22) says, 'body is everything we have in this job, of course we need to take care of it'. Rent boys have a certain tension around their bodies in order to keep them in good condition, to seem young(er), and not to lose their virility through developing an over-muscled look.

Appearance

Another significant issue in the material culture of rent boys is about what they wear and how they look. Most rent boys wear denim jeans. They almost never wear shorts even when it is unbearably hot and humid in Istanbul. Burak (aged 18) states that 'real men never wear shorts, jeans are the best'. For their upper parts they commonly opt for white. 'White is better because it looks more attractive when you are tanned. Also, it shines in the dark bar and makes you more visible', says Arda (aged 23). Black tops are also very popular for their taste because it is deemed to be more masculine and mature. They also wear some bright and lively colors like red

and yellow to be seen in the bar, but dreary colors like gray or brown are not chosen.

Rent boys do not wear earrings as Okan (aged 18) told me, 'Earrings would harm masculinity.' They are more tolerant towards wristbands, chains, and rings, but earrings are identified with gays and/or foreigners. Some of them use fake earrings that do not pierce their ears at Bientot in order not to look as *varoş* and take them off when they go home. Rent boys in Istanbul insist on wearing sports shoes and sneakers even on snowy days. This is another tactic they use for negotiating with the *varoş* label. Their shoes are mostly cheaper imitations of the famous sports brands unless they get them from clients as gifts.

Perfume

Perfumes and colognes are significant manifestations of rent boys' risky relations with their gay clientele. It is always good for a rent boy to have the fragrance of a charming perfume because it increases his attractiveness when his client has to whisper into his ear in the noisy bar. Perfumes are very expensive for rent boys' budgets but sometimes they receive perfumes after satisfying a client with their sexual performance. Whether it was stolen from a client or given to the rent boy as a gift, it proves the rent boy's popularity and sexual activity. As Burak told me, 'if you smell [of] perfume, it shows that you recently got some work done'.

The risky point is about the gendered quality of the fragrance. Accordingly, the fragrance must smell masculine because otherwise it cannot contribute to the exaggerated masculinity of the rent boy. However, rent boys generally do not find the perfumes that gay men use attractive. They are not masculine enough – mostly androgynous – for rent boys. On the other hand, a client who uses a very masculine perfume for himself endangers a rent boy's masculinity because it implies that the gay client was not a feminine man and he could turn active in sexual penetration. So rent boys construct a narrative in which their client was effeminate enough to use a less masculine perfume for himself and thus he did not threaten the rent boy's masculinity. However, he gave the perfume specifically to the rent boy to show his gratitude. Of course, this narrative's veracity can always be questioned. Hence, using a masculine perfume is a risky action. Its absence or a more androgynous fragrance points to a failure. Its presence indicates the dilemma of being bottom and finding a really generous gay – which is rather difficult.

Most of the rent boys that I talked to said that they were totally against stealing or any other kind of criminal activity. On the other hand, they also revealed that they were not against asking for or even stealing perfumes from gays' houses after they have sex. Perfumes clearly are the exception for rent boys' moral stance against stealing. Hasan (aged 24) says 'when I see a nice perfume I ask for it. Honestly, if he does not want to give it to me I will try to take it anyway. I don't think this is stealing.' Hakan also noted that 'I am not interested in anything else, but if he has a nice perfume I will take it... He can buy another bottle easily and I will smell nice. Good deal.' Murat (aged 23) states that 'perfume is

a connection between the Rich's life and mine. I can take it, I can use it and when I smell it I remember what I did and I enjoy about it. It makes my life more beautiful.'

Dance

Dance is another risky subject in the context of male prostitution in Istanbul. Rent boys have to dance in the bar in order to be seen by clients. The particular motions and gyrations of the boys' dancing give the impression that they are carrying out a predefined script of performing a task, but not reflecting pleasure to move in a relaxed manner with the music and the rhythm. In other words, when rent boys dance, they perform another requirement of their work. Their dance is never visibly homoerotic although their bodies are pretty close and sometimes touch each other. It has its own sense of humor: If a rent boy puts himself at the back of another, the one in the front bounces in sudden panic – in an anxiety to save his back (his bottom). It manifests a rigid top–bottom code concerning the control and defense of your own back and a constant search to attack the others' backs.

If a rent boy oversteps the boundary of touching another's back or exhibits signs of pleasure, other rent boys explicitly disapprove the act and call him 'pervert', *ergo*, humorous pleasure that comes from sodomizing others should be limited to activity with gays and not with other rent boys. In the bar, this is the main reason behind physical fights amongst rent boys. Thus, bodily humor is dangerous to play with, although avoiding it brings social exclusion because a rent boy ought to dance. He needs to 'show' in order to charm his audience. A motionless rent boy renders himself invisible, which seriously reduces his chances of finding a client. Anil (aged 20) says, 'dancing is the moment where we get the gays. We attract them when we dance. They love to watch us.'

Most importantly, a rent boy has to dance without looking feminine. Okan says, 'it is better not to do it [dance] if you do it like a girl'. Riza (aged 24) told me 'you should not shake your ass like a belly dancer. Arms and legs must be straight. Gaze is also important.' There are strict performative codes that most rent boys obey to protect the masculine image during the dance: The body should not be curved or shaken too much and it must repeat the same rough movements without flexibility. It must show strength. Shoulders and arms should be kept wide open, the waist should move only back and forth, imitating the sexual act of penetration. Dance is controlled and regulated by the surveillance of other rent boys. As long as they can perform it according to the unwritten rules of exaggerated masculinity, dance guarantees rent boys' masculine identities and makes them the center of attraction before potential clients.

Friends

As I recounted earlier from the indignant rent boy in the bathhouse, taking part in male prostitution or being seen while cruising is very risky. This necessary

concealment paralyzes friendship mechanisms amongst rent boys. Most of the time, they come to the bars or other cruising places alone or at most in the company of one other rent boy, who is supposed to be trustworthy (mostly one's kin, for example a cousin). They usually know other rent boys personally and they have an intimate network of gossip and information exchange. They also spend time together chatting and dancing in the bars, but they always wind up alone while working or cruising. The solitude of rent boys might be seen as a tactic to increase their chance of negotiation for higher prices or as a part of the tradition of mendacity about what they do for how much. It actually protects them from unwanted rumors and from the dangers of unexpected disclosure. Can (aged 21) elaborates that 'I know some people in the bar, some other 'rents' but I never see them out of the bar. Nobody knows that I am coming here in my neighborhood. I must be very careful. When my regular friends ask I tell them I will hang out with my cousins.' Mert (aged 24) adds, 'If you go out together he [a friend] can say that Mert let the guy fuck him, Mert turned bottom, etc. If he won't say it today, he will say it tomorrow. This is how it works. So, it is better to be alone instead of dealing with gossip and lies.'

Another point that poses a risk to the exaggerated masculinity is about emotions and sexual attraction between rent boys. In order to sustain fraternal heterosexuality, homoeroticism must be tamed and eliminated (Connell, 2000; Sedgwick, 1986). In male prostitution, who is feminine (gay) and who is masculine (rent boy) is rigidly defined. For rent boys, intimate relations are allowed only between these distinct gendered groups and not within them. Therefore, the possibility or manifestation of any kind of affect, eroticism, or sexuality between rent boys subverts their masculine positions as well as their 'natural' heterosexuality. Just like the uneasiness when they dance together, the risk of emotional and bodily intimacy as well as the ways it might be talked about create a certain tension and prevent rent boys from becoming further attached to each other.

Drinks and drugs

For rent boys, their young age is but one factor that needs to be struggled against in order to look more mature and masculine than they really are. Drinking alcoholic beverages in the bar is a vital chance to look like an adult and demonstrate toughness. Soft drinks and soda are not preferred because they look juvenile and gentle. Beer is the drink that rent boys consume mostly because it is the cheapest and the most masculine beverage (except the traditional *rakı*, which is not the best option for a bar). Beer is easy to drink while dancing, and more importantly, it does not make one drunk easily. Alcohol is a very risky issue just like drugs. Mixing different beverages, drinking tequila shots fast, or taking drugs can make a rent boy dizzy – sometimes almost unconscious. Emre (aged 25) notes 'gays try to make you drunk by buying you many drinks. They want to use you when you are drunk. If you are new here they can easily entrap you. You can have sex for no money, or worse things can happen'. These 'worse things' that Emre notes may lead to losing

the masculine pose and roughness, which was carefully constructed. When they are very drunk or 'high', rent boys would take the passive role in sexual intercourse that may end up with rape as Emre implied. Hence, although drinking (and drugs) is an inseparable element of the bar culture and a good way to expose masculinity for rent boys, it might be really risky for sustaining this life-style.

Transvestites

My framing of risk for rent boys' exaggerated masculinity includes their multifaceted relations with transvestite sex workers. Almost all the rent boys that I talked with have had sexual experiences with transvestites. A rent boy and a transvestite can become friends, sexual partners, and even lovers. The stories told about rent boys and transvestites range from scandals such as a drunken rent boy who was raped by a transvestite to some poignant love stories. Despite the fact that they are in two different sides of sex work neither rent boys nor transvestites pay to have sex with each other. As Aykut (aged 25) says 'we are free for them, they are free for us. For all the rest, only money talks.'

While transvestites enjoy the young virility and 'real' masculinity of rent boys, the latter are happy to show how masculine and sexually active they are by having sex with the 'girls'. In most cases, a transvestite mentors an inexperienced rent boy and she teaches him how to have good sex. Although it seems a mutually satisfying relationship, these escapades with transvestites are indeed very risky for rent boys. Transvestites can easily ridicule a rent boy for not having a sufficiently large penis or for not achieving a fulfilling sexual performance. Emir (aged 20) said, 'I saw many guys like this. Everybody knows that they ejaculate really fast or it [the penis] is really small because one of the girls talked about it. They can still convince some clients, especially tourists, but it is more difficult to find a client for them.' Such a public display of physical or sexual insufficiency would permanently destroy a rent boy's sources of masculine respectability and reputation.

Safe sex

The last component of what I conceptualize as risk for rent boys' construction of the exaggerated masculinity, is about 'sexual risk' (Fernández-Dávila et al., 2008) and bodily health. All the rent boys that I conducted interviews with had knowledge about STDs, HIV, condoms and how to use them. Nevertheless, my conversations with both rent boys and their clients testify that rent boys have a certain disinclination and resistance to concede their vulnerability and to use a condom during sexual intercourse. They prefer to have *doğal* (natural) or *çiplak* (naked, without a condom) sex especially when the client asks for or pays more. Ilker (aged 19) told me 'I use it [a condom] sometimes. It does not really bother me. I prefer cleaner gays so it is not a big threat for me. I know many rents do it without condoms with tourists because they pay more. It is crazy because there is a higher chance for a foreigner to be sick.' Their negative attitude might originate

from their practical difficulty to use condoms, or as more likely, the construction of their masculine self-identities rejects expressions of fear and protection while it promotes courage and adventure. Rent boys interpret the sexual encounter as an opportunity to challenge and prove their manhood as Ozgur (aged 22) says, 'little boys might get scared of it, but for me, it is not the case. I know how to fuck a guy without a condom in a safe way. It is not necessary for me to put one on. I can protect myself.' Also, some clients opt for unprotected sex with younger rent boys whom they believe do not have a long sexual history and are thus 'cleaner'. On the other hand, Burak mentioned, 'Probably because I am younger they ask my age and how many times I did it [having sex]. Then, they say "it is OK with you, you are clean" and I don't put a condom on. That's what they want.' Therefore, rent boys' desire to demonstrate their courage and fearlessness operates along with some clients' demands for unprotected sex and produces a risky and dangerous encounter for both sides.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have explained how rent boys in Istanbul have developed cultural, bodily, symbolic, and material strategies both to challenge tacitly and to negotiate inventively with the social norms of hegemonic male sexuality (Plummer, 2005) and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). The 'top only' sexual positions whereby they make themselves sexually available, the protection of their bodies from penetration, and the distance they place between themselves and feminine connotations by the way they dance, smell, or dress, can be seen as attempts to save the penis-and-penetration-centered hegemonic virile sexuality. On the other hand, the enactment of exaggerated masculinity and the production of a story of authentic manhood via *varos* culture are manifestations of their complicity to the hegemonic forms of masculinity in Istanbul despite their dissident sexual practices that contradict these narratives.

Is it acceptable for the embodiments of hegemonic masculinity, or its imitations, to operate alongside queer sex? Is it possible for one to reclaim his privileged heterosexual status while he engages in compensated sex with other men? Gary W. Dowsett and his colleagues note that the definitions and conceptualizations in which masculinities have been theorized are in need of reconsideration and recalibration since 'the prevailing formulation of masculinity represents a failure to engage with the creative meanings and embodied experiences evident in non-hegemonic sexual cultures, and with the effects these meanings and experiences may generate beyond their boundaries' (2008: 124). In this sense, rent boys and their ambivalent sexual acts and identifications provide an excellent case for such inquiries regarding their involvement with the active meaning-making process of sexuality and masculinity. As a response to the possible inquiries and challenges towards their heterosexual and masculine self-identities, they use exaggerated masculinity in order to be able to continue their everyday lives as heterosexual members of their families and kinship networks. In other words, exaggerated

masculinity repairs and masks the subverting effects of compensated sex for rent boys' heterosexuality and makes them closer to the hegemonic ideal of masculinity. They perform an assiduous self-governance through symbols and implicit meanings vis-à-vis different and contradictory class positions, gender identities, and sexual acts.

Rent boys constitute exaggerated masculinity relationally and strategically at the nexus of contradictory contexts of the local *varoş* culture and the impact of the global gay culture. Risk is central in understanding the mechanisms of the exaggerated masculinity since it is a fragile, insecure, playful combination of various bodily acts, gestures, and symbols. At another level of risk, rent boys and their relations with their gay clientele in Istanbul might be seen as an example of how globalization has a potential to destabilize and imperil local constructions and operations of heteronormativity in the non-West. In order to cope with the discourses of linear outcomes and homogenizing effects of globalization, there is need for more research in divergent geographies about new openings, possibilities, and hybridizations in gendered subjectivities and sexual identities as a result of globalization's reshuffling in local entanglements of power, gender, and sexualities.

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Notes

1. Rent boy (as in English) is the term my informants use for defining themselves. They say '*ben bir rent boyum*' (*I am a rent boy*) or just '*rentim*' (*I am rent*). Sometimes they prefer to say, '*parayla veya ücretli çıkıyorum*' (*I am going for money*). I never encountered any other terms, either in the English versions or in Turkish translations, such as *erkek fahişe* (*male prostitute*), *seks işçisi* (*sex worker*) or *jigolo* (*gigolo*) used by my informants, their clients, or in the mass media. The subject of this article, rent boys, who are from the *varoş* segments of the city, is the only group of men who engage in compensated sex (receiving money or gifts) in the gay scene in Istanbul (Hocaoglu, 2002).
2. I prefer to describe the rent boys' stylized embodiment as 'exaggerated masculinity' in order to underline its theatrical, playful, performative, and decontextualizing characteristics. It is a constellation of learnt, imitated, calculated, and socially regulated displays of doing masculinity. There are other similar terms for such excessive masculine performances like hypermasculinity (Healey, 1996) or machismo (Guttman, 1996) that are conceptualized in different webs of relations.
3. With the western-style gay culture, I basically mean the emergence of men who call themselves gay (as in English) or sometimes *gey* in Turkish (Bereket and Adam, 2006) because they engage in sexual, erotic, and emotional relations with other men. There are many components of this culture including enclosed spaces called gay bars or gay clubs, and access to foreign or local websites with gay content for various purposes such as

- online dating. Before the emergence of the modern gay identity in Turkey there were various sorts of same-sex sexual relations going on under different identifications and social organizations (Tapinc, 1992; Yuzgun, 1986).
4. Lambevski (1999: 402) highlights the significance of being an insider and participating in the queer (sub)culture in order to have 'intimate, rich, and meaningful knowledge' of the gay scene of Skopje, Macedonia.
 5. Rent boys claim that they are 'top only' in order to insist they do not let their clients penetrate their bodies, while they can insert their penises into their clients' bodies through oral and anal sex. Rent boys also claim that they never touch their client's penises and they never let their clients caress their bodies. In addition to the 'top only' rule, some of the rent boys I talked to stated that they never kiss their clients from their mouths and some told me that they do not 'make out' with clients and delimit their sexual activities with oral and anal penetration (Özbay, 2005).

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