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Geographies of place-affective trans-becoming: an ethnography of drag in Istanbul

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ethnographic study of *Dudakların Cengi*, a drag and queer performing event series in Istanbul, where a community of predominantly trans and non-binary performers create a place of collectivity for self-expression and gender exploration. Drawing on trans and feminist geographical perspectives, we examine how the participants use drag as a way of creating shared imagery, exploring themselves in relation to gender, and producing places in the city through their performances beyond the stage. We conceptualise Dudakların Cengi as a place-as-becoming that emerges from the intensities of social ties, flows, narratives, and sensations. We also propose a geographical understanding of gendered embodiment to account for transness in new spatial ways that enable the interrogation of phenomena that do not immediately yield their relevancy to the category of gender. The data was collected in over three years of presence within the field through situated and reflexive participant observation, informal conversations, in-depth interviews, and the participants' written narratives. We analyse the data with iterative cycles of grounded theory completed with continuous collaborative theorisation with participants. Through this collaborative theorisation, a series of concepts emerge that explain the experiences of the participants: opening drag, collectivising the stage, socialising in drag, urban navigation of gender, and an unfolding sense of drag. Together, these concepts help explain a novel understanding of place-affective trans-becoming.

Introduction

This is a situated inquiry into *Dudakların Cengi*, a drag and queer performing event series in Istanbul. The paper explores how a community of predominantly trans and non-binary drag performers create a collective environment for

self-expression by challenging existing norms, use drag as a way of exploring gender experience, and produce places in the city through their performances beyond the stage. Dudakların Cengi events used to be organised regularly every two to three weeks, at venues changing over time. As a result, the event series extended over to people's everyday lives, providing a platform for those participating to come together consistently. The event preparations brought different groups together, and the social ties created and maintained at the events lasted beyond the nightlife. People's routes, routines, homes, and urban lives became intertwined as part of this spatiality. Performers and the audience gradually changed in composition—new people came, and some left. The overall atmosphere and event flow, however, remained the same. The tone of a night is set by people dancing, chatting, laughing, and enjoying themselves—and one another—in an atmosphere of bright lights, music, and colourful outfits.

This paper's main contribution is the emergent conception of how experiences of becoming trans are shaped by affects in place. Transness is an embodied condition, in that one becomes trans in their body. However, an understanding of trans embodiment must account for one's experience of 'the complex and contested interconnections between sexuality, gender, embodiment and the (re)constitution of spaces and subjectivities' in an inquiry beyond the body, and into the social, psychic, and political complexities of everyday life (Nash 2010, 582). We investigate Dudakların Cengi as 'assemblages, gatherings, of materiality, meaning, and practice' (Cresswell 2019, 188)—a relational coming together of people, their senses, and their stories—seeking how the spatiality here is performatively produced (Valentine 2002). Dudakların Cengi is a series of entertainment events hosted at different locations, but the social ties forged here persist over time and space. It produces an urban fabric constituted by the relationships of its participants. This is a collectively produced place. While research has examined young trans people who feel out-of-place due to the everyday hostilities they face (Todd 2023, 2024), we take a different approach, investigating how trans people create spaces where they feel *in-place*. We follow from Petra Doan's (2010, 649) call for a broadened understanding of gender to 'include a distinct spatiality within which a range of gendered and other differences can be performed' against the oppressive gendered ordering of everyday life. Building on such previous discussions, we conceptualise Dudakların Cengi as a 'place-as-becoming', understanding its formation through the social and spatial ties, flows, narratives, and sensations (Dovey 2010, 6), unveiling the intensified spatial and temporal complexities of gendered embodiment happening here. We put forward a geographical understanding of *place-affective trans-becoming* to explore transness in new spatial ways—enabling investigation of phenomena that do not initially appear relevant to the category of gender.

Categories of transness and gender nonconformity are difficult to pin down due to their ambiguity and geographical variance (Zengin 2022), and working with such categories of local subjectivities necessitates attention to contextual entanglements (Savcı 2021a). Transness involves a complicated set of conditions that cut across many intimate and public milieus since it catalyses substantial debates that implicate policy with the organisation of private and public life (Gleeson and O'Rourke 2021). The social construction of categories that meander between effeminacy, homosexuality, transvestism, transsexuality, and gender fluidity has been discussed in relation to the intersection of social class, gender, sexuality, and generational differences (Özbay 2017). We aim to explore new modes of thinking about gender in-between drag performance, urban experience, and processes of becoming trans. This is an in-between, or as Loren March (2021) terms, liminal geography of transness that can ground 'contingent, non-linear becoming' in everyday realities (1). Discussing bodies and embodiment, Linda McDowell (1999) conceives the mutability of the body as connected to place and position. This resonates with the call for new analyses, strategies, and practices for understanding transness (Stryker 2006), by expanding the field of research to the spatial. As such, we reevaluate becoming trans as a spatial practice. This is exemplified by the many ways transness has a transformative relationship with space—such as the assemblages of mobilities and subjectivities in urban spaces (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2017), a trans reimagining of the world (Halberstam 2018), trans inclusion and exclusion in queer spaces (Stone 2013), and the creation of spaces constituted by trans cultural practices (Rooke 2010). While attending to the transformative processes of transness, we opt for a holistic understanding of *becoming* rather than a strictly medical perspective on gender transition, which cannot encompass the full range of gender-diverse practices (Hines 2007). We want to allow for a general reading of 'a constant process of emergence, shifting, (re)assessment, and (re)configuration' (Cordoba 2023, 28) rather than one that is specific to the temporalities of transitioning.

This is as much of a study on drag as it is one of transness. We understand drag as a gender-bending that enables the performer to go beyond the limitations of the *on-stage versus off-stage* and *imitation versus authenticity* divides (Heller 2020). We offer a spatial revisiting of drag performance in relation to transness and gender, engaging with affect and performativity from a primarily geographical perspective, focusing specifically on how a relation to place shapes the processes of becoming trans. A spatial understanding of drag can be traced back to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2003, 9) inquiry into drag and performativity. She critiques Judith Butler's (1990) reading of Esther Newton's (1972) *Mother Camp*, arguing that Butler's 'attention to space collapses'—oversimplifying and reifying the complexities of drag performance—leading readers to derive a simplistic, 'voluntary' model of gender performativity. Instead, when discussing performance, Sedgwick (2003, 44) describes affective

experience of space in relation to the subject's own reflection on performativity. This spatial affective experience emerges as a negotiation of the space generated by both subjective experience and the front-of-stage interaction with the audience.

Our focus here is not to make a judgement about this theoretical difference, but instead to show how spatialising drag experience allows for a re-articulation of the practice to include a multitude of destinations and unfinished—or never-ending—projects of self-making. This paper aims to inquire how Dudakların Cengi, as a becoming place materialises relations of trans self-making. The research process itself embodies such a milieu of emergence through an ethnography planned and realised with the participants. In the following sections, we discuss the design of the research process as an ethnography with collaborative theorisation with the participants. Then, we introduce the contextual setting of Dudakların Cengi and locate it in the larger context of Türkiye. The following three sections present participants' experiences, organised under six concepts that collectively theorise the process of becoming trans through the lens of affective place experience. These conceptual underpinnings resulting from an iterative process of theorisation grounded in empirical evidence encompass six key areas: (1) *opening drag*, examining how an amateur imagery of self-actualisation creates a critical interpretation of drag culture, (2) *collectivising the stage*, exploring the production of a stage made possible through community practice, a process that, in turn, introduces many to drag for the first time, (3) *socialising in drag*, investigating the building and cultivation of unique social practices that enable newcomers to socialise within the collectivity, (4) *an urban navigation of gender*, analysing how certain ways of experiencing the city enables one to explore themself in relation to gender, (5) *an unfolding sense of drag*, offering a progressive understanding of drag that takes shape to accommodate the performer's changing needs around self-actualisation, and lastly (6) *place-affective trans-becoming*, which, together with the rest of the framework, puts forward a spatial mode of understanding gender in relation to the city, drag performance, and processes of becoming trans.

Research design

This research project emerged from the first-author's long-term involvement with the predominantly trans and non-binary drag-performing collectivity at Dudakların Cengi events. Throughout this article, the use of 'I' refers to Tuna reflecting as the field researcher who led the data collection, analysis, and theorisation, while 'we' refers to the authors collectively. Second and third authors provided authorship and were not fieldworkers. Within the Dudakların Cengi context, I would be considered an insider rather than an outsider because I am part of this collectivity, even though I do not perform. Since

30 November 2018, I have attended nearly every event, initially to enjoy the community atmosphere and watch my friends' performances. I later volunteered as a photographer and eventually participated as a researcher.

After attending Dudakların Cengi for the first two months, I realised that very few photographs were being taken to memorialise the shows. After asking for permission, I started taking photographs during the events as a volunteer. During this time, performers encouraged my work, which heartened me to continue with photography and later to conduct immersive research at Dudakların Cengi. In February 2019, I decided to write about Dudakların Cengi. The research was designed as an ethnography to provide a deep insight into the social life of the participants (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). It was built on feminist ethnographic principles of immersive participation with the community and mutual reflection throughout the course of the work (Davis and Craven 2023).

I negotiated participation through my existing social relations and the community supported the study from its early development. The process was structured collaboratively, and the research priorities were set together. I had informal conversations with the larger Dudakların Cengi collectivity at nightclubs, at one another's homes, and other casual occasions; these conversations served as an agenda setter. Later, the data collection included long-term participant observation and continuous informal conversations, in-depth interviews, and personal narratives written by the participants. The participants were regarded as experts in their own experiences and significantly contributed to the interpretation of findings and to conceptual development. This reflects a feminist standpoint perspective in knowledge production that embraces pluralistic meaning-making practices and allows for inferences about the social position of the participants as knowers (Anderson 2020).

In May 2019, I requested a written narrative from both Jade and ABB. Both had been part of Dudakların Cengi for about a year, having started and performed exclusively there at the time. I asked them to reflect on their relation to Dudakların Cengi, without further specifying the request. They each wrote me a letter within a week; these later informed the research themes. In June 2021, I conducted in-depth interviews with Jade, ABB, Madır Öktiş, Larissa, and Deniz Aşırı, all of whom had been involved with Dudakların Cengi for more than three years at that time. Interviews with Larissa and Deniz Aşırı, in addition to earlier material produced with other participants, are not presented in this publication due to its scope. I was present in the field for over three years, until June 2022. My immersion in the field became my everyday social life. This longitudinal perspective allowed for observing Dudakların Cengi events as they evolved from a small gathering of extended friends into a semi-professional entertainment show. This period saw performers debut in drag, others depart, and many explore and change their gender identities.

I organised the data collection, interpretation, and collaborative reflection with participants in iterative cycles following grounded theory principles. The use of grounded theory enabled the development of a theoretical account of the field based on empirical findings and the life narratives of the partici-pants (Charmaz 2014). The procedures for theory-building were flexible. In this situated and reflexive process, I shared my writing openly with partici-pants and the wider community. This also enabled upholding ongoing con-sent for the research. We regularly discussed what I was tackling at the given moment. On multiple occasions the main document containing fieldnotes and the research manuscript was printed out or digitally shared with Jade, ABB, Madır Öktiş, and others in the community. Our mutual reflections on these documents during later informal conversations played an essential role in interpreting the findings and finalising the research.

Contextual setting

Dudakların Cengi events have been held in Istanbul starting from 2017, transforming various venues for a night. The events were held regularly until March 2020, every two to three weeks, and rather irregularly thereafter. The events are announced through Instagram and are publicly open for partici-pation. They align with what Ghaziani (2024) terms 'club nights', as ephem-eral popup events, rather than a fixed LGBTQ+ venue. Dudakların Cengi scaled up from an event regularly attended by about 50 people at Ren Bar, a small Beyoğlu bar not designed for performances. This changed when Anahit, a large, queer-friendly show venue in Beyoğlu dedicated to stage performances, opened in November 2018. There, Dudakların Cengi reached 400 guests and hosted up to 30 performers at each event. The shift to Anahit marked not only growth in scale but also a restructuring. The per-formers were selected well before the event dates, instead of allowing for, and depending on, spontaneous stage performances. They were paid a share of the ticket sales, and performances became more choreographed. The venue—with its ample space, a controlled entrance, a large stage, a dressing room, and a crew—enabled Dudakların Cengi to become a semi-professional show, reaching a larger audience, creating long waiting lines at the door. Most Dudakların Cengi events were held there until the venue's permanent closure (Figure 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic had detrimental effects on queer social spheres (McCormack & Measham 2022). In March 2020, it also resulted in the closure of nightlife in Türkiye. Anahit never opened again. Queer nightlife venues function as vital infrastructures for LGBTQ+ people; the closure of these ven-ues results in the loss of spaces for care and protection from violence (Campkin and Marshall 2018). In Türkiye, the COVID-19 pandemic brought unparalleled difficulties to LGBTQ+ people and was accompanied by a rising

Figure 1. A Dudakların Cengi runway at anahit. Photograph by Tuna Ogut, January 2020.

tide of political homophobia (Altay 2022). During the pandemic, Dudakların Cengi took online forms enabling remote participation. After the pandemic restrictions were lifted, the events began to be held at different venues, but they became less and less regular, eventually stopping effectively.

This, of course, is in the backdrop of a complicated relationship between gender and space in Türkiye (Alkan 2009) and the consolidated regime of the conservative Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) which has approached Türkiye's LGBTQ+ populations with a hostile attitude since coming to power in 2002 (Amnesty International 2011; Tosun and Tepetaş 2021; Tar 2022). Earlier studies have documented the violence and expulsion faced by trans people (Selek [2001] 2014; Berghan 2007). Evren Savcı (2021b) theorises this increased precarity and securitisation in relation to the new political-economic-religious order in Türkiye brought about by a regime of neoliberal Islam. In her ethnography of trans life and organising in Istanbul, Aslı Zengin (2024, 4) charts the changing political landscape of Türkiye, putting forward an understanding of transness beyond an identity category and as a 'condensed site of a relational economy of violence in and through which social difference is produced and managed'. This understanding of transness as a 'site of intimacies in the plural' (4) deeply aligns with this study's understanding of gender and place. Most recently, Jilet Sebahat (2024), a queer activist and artist, in the interviews featured in their book, provides a first-hand embodied account of queer life and drag culture in Istanbul, offering a testimony of challenges, resilience, and resistance.

Opening drag and collectivising the stage

Dudakların Cengi introduces a new perspective of openness to the practice of drag and collectivises the stage in a way where the performers perform for one another rather than the audience. The key participant for this section is Madır Öktiş, who organises and hosts Dudakların Cengi events. The following analysis offers a close examination of their contribution to the research, which results in the conceptualisation of *opening drag* and *collectivising the stage*.

Madır Öktiş is an Istanbul-based queer artist, a 'societal mom' and a 'gender saboteur' in their own words. I met Öktiş in 2018 through a loosely knit community of young queer people who socialised within similar circles in Istanbul. Even though Dudakların Cengi is a result of collective action, Öktiş holds a key position by planning, hosting, and setting the tone for the events. This involves bringing networks of people together and establishing relations with event venues.

Having no formal art training and lacking connections to networks within the art sector, Öktiş had few opportunities to access a platform for self-expression prior to Dudakların Cengi. Their initial vision for the event series was of a stage that would be widely accessible and non-competitive. This created a welcoming environment for people who were new to drag. Queer performance enables creative experimentation and imagination that José Esteban Muñoz (2019) puts forward as a utopian horizon. In his exploration of such potential in relation to existing spaces of queer socialisation, Muñoz (2005) emphasises embracing both becoming and an amateur aesthetic over professionalism. Yet he terms the space for such utopianism as an impossible futurity. Grounding Muñoz's queer vision of utopia in relation to being trans, Caterina Nirta (2017) puts forward a conception of transness as a continuous project of actualising one's becoming in the 'here and now' (25). Below, Öktiş gives an account of the kind of openness they envisioned when starting Dudakların Cengi:

> We came out of the shower with bathrobes, our friends painted our faces, we tried on a couple of wigs and clothes; we went in and out, and we were done! [...] The space we opened is just like that [...] it should provide one with such an empty canvas! A canvas of five minutes. [...] You don't owe an explanation; you just paint the canvas however you want for those five minutes. [...] It's more common, more communal, more open to creative collaborations... (Excerpt from in-depth interview)

Dudakların Cengi became popular at a time when drag and queer performing arts were not as widely appreciated in Istanbul as they are today. In its early phases, Öktiş and the participants not only built an audience but also cultivated an environment where more people became interested in performing on stage and appreciating one another's performances. Drag

performances and the ritualised practices organised around them create space for alternative gender and kinship formations to take place (Bailey 2013). By organising this event series and appreciating one another's drag performances in the absence of a wider audience, Madır Öktiş and the early participants created Dudakların Cengi as a collectivised stage for self-expression (Figure 2).

Dudakların Cengi opens up drag in critical opposition to the pre-existing spheres of drag audience organised around competitive shows inspired by mainstream productions and venue-sponsored shows. While productions such as RuPaul's Drag Race help popularise drag, they also create a narrow and individualistic definition of successful drag, in opposition to which, alternative drag forms emerge to resist (Parslow 2020). At the time Dudakların Cengi became a recurrent event series, other events in Istanbul's queer nightlife scene were either organised irregularly around university students' clubs, which followed the competitive imagery of drag popularised by television shows or were hosted in expensive nightclubs in cabaret-like formats. These formats do not allow for group socialisation among performers and instead pit them against one another. Furthermore, venue managers sometimes enforce restrictions for performer attire, makeup, choreography, and drag style.

Dudakların Cengi is significantly different from these formats. Öktiş books the venue for the entire night and hosts the performers in a non-challenging setting. Each Dudakların Cengi event is made up of consecutive performances with no intervals in between. There is no evaluation of the performances; instead, the performers briefly comment at the end on what the performance

Figure 2. Madır Öktiş presenting Dudakların Cengi. Photograph by Tuna Ogut, January 2020.

means to them. In this sense, it is more like a karaoke event rather than a conventional drag show. Dudakların Cengi's Youtube and Instagram accounts, particularly the earlier recordings, also provide an illustration of this. The performers go on stage for themselves and for in-group socialisation rather than to entertain an audience. First-time performers are affirmed and appreciated. There have been many occasions at Dudakların Cengi where a performer went on stage for the first time and was applauded and cheered immensely simply for doing so. Embracing such an intentional amateur ethos flattens the ground for newcomers by making entry easy and enjoyable. In this non-competitive environment, newcomers are embraced by the community and provided with social opportunities in addition to the practicalities of performing drag. Having an accessible and sociable event structure enables people to pursue drag further.

By reframing the relations between drag performers, the stage, and the audience, Madır Öktiş created an open practice of drag and a collectivised stage that enabled community-building around Dudakların Cengi. This new form of socialisation around Dudakların Cengi created a local alternative to the existing modes of drag practice.

Socialising in drag and an urban navigation of gender

This section deals with how one builds and cultivates social practices around Dudakların Cengi, which is conceptualised as *socialising in drag*, and the ways in which one can develop a deeper understanding of their gender in relation to the city, which results in the conceptualisation of *urban navigation of gender*. ABB Afrodith, who used to keep the door for the events and sell the tickets, is the key participant in this section.

I met ABB on one of the nights I had just started taking photographs at Dudakların Cengi. They were by the door selling tickets, a role they had just started. We got to know each other better as we met at events and on other occasions. During the event days, ABB would stand by the door in drag, next to the security crew, and act as a ticket seller, a greeter, and a bouncer. They would welcome people cheerfully, check on those who enter and exit the place, entertain the low-spirited, and deny entrance to those they suspected would disturb the atmosphere inside. Hence, they call themself *the door queen*. Due to their duties, their experience of Dudakların Cengi is unique.

Drag shows create a sense of belonging and collectivity among performers through joint participation in shows, sharing preparation work and spaces, and pooling resources (Rupp and Taylor 2003). The emergence of kinship relations out of aesthetic bodily work (Bradway and Freeman 2022) and, specifically, the dynamics of queer kinship in Istanbul have been explored before (Çalışkan 2022). ABB's approach to drag and Dudakların Cengi created occasions for many to socialise into the collectivity by connecting people and

facilitating the exchange of tools and skills. Initially, ABB socialised within the community as a newcomer to drag, and later developed a sense of belonging to Dudakların Cengi by becoming the door queen—placing them in an insider position. They gradually turned into an integral part of the collectivity.

ABB expands the social practices around Dudakların Cengi by hosting others at home to prepare together for upcoming events and by teaching them relevant skills. The preparation process is a way in which the embodied geographies of the queer nightlife scene extend beyond the venue (Misgav and Johnston 2014). Sewing new costumes, modifying found materials, and doing rehearsals bring people together in a homely environment and initiate collaborations. The practices undertaken out of necessity for performing in a show facilitate newcomers' induction into the community and help maintain the existing networks. Below, ABB gives an account of their veteran position within the collectivity:

> I've sewn so many things for the girls. […] For instance, A.T. once came over, made a sketch, and said they wanted it made. […] You know [A.T.'s] black dress with these knobs on the arms, I made that one. […] When [A.T] would ask me to cut up and sew stuff, I would always do so, but also would explain how it works […] Now they make better stuff than me. (Excerpt from in-depth interview)

ABB's own process of socialising within Dudakların Cengi involved cultivating a new set of social practices based on their unique position. Being, in their words, '*the door queen*', not only standing at the door but acting like the door itself, moved them from being a newcomer to becoming an insider. During the early hours of event nights, ABB spent time not only with the Dudakların Cengi participants but also with Anahit's venue crew and manager, describing these relationships as strengthening and reassuring. Taking on responsibility and practising agency in the events' organisation improved their sense of belonging.

ABB's engagement with Dudakların Cengi happened at a time when they were questioning their place in gender. ABB initially engaged with drag through a lens of curiosity, trying to explore ways of understanding themself beyond the gay identity. As they developed a sense of belonging to Dudakların Cengi and drag, they further experimented with how they practiced and ascribed meaning to drag—tapping into its capacity for transforming oneself through performance (Horowitz 2020). ABB embodied a threshold position within Dudakların Cengi and cultivated social practices along the line of being in-between: inside versus outside, venue crew and event participant, and newcomer versus veteran. They used their threshold position to build a unique role and cultivate new social practices around themself.

ABB relied on a spatial conception of gendered life when articulating their practice of drag as an urban navigation of gender. Johnston (2019) argues

that gender variant people make sense of their feelings and identity by invoking memories and places. Space shapes gendered experiences and vice versa. ABB describes mediating their drag (ABB) and everyday (B) identities:

> Then [ABB] goes on the subway, they are B [everyday identity] until they return. When returning, if they are up for it, they can become ABB the moment they transfer at the Yenikapı subway station. The shirt is removed, a t-shirt is worn; if they are bored, they put on earrings; these are kept in the bag. B's life continues at least until five. ABB is nothing like that. ABB goes to the bazaar, buys costumes, gossips with the greengrocer. […] ABB is very fluid, ABB goes in all directions. […] B is about protecting that professional life so that they can earn money, never breaking their role until five. But all ABB cares about is happiness. They can a play hetero [heterosexual], or they can become a woman or gay if that will make them happy. (Excerpt from in-depth interview)

ABB's urban experience and spatial conception of drag take shape reciprocally and inform their understanding of their place in gender. ABB's drag invokes spaces of gender experientiality as they navigate urban life. They embody their drag persona as they move through the city. Focusing on performances engendered in and by place provides insight into the spatial contradictions that frame contemporary queer and trans geographies (Huitrón 2024). ABB's practice of drag in everyday life complicates the in-drag/out-of-drag distinction, reorganises their urban encounters, and genders their experience of the city, which we conceptualise as *urban navigation of gender*. This urban navigation has two aspects: ABB employs a set of mannerisms and sensibilities to embody their drag persona in the city, and their experience of gender exploration is shaped by urban dynamics.

ABB describes their drag persona as inspired by archetypes of a seductive woman, a Southeastern Anatolian auntie, and a teacher. They do not necessarily roleplay these archetypes in the strict sense. These archetypes, however, inspire them to create a set of mannerisms that shape their mood and attitude: removing their formal shirt and putting on earrings at specific places represent a mental spatial threshold. By realigning their mannerisms, ABB embodies their drag persona with a projective sensibility: they imagine how a seductive woman, a Southeastern Anatolian auntie, or a teacher would act, and how that would feel. An affective geographical operation reorients ABB in relation to gender and place.

Delving into the urban experientiality of drag practice gives insight into the interplay between gender performance and the production of place. ABB's experience illustrates how queer belonging is created in the city through navigating nocturnal performative geographies (Centner and Pereira Neto 2021). Drag personas are lenses through which the performer interprets and engages with the urban. ABB's journey through drag performance and their role as 'door queen' at Dudakların Cengi reveals the transformative potential of drag as a tool for self-exploration, community

building, and reimagining urban experientiality. Their engagement with the collectivity fosters a sense of belonging and facilitates the cultivation of new social practices, extending the embodied geography of queer nightlife beyond nighttime venues. ABB's embodiment of their drag persona to navigate the city, shaped by both personal agency and the dynamics of the city, shows that individual experiences of gender are shaped by place-based affects.

An unfolding sense of drag and place-affective trans-becoming

Drag is a spatial practice intertwined with one's process of trans-becoming. It can take shape to accommodate the performer's changing needs around self-actualisation, and in turn, the spatial practice of drag can shape one's gender experience. We explore this in two parts in this section. First, we explore the concept of an *unfolding sense of drag*—which presents a geographical understanding of drag that evolves to accommodate the gender experience of the performer. Second, we introduce the concept of *place-affective trans-becoming*—which interweaves the affective processes of becoming trans with geographical phenomena. This concept frames the larger idea of how Dudakların Cengi created a space of possibility where becoming trans happened in affective relation to place. Jade, a performer at Dudakların Cengi since the beginning of the series, is the key participant in this section. Jade is a non-binary trans femme person who started doing drag as a way of exploring themself in relation to their body and gender. They have been a close companion to me during the early occasions I became involved in the community. I met many people through them, and we attended many events that I would not have attended alone. Our close friendship and involvement in the Dudakların Cengi community provided us with emotional support, belonging, and inspiration in this research project. Their bold narratives about their life, and the evocative discussions we had on trans experience, affect, and selfhood have guided this analysis. I was in constant dialogue with Jade about the experiences they reflected on for this research.

Jade initially explored drag to come to terms with how they perceive their body and gender. Drag provides a safe and enjoyable space for gender exploration and is sometimes used by trans people to reconsider their felt identity (Rogers 2018). When Jade started doing drag, they found new forms of bodily expression and realised that their perception of how their body is engendered is mutable. This is a 'capacious' (Khubchandani 2023) understanding of drag that goes beyond the traditional conception of it as crossdressing. Jade's first time in drag was not premeditated. Their *drag mother*—in this context, a term used for a more experienced drag performer who acts as a mentor to the less experienced—offered to put makeup on them as a pass-time activity when Jade felt down, and this resulted in a revelation:

When I first saw myself with that make-up, I thought, okay, maybe I don't need to find answers to all my questions, but maybe I'll create new answers in place of the questions that I can't answer, and maybe I can have a space for myself where I can start living them. Drag was something like that. […] I think that's how my path crossed with DC [Dudakların Cengi] too. (Excerpt from in-depth interview)

When I brought Jade [referring to the drag persona] into existence, I wasn't aware of what I wanted or what would be good for me. I was younger and didn't know myself well. My time with Jade made [exploring myself] possible for better or worse. (Excerpt from in-depth interview)

I think Jade [referring to the drag persona] came into this world to heal my out-of-drag identity. (Excerpt from Jade's written narrative)

Jade understands drag and their gender performance as malleable. Their out-of-drag gender performance, their bodily experience, and their drag practice have shifting affinities. The meanings Jade attributes to drag transforms over time, allowing the practice to evolve as an exploration. We conceptualise this as *an unfolding sense of drag*. Jade's experience illustrates a dynamic drag practice that unfolds to accommodate the different processes of their trans-becoming.

Jade describes being accepted and appreciated by the community and the audience while in drag as transforming their perception of their body. They regularly feel unsettled with their body because of their breasts and describe drag as alleviating this feeling beyond the time they spend in drag, which they describe as 'healing their out-of-drag identity'. Being in drag allows them to experience their persona as consistent with their embodiment, enabling them to learn to feel comfortable with their body. This experience of being comfortable is then carried over to their time out of drag.

Over time, Jade started understanding drag as a mode of self-realisation, becoming less concerned with the audience's response. Eventually, their performances turned into acts of self-indulgence in front of an audience rather than a show per se, evolving to be about experiencing the moment. This extended the boundaries of where Jade enacted their persona. Initially, they started performing their persona during their off-stage time while out at night. This then extended to other times, transcending the stage completely, and turning into a part of their identity and an alternative everyday embodiment.

Another instance of unfolding is Jade's temporary relocation to Stuttgart, where they created a new persona named Harajuku to cope with a traumatic event. In the face of trauma, Jade turned to drag to find stable ground as they had experienced it before:

I needed to find something else to reflect on. Because, that day, I was Jade [referring to the drag persona] when bad things happened to me, it was my first drag in Germany, and I was Jade. I was in my wig, and everything was beautiful, and I was feeling very safe. Suddenly, everything went upside down. So, it seemed there was

no Jade to hold onto. Something new had to emerge. (Excerpt from in-depth interview)

The thing I love most about Harajuku is that while Jade is something I can bring into being on stage or when among the community, Harajuku is someone—something—someone, I don't know, who is with me even when I am alone by myself. Harajuku was always there. (Excerpt from in-depth interview)

Jade's previous persona no longer offered the same feeling of controlled detachment as it had before. They invented an alternative persona, Harajuku, to cope with trauma, seek relief, and enable deeper self-understanding. Jade emphasises that Harajuku is not a stage persona only. However, neither was Jade-the-persona merely a stage persona when they first created that identity. Jade initially experienced Jade-the-persona as an exploration into themself. As they later felt more empowered in navigating their identity, the previous persona was externalised and retrospectively turned into solely a 'stage persona'. Jade's drag unfolds into different modes of embodiment over time and space: gender exploration, self-actualisation, stage persona, and coping mechanism. Navigating an unfolding sense of drag transforms Jade's understanding of themself and accommodates their trans-becoming in different processes.

In the very first quote in this section, Jade describes their self-exploration in spatial terms: 'Maybe I can have a space for myself where I can start living them [new answers about gender and their body]'. They describe the milestones of their trans-becoming in terms of sequences of places they produced and their affective experiences in these places. We conceptualise this as *place-affective trans-becoming*.

[Drag] was not necessarily all about a stage setting, raised some meters above the audience, with a sound system and a spotlight that projects only onto you. Every square meter of space that you exist on can already provide this. (Excerpt from in-depth interview)

Jade's understanding of drag separates from the stage as physical space. Building on the mobility this detachment brings, Jade produces felt stage-like places to mentally occupy. They use the affective experience they have in these places for self-reflection, exploration, and transformation. Some cases of these experiential settings they describe are discussed below in the following order: their bedroom mirror, a previous venue of Dudakların Cengi, and a subway ride during their visit to Stuttgart. The first of these experiential settings is the place created by Jade's bedroom mirror hung on their closet door:

Upon welcoming Jade, I realized how much there is to discover about myself, I admired my (former) drag mother and all the other queens, but instead of learning from them, exploring Jade felt much better. I went in front of the mirror every day and started trying out songs I could lip-sync to. The time I spent in front of the mirror sometimes reached three to four hours. (Excerpt from Jade's written narrative)

When Jade initially started doing drag, the time they spent gazing into themself in front of this mirror enabled them to think and reflect on themself, their body, and their gender. The larger setting here, the queer home space, acts as a critical site for challenging and reimagining societal expectations (Gorman-Murray 2007). Henry Urbach (1996) conceptualises the ante-closet—the space in front of a closet where one stands when choosing and putting on clothes—as a transitional space of negotiation between the closet's hidden enclosure and the visible space where one will present oneself. Jade's looking at themself in the mirror, in front of their closet, creates a place for experimentation with their understanding of themself. Being in their room, in front of their mirror, they also explore their metaphorical closet's edge in their journey with gender.

Dudakların Cengi venues are another such setting. Describing the first time they went on stage, at the first ever Dudakların Cengi event, Jade describes a backstage space in Ren Bar in Beyoğlu woven together by their emotions:

> It was a little dark inside, and some of the queens had arrived, and were getting ready in what could be called the backstage of the venue. […] I was sitting on a chair in the middle of the bar, and this sweet person was doing my makeup, the queens were getting ready around me, and that scene was making me dizzy from both excitement and happiness. (Excerpt from Jade's written narrative)

The first thing to note is that Ren Bar does not have a backstage. Jade produces this felt place as a backstage through their affective experience. The space is otherwise the side of the dance floor and the stage, out in the open. In later events, the performers continued to fix their makeup, get dressed and undressed, smoke, and chat in this part of the venue. The collective preparations being made in this space orient Jade in understanding it as backstage. The affective experience of seeing other performers getting ready alongside them makes Jade realise that they are also a drag performer who will be performing among the others.

Another such experiential setting is a subway ride that accommodates the creation of the Harajuku persona in Stuttgart, at a time when Jade was trying to cope with trauma:

> Suddenly, everything went upside down. […] Something new had to emerge. […] [Harajuku] came into being in its most dramatic state, when I was at my loneliest, when I was devastated, at four at night, crying on a subway ride to unknowingness in Stuttgart. (Excerpt from in-depth interview)

Reflecting on a traumatic event taking place abroad, in an unfamiliar context, Jade describes how they use their experience with drag to find stability by creating a new persona. Jade had started practicing drag as a mode of breaking from their daily life to explore themself. Whereas, at this point, drag is not an unknown territory anymore; they feel comfortable knowing what they can expect to feel when they enact drag. Drag is commonly associated with

temporariness, imitation, and change. Whereas Jade uses drag to shift from a place of ambiguity and the unknown, on a subway ride trying to return to safety, to create for themself a felt place of stability. Through a projective use of drag, the subway ride is produced as a place to accommodate their affective needs.

Jade forms new connections between their senses and space through these experiential settings. They invent ways of exploring themself through reshaping the mediation between sensation and environment. The affective experiences they have in this way transform their understanding of themself, thickening and realising their trans-becoming. Jade actively imagines how to actualise themself and chooses which place-based affects to repeat or avoid. Through producing the settings that will shape their gender experience, they exercise agency over how they construct their transness. This process of place-affective trans-becoming allows Jade to take a place in their gender.

Eva Hayward (2010) argues that conceiving of transness in relation to the spatial and affective constructs shifts the focus of debates surrounding trans experiences of aesthetics and 'passing' toward a more nuanced interrogation of feeling and becoming. This approach recognises how the material force of trans-becoming alters the mediation between sensation and place. Trans spatiality allows for the articulation of the abundant possibilities transness has in connecting how bodily and sensational transformation in the city and its enclaves materialises as a 'movement back into the world' (Stryker 2008, 42). This can be understood in line with a 'trans* radical geographical imagination' (Gieseking 2023, 572) and as a 'trans concept of space' that takes as its basis one's *becoming* in terms of their emergence within their milieu, shifting temporalities, and collective potentialities (Brice 2023, 594).

Jade's experiences reveal the interplay between drag, place, and processes of becoming trans. An unfolding sense of drag, shifting and adapting across time and space creates a dynamic mode of exploration of embodiment and expression. Interrogating the creation of experiential settings—from a bedroom mirror to a backstage or a subway car—demonstrates how place shapes self-actualisation and transformation. This place-affective trans-becoming allows for agential engagement with one's environment and its sensations, constructing a process of transness through affective connections and embodied experiences.

Conclusion

We put forward an inquiry into Dudakların Cengi, accounting for it as a place-as-becoming produced by the collectivity around it. Dudakların Cengi is constituted by the relations of the people, the atmosphere, and the modes of socialisation taking place here. The stage and the social organisation of this place are not limited to a physical location but extend to the everyday lives of its participants beyond the events.

This place has transformed from a group of friends into a bustling collectivity with intricate relations, including chosen families, cohabitation arrangements, work partnerships, and shared imagery of self-actualisation. The preparation of costumes, rehearsing, and the exchange of skills are done in collective spaces invented by the participants. They do not perform for the audience but for themselves and one another. This creates an open and non-competitive place to practice drag that fosters a culture of solidarity and self-expression.

The way the performers engage with drag at Dudakların Cengi is not only a form of entertainment but also a mode of exploration. Performers develop a sense of drag that allows for an urban navigation of gender, produces places of affectivity, and transforms over time to accommodate their changing self-conceptions. These transformations illustrate the potential of drag as a tool for exploring gender as mutually constituted with place, enabling us to make sense of trans experiences in new ways. Delving into the spatiality of drag practice gives insight into the interplay between gendered embodiment and the production of place.

Many of the phenomena that have been accounted for here are not uncontested sites of gender. Trans experiences and practices offer new possibilities for rethinking gender (Hines 2007). By centring drag practices in relation to transness, we bring to the table a practice that pushes the boundaries of the existing social relations that substantiate the ways in which gender is historically constituted. Our aim is to expand knowledge on the spatiality of gender experience by engaging with this contested site with a 'progressive sense of place' (Massey 1994, 151). This resonates with Finn Enke's description of transness as an 'ever-expanding social category' (Enke 2012).

We understand this work as a contribution to both the queer and trans lived experience and the academic context in Türkiye, as well as part of a larger struggle for trans liberation and gender equality. Lucas Crawford (2016) stresses the risk of ethnographic approaches representing only what is taking place, thereby missing out on the imaginative work of what is not there yet. This ethnography was undertaken to engage in the work of such imagination together with the participants, as a practice from the present for a geographical moment 'yet to come' (Kinkaid 2024, 2). This study is not about establishing the particularities of a small group of people; rather, the expectation is that it will shed light on and become part of the geographies of place-affective trans-becoming.

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