Remembering hope: mediated queer futurity and counterpublics in Turkey's authoritarian times

Yener Bayramoğlu

Abstract

This article explores how hope and visions of the future have left their mark on media discourse in Turkey. Looking back at some of the events that took place in the 1980s, a decade that was shaped by the aftermath of the 1980 coup d'état, and considering them alongside what has happened since the ban of Istanbul's Pride march in 2015, it examines traces of hope in two periods of recent Turkish history characterized by authoritarianism. Drawing on an array of visual and textual material drawn from the tabloid press, magazines, newspapers, and digital platforms, it inquires into how queer hope manages to infiltrate mediated publics even in times of pessimism and hopelessness. Based upon analysis of an archive of discourses on resistance, solidarity, and future, it argues that queer hope not only helps to map out possible future routes for queer lives in (and beyond) Turkey, but also operates as a driving political force that sustains queers' determination to maintain their presence in the public sphere despite repressive nationalist, militarist, Islamist, and authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: *hope; queer; media; counterpublic; authoritarianism*

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Introduction

It could be argued that hope can only flourish in good times. Ernst Bloch, for instance, wrote during the Second World War that collective hope is experienced most intensively during periods when prosperity, democracy, and human rights are seen to be secure. In his analysis, when societies fall under authoritarian regimes, fear takes over the public sphere and it becomes difficult for hope to be imagined or expressed.[1] Yet, when we look back at Turkey's queer history,[2] we see that even in times of repression, non-normative sexualities, gender identities, desires, and imaginations have managed to make their presence felt in public space[3] and media,[4] and have even opened the way for complex sexual politics to be contested under a regime of neoliberal Islam.[5] In this article, I turn my attention to emotions, particularly to the constitutive relationship between hope and hopelessness to understand how queer counterpublics[6] operate despite – and even gain strength in – repressive times. I argue that even when hopelessness seems to dominate the mediated public sphere, articulations of queer hope help to map out possible future routes for queer lives, and thereby justify the existence of queer political discourses.

I take a comparative perspective to look back at the 1980s, which were shaped by the aftermath of the military coup in 1980, alongside the years since the banning of Istanbul's Pride march in 2015, including the coup attempt in 2016. I characterize these two periods as "authoritarian times." While they differ in very significant ways, and there have arguably also been other such "authoritarian times" in Turkey's modern history, I focus on them because of their significance in recent queer history: The 1980s represents a period in Turkey's queer history in which trans sex workers were at the forefront of the foundation of a movement that led to the first queer demonstrations in public space despite the hostile authoritarian climate of the time.[7]

1 Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung: Kapitel 1* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 2.

2 Cenk Özbay, "Same-Sex Sexualities in Turkey," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Right (Oxford: Elsevier: 2015), 870–4; Cenk Özbay and Evren Savcı, "Queering Commons in Turkey," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018): 516–21.

3 Cenk Özbay, *Queering Sexualities in Turkey: Gay Men, Male Prostitutes, and the City* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

4 Yener Bayramoğlu, *Queere (Un-)Sichtbarkeiten: Die Geschichte der queeren Repräsenationen in der türkischen und deutschen Boulevardpresse* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018); Yener Bayramoğlu, "Media Discourse on Transgender People as Subjects of Gentrification in Istanbul," in *Queering Sexualities: Diversifying Queer, Queering Diversity*, ed. Vikki Fraser (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 41–8.

5 Evren Savcı, *Queer in Translation: Politics under Neoliberal Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

6 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2002).

7 *Milliyet*, "Eşcinsellerden 'politik' eylem," April 30, 1987: 7; *Milliyet*, "Eşcinseller dağıtıldı," May 1, 1987: 2.

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The period since 2015, on the other hand, has simultaneously been shaped by increasing restrictions on basic rights – especially for queers – as well as by hopeful and creative new forms of activism. Hence, with this article, I look back and remember the beginnings of mediated queer activism in Turkey in order to gain a better understanding of recent events. At the same time, viewing the 1980s from the present perspective sheds new light on the pioneering strategies of Turkey's first queer activists and public figures.

On September 12, 1980, Turkey experienced the third coup d'état in its history. The Turkish military used growing tension between nationalist far-right and leftist groups as a pretext for their takeover of the government.[8] In the three years that followed, Turkey was governed by the military, with wide-reaching impacts upon many aspects of life, including regimes of gender and sexuality. Increased police violence toward trans women in particular,[9] the forced displacement of trans women from large cities to rural areas,[10] the torture in custody and public shaming of trans women and gays,[11] and a law that prohibited "homosexual performers" from performing on stage – in the interest of public morality[12] – were among the repressive measures taken against queers in the 1980s. Almost four decades later, an increasingly authoritarian government is once again seeking to regulate public life, including sexual and gender regimes in Turkey. As in the 1980s, the crackdown on the LGBTI+ movement is being defended by the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) with some rather indistinct justifications such as the need to protect "public security" or respect "public sensitivities."[13] When Istanbul's governor banned the city's Pride march in 2015, which had often been championed as the world's biggest Pride march in a predominantly Muslim country,[14] he claimed to be doing so to prevent public sensitivities being disturbed during the holy month of Ramadan. The rise of authoritarianism gained further momentum after July 15, 2016, when the Turkish military once again tried to take over the government. Directly after the coup attempt, the government declared a state of emergency that led to the closure of schools and media outlets, the detention of thousands

8 Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge: 1993).

9 Erdem Gürsü, *80'lerde Lubunya Olmak* (Izmir: Siyah Pembe Üçgen: 2013).

10 *Hürriyet*, "Homoseksüel sanatçılar İstanbul'dan çıkarılıyor," June 13, 1981: 1.

11 *Gacı*, "Tekme-tokat bindik trene," May–June, 2005: 7.

12 *Hürriyet*, "Bülent Ersoy'un sahneye çıkması yasaklandı," June 12, 1981, 15.

13 Elif Sarı et al. "A Critical Forum about LGBTI+ Prohibitions in Turkey," *Jadalliya*, January 3, 2018. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34951/A-Critical-Forum-About-LGBTI-Prohibitions.

14 Huffpost, "7 Stunning Images from What May Be Muslim World's Largest LGBT Celebration," July, 1, 2014. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/istanbul-gay-pride-lgbt-festival_n_5545252.

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of individuals, and increased censorship.[15] Following the coup attempt, queer cultural events were banned in Ankara in 2017,[16] and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was not shy to refer to LGBTI+ identities as a "cursed perversion" when he expressed his support for the ban of Istanbul's Pride march in 2020.[17]

A number of scholars[18] have explored the significance of hope in queer lives and publics. I follow prior researchers in my use of "queer hope" to refer to a desire to destabilize the existing hegemonic sexual and gender order. I focus in this article on mediated public articulations of queer hope rather than on personal hopes expressed by individuals outside the mediasphere. Furthermore, since hope is always expressed as something beyond the limits of the known present, and helps to articulate imagined futures, an examination of the present and past hopes necessarily puts the future center stage. In order to analyze future aspirations, I turn to the past, inspired by other queer scholars' calls for a critical rethinking of temporality.[19] It goes without saying that not all hope is queer hope, and that invoking hope can also be crucial to non-queer movements' projects of social transformation.[20] By focusing solely on queer hope here, I hope to contribute to the growing body of literature on the construction of possible worlds that lie beyond the landscapes of cis- and heteronormativity. This article therefore discusses the particular ways in which queer hope has been – and continues to be – mediated and regulated in authoritarian times in Turkey. Although hopelessness and pessimism can and do also shape certain forms of collective imaginaries, in this article I only refer to hopelessness in terms of its constitutive relation with queer hope.

In what follows, I situate my central arguments in relation to discussions on hope in general and queer hope in particular. I then summarize my

15 Tom Ruys and Emre Turkut, "Turkey's Post-coup Purification Process: Collective Dismissals of Public Servants under the European Convention on Human Rights," *Human Rights Law Review* 18, no. 3 (2018): 539–65.

16 BBC, "Turkish Capital Ankara Bans All Gay Rights Functions," November 16, 2017.

17 T24 Haber Merkezi, "18 yıl önce 'Eşcinsellerin yasal güvence altına alınmaları şart' diyen Erdoğan, bugün 'Lanetlenmiş sapkınlıklar' ifadesini kullandı," June 29, 2020.

18 Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19 (2009): 275–83; Kevin Floyd, "Queer Principles of Hope," *Mediations* 25, no. 1 (2010): 107–13; Birkan Taş, "Queering Hope," in *Hope in All Direction*, ed. Geoffrey Karabin (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 163–72.

19 Carolyn Dinshaw et al. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 177–95.

20 Ozge Ozduzen, "Spaces of Hope in Authoritarian Turkey: Istanbul's Interconnected Geographies of Post-occupy Activism," *Political Geography*, 70 (April 2019): 34–43; Özlem Savaş, "Affective Digital Media of New Migration from Turkey: Feelings, Affinities, and Politics," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 5405–26.

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methodological approach, which has been inspired by queer methodologies.[21] By assembling an archive of media texts and images that document traces of queer hope in the public domain, I show how media artifacts can function as tools both for archiving hope and for analyzing futures. I then turn to some recurrent patterns in the archive, which I identify as glimpses of queer hope, solidarity as queer hope, and queer hope beyond borders.

Understanding hope

Muñoz's concept of hope provides a good starting point for an analysis of queer hope in Turkey. He perceived the time in which he lived as "toxic" for queers. He argued that queerness is always about a desire to create lives, stories, politics, and ways-of-becoming that have yet to be established.[22] What makes Muñoz's work useful to me is not only his way of identifying queerness with the realm of hope and the future, but also his approach to the question of time. Muñoz understands queerness as a stepping out of straight time. In his writings, straight time is not only based upon a heteronormative temporality that centers on biological reproduction and binary gender categories, but also on the conventional understanding of time as something that is intrinsically linear. In order to make it possible to conceive of futures that offer better opportunities than those of the "poisonous present," Muñoz proposes looking back and remembering some of the devastating effects of the AIDS crises in the 1980s.[23] He finds traces of hope and projections of better futures in queer art and texts from the time of the crises. In other words, he finds traces of hope embedded in places and times in which it might be least expected.

Hope's resilience in the face of a "poisonous present" can sometimes even appear paradoxical or cruel. Berlant uses the term "cruel optimism" to refer to desires for better political projects, ways-of-becoming, or fantasies of a good life, which she claims can become obstacles to learning how to cope with the realities of a frustrating present.[24] Such imaginations, expectations, and utopian fantasies can result in the present being felt "as a heavy weight," leading subjects to disconnect from their own surroundings and struggle to adjust to ordinary life.[25] Furthermore, several scholars have criticized the view

21 Kathe Browne and Catherine J. Nash, "Queer Methods and Methodologies: An Introduction," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1–23.

22 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 26–7.

23 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 38–9.

24 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

25 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 29.

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that hope is always necessarily directed toward future happiness and success, and that it denies the possibility of a future that includes negative feelings.[26] Critiquing political discourses that focus solely on progress and pride, Love, for instance, looks back to remember the importance of stories marked by shame, violence, injuries, and vulnerabilities.[27] In a similar way, Ahmed is skeptical about optimism in *The Promise of Happiness*,[28] and unlike some feminist thinkers, such as Brown, who argue that focusing on negatively connoted attributes such as vulnerability can only result in their perpetuation,[29] Ahmed insists on the need to give space to stories that "kill our joy."[30]

In addition to these more theoretical contributions to the discussion on hope, Miyazaki and his colleagues offer useful insights for those undertaking empirical research on hope.[31] They conducted studies, primarily based upon surveys, during the early 2000s – a time when a sensed lack of hope among Japan's population was the topic of public debate.[32] Based upon their findings, Miyazaki et al. highlighted the fictional character of hope, emphasizing that hope does not always have to be based on a current reality or even ever become "real." My interest in hope in contemporary Turkey resonates with the motivations that inspired Miyazaki et al. to look for hope in times when a sense of hopelessness seems to be dominating discussions on human rights, democracy, and economy[33] – and, in my case, queer politics. Given Turkey's poor record internationally regarding LGBTI+ rights,[34] one might argue that queer hope has never had a chance to make headway in Turkish political discourse.

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26 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Birkan Taş, *Reclaiming Hope: Affect, Temporality, Politics*, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2016).

27 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

28 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

29 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 20–1.

30 Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 50.

31 Yuji Genda, "Hope and Society in Japan," in *The Economy of Hope*, ed. Hirokazu Miyazaki and Richard Swedberg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 97–125; Hirokazu Miyazaki, "The Economy of Hope: An introduction," in *The Economy of Hope*, ed. Hirokazu Miyazaki and Richard Swedberg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 1–36.

32 It was the declining general mood in Japan, with its ageing society, crumbling education system, and concerns about widening social disparities that motivated the social scientists to carry out research on hope (Genda, "Hope and Society in Japan," 97).

33 Kerem Öktem and Karabekir Akkoyunlu, "Exit from Democracy: Illiberal Governance in Turkey and Beyond," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 469–80; Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1581–606.

34 ILGA Europe, *Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People*, https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/2019/full_annual_review.pdf.

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Yet there have been times when queer hope has seemed to be more present than ever before. One such hopeful moment was experienced in 2013, following anti-government demonstrations that took place in response to the ruling party's decision to evict protesters from Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. In the wake of the Gezi Park demonstrations, unprecedented numbers of people joined the Pride march in Istanbul and expressed their solidarity with queer activists, who had gained more public visibility as a result of their active involvement in the Gezi Park protests.[35] This, in turn, sparked a shift in Turkey's political discourse: after the LGBTI+ activists had been so successful in gaining the attention of numerous diverse and even rival groups, opposition parties such as the People's Democratic Party (*Hakların Demokratik Partisi*) and the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) incorporated LGBTI+ rights into their political agendas for the general elections in 2015.[36] This even led to some CHP municipalities celebrating Pride in their social media accounts[37] and hanging Pride flags outside their buildings.[38] Nonetheless, this hopeful transformation subsequently took a dramatically different, disheartening direction when Istanbul's Pride march was banned in 2015. Since then, violent repression has made activism in public space difficult and dangerous,[39] with those who express opposition to the government often being intimidated by detentions and trials that get drawn out over years.[40]

The archive of images and texts that I have assembled reflects the view of hope as "the wish for something to become true" – as Swedberg defines it.[41] For him, this wish is not directed toward something abstract. Although what one wishes will become true may lie in the realm of the uncertain, unknown, unseen, or can resemble a fiction, it is nonetheless something precise.

35 See Özbay and Savcı, "Queering Commons in Turkey"; Ayşe Deniz Ünan, "Gezi Protests and the LGBT Rights Movement: A Relation in Motion," in *Creativity and Humour in Occupy Movements: Intellectual Disobedience in Turkey and Beyond*, ed. Altug Yalcintas (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), 75–94; Asli Zengin, "What Is Queer about Gezi?" *Fieldsights – Hot Spots Cultural Anthropology Online*, 31 (2013).

36 Özge Kemahlıoğlu, "Winds of Change? The June 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 4 (2015): 445–64.

37 ListeList, "Sosyal Medyayı Gökkuşağı Renklerine Boyayan 10 Belediye," June 28, 2015, https://listelist.com/onur-haftasi-belediyeler/.

38 Cumhuriyet, "Beşiktaş Belediyesi binasına gökkuşağı bayrağı astı: 'Freddie Mercury'nin askerleriyiz," June 19, 2017, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/yasam/764248/Besiktas_belediyesi_binasina_gokkusagi_bayragi_asti___Freddie_Mercury_nin_askerleriyiz_.html.

39 Amnesty International, "Turkey: Farcical Criminal Charges against Students Who Celebrated Pride March Must Be Dropped," November 11, 2019, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/turkey-farcical-criminal-charges-against-students-who-celebrated-pride-must-be-dropped/.

40 Ruys and Turkut, "Turkey's Post-coup Purification Process."

41 Richard Swedberg, "A Sociological Approach to Hope in Economy," In *The Economy of Hope*, ed. Hirokazu Miyazaki and Richard Swedberg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 37–50.

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Put slightly differently, hope is always directed toward something such as a good life,[42] or emancipation from a restrictive present,[43] or toward specific political changes, desired objects, or persons. As I illustrate in this article, there may even be more chance for hope as a "wish for something to become true" to flourish at times when the likelihood of it actually becoming true seems most remote. One might argue that in authoritarian times hope is often thwarted, potentially exacerbating a sense of frustration and disappointment. Yet, hope does not always have to lead to its own fulfillment; as a persistent wish it is the "resilience of hope"[44] that impels people to conceive and mediate political aspirations, visions, and demands that then go on to shape politics.

Studying hope

A substantial part of the material I analyze in this article was sourced from "normative archives" that were not created with the documentation of queer lives in mind. I obtained material from *Hürriyet* from the Istanbul Atatürk Kitaplığı archive, and I used digital archives to gather material from *Milliyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, and *Bianet*. I chose these center-right (*Hürriyet* and *Milliyet*), center-left (*Cumhuriyet*), and left (*Bianet*) oriented newspapers because I expected them to allow more space for the discourse of queer hope than right-wing newspapers would. In order to also include non-normative voices, I collected material from the archives of *Kaos GL* as well as event announcements posted on Facebook relating to LGBTI+. *Kaos GL* is Turkey's longest-running queer magazine, and has been key to the establishment of a queer public sphere since its first publication in 1994.[45]

I align myself with the growing scholarship on queer methodologies. According to Browne and Nash, queer methodologies can be productively implemented in research that aims to question orthodoxies about theoretical and methodological boundaries, and to promote understandings that simultaneously constitute and destabilize research considerations.[46] For scholars such as Plummer, queer method involves refusing to be loyal to any single conventional method.[47] Stimulated by these principles, in developing my

42 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

43 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

44 Jane I. Guyer, "When and How Does Hope Spring Eternal in Personal and Popular Economics? Thoughts from West Arica to America," in *The Economy of Hope*, ed. Hirokazu Miyazaki and Richard Swedberg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 147–71.

45 İdil Engindeniz, "Türkiye'de LGBTİ Kamusal Alanın Ortaya Çıkışında KAOS GL Dergi'nin Rolü," in *LGBTİ Bireyler ve Medya*, ed. Yasemin İnceoğlu and Savaş Çoban (İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2019), 110–29.

46 Browne and Nash, "Queer Methods and Methodologies: An Introduction," 12.

47 Ken Plummer, "Critical Humanism and Queer Theory," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), 366.

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methodology I have not strictly adhered to a single approach to discourse analysis, but instead chosen to implement mixed and fragmented methods. I was inspired by Fairclough's concept of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which not only helped me to examine how discursive elements of texts such as metaphors, voices, argumentations work together to build the architecture of narratives, but also to locate such discourses in their historical and socio-political contexts.[48] The material that I analyze in this article was sourced from different media outlets and institutional contexts, which shape the ways queer hope is articulated and mediated. The respective institutional contexts create limitations as well as opportunities for authors, as I discuss in the following pages. Often CDA is undertaken in order to research the ideological background of discourses relating to issues such as social class, race, gender, or politics. Here, however, I do not focus on the ideological role of media outlets as producers of news, but am concerned with the question of how queer hope manages to leave its "traces" within heteronormative public discourse – regardless of a media outlet's ideology. It could be questioned whether such disparate and fragmented – or "messy" – material is suitable for a comparative study; but queer methodologies, as Manalansan argues, should embrace messiness.[49] At the risk of disloyalty to Fairclough, I do not present the entire source texts in the following, but refer to some exemplary fragments, which provide "thin descriptions"[50] of messy archival materials that have been produced in different contexts; marked by different narratives, images, and voices.

The CDA was complemented by Mayring's qualitative content analysis (QCA), which is a qualitative method that facilitates the identification of patterns across research data. This could appear to be at odds with queer methodologies that generally avoid imposing discipline upon messy research material by sorting it into neatly divided categories. However, although I do explore how queer hope is mediated through several different argumentation patterns, I do not do so in order to define a set of supposedly discrete categories. Ultimately, my combination of two methods (CDA and QCA) proved particularly worthwhile in enabling me to study how queer hope is mediated across different times and contexts. While CDA helped me to focus on the particularity of each text and context, Mayring's QCA enabled me to identify discursive continuities and ruptures.

48 Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 2013).

49 Martin F. Manalansan IV, "Messy Mismeasures: Exploring the Wilderness of Queer Migrant Lives," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2018): 495.

50 Heather Love, "Close Reading and Thin Description" *Public Culture* 25, no. 3 (2013): 401–34, 404.

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Inspired by QCA, I used singular events (denoted by terms such as "Pride march," "military coup," and "hunger strike") to open specific windows of time within the temporal flow of discourse, which enabled me to sample fragments of discourse from particular moments in history. Then, in a second phase, I elaborated the analysis with an inductive coding of discourse fragments.[51]

Queer hope leaves its traces between the lines rather than fundamentally transforming the flow of general discourse. As Muñoz writes about queerness in general: instead of boldly visible evidence, it is in "fleeting moments."[52] Queer hope often rises to the surface in the final summaries of speeches, reports, columns, or comments on authoritarianism and repression, offering respite by providing an alternative outlook for the future despite present repressive politics. I refer to such discursive fragments as "glimpses of queer hope." As I sought to understand how belief in the possibility of queer futures can be upheld in authoritarian times, I found that solidarity within communities and with other social movements such as feminism was often emphasized. I identify such patterns as "solidarity as queer hope." In some discourse fragments, people advocate translocal or transnational mobility as a strategy for escaping the effects of repressive politics. Sometimes such calls for mobility are intertwined with activism across borders. I term both strategies "queer hope beyond borders."

Hopeful discourses

Glimpses of queer hope

How queer hope left traces in media discourse during the 1980s, a decade marked by the impacts of the military coup, is a rather neglected topic in the literature on 1980s Turkey. Soon after the Turkish military took over government, a new bill was passed, which forbade queer artists from performing on stage.[53] The law affected trans singers in particular, including Bülent Ersoy, whose career had started in the 1970s and whose gender transition coincided with the post-coup period. Between 1981 and 1988, Ersoy fought publicly for her right to sing, to go on stage, and to get officially registered as a woman citizen. The military administration tried to eliminate her from public

51 Philipp Mayring, "Qualitative Content Analysis." In *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, ed. Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardoff, and Ines Steinke (London: Sage, 2004), 266–9.

52 José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 5–16.

53 *Hürriyet*, "Bülent Ersoy'un sahneye çıkması yasaklandı," 15. The military regime not only forbade queer performers from going on stage, but also forcibly displaced trans women from big cities to small towns and encouraged increased police violence against queers. *Gacı*, "Tekme-tokat bindik trene."

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consciousness by bringing several lawsuits against her, alleging that she had offended public morality. Here I would like to revisit one case in which she was accused of using an illegal passport and smuggling foreign currency.

Hürriyet reported on the hearing in an article entitled, "I Am a Housewife."[54] According to the report, when asked by the judge, "what is your occupation?" Ersoy had not replied that she was a musician or performer, but a housewife. This answer, highlighted by the report's title, expresses Ersoy's sense of despondency in the face of the restrictions. Yet the report ends with a direct quotation, in which Ersoy expresses her faith in a better future, offering a glimpse of hope:

> I went abroad with the passport I got. My passport got the stamp "This person works abroad." My assistants got that stamp for me. Now, it is asserted that this was a fake stamp. The truth will reveal itself. No one can run away from justice.[55]

Ersoy's statement communicates a trace of hope that the future will bring change: justice. In the context of her persecution as a trans woman, which was what prevented her from performing in Turkey, one might argue that the justice she wished for was not just about the stamp in her passport, but also about her gender identity as a woman, which the authorities were refusing to recognize. Indeed, her answer "I am a housewife" not only expressed her frustration at being unable to perform and sing in public, but also strategically reaffirmed her womanhood in the face of a legal system that refused to recognize her gender identity. Ersoy was and is neither a sexual rights activist nor a representative of the queer movement in Turkey. Yet her story, particularly her fight for official recognition as a woman and for her right to sing in public, cannot be dissociated from the queer struggle in the 1980s that was heavily shaped by the legacy of the military coup. Arguably, as a trans woman fighting for her rights she embodied queer hope in the 1980s. She recurrently destabilized the sexual and gendered categories in public and popular culture.[56] Often, as in the quotation above, she used the public courtrooms as stages from which to express her faith in justice and her optimism for the future.

54 All Turkish–English translations in this article are my own.

55 *Hürriyet*, "Ben bir ev kadınıyım," April 13, 1982.

56 Başak Ertür and Alisa Lebow, "Coup de Genre: The Trials and Tribulations of Bülent Ersoy," *Theory & Event* 17, no. 3 (2014), Project MUSE, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/539135.

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In such news articles, queer representations and queer hope manage to circulate within the mainstream due to the "intertextuality"[57]of journalistic discourse. Tabloid journalism in particular is characterized by intersexuality, which not only combines disparate genres such as entertainment and information,[58] but also brings together contradictory meanings, narratives, and representations.[59] This means that a journalistic text can deplore non-normative sexualities and gender identities for being scandalous while nonetheless opening space for more queer visibility.[60] As in the above-mentioned article on Bülent Ersoy, the citation of speeches in particular – "recontextualizations" in Fairclough's terminology – can create opportunities for queer hope to leave its traces in mainstream media discourse despite editorial limitations on what is sayable in such a publication.

While violent regimes imposed to curb non-normative sexualities and gender identities continued to shape society and media,[61] a contradictory, more liberal discourse on sexuality began to influence Turkish culture in the late 1980s. An explosion of printed lifestyle magazines went hand in hand with the burgeoning of a more open discourse on sexuality: people started talking in public about previously taboo topics such as masturbation, erotic fantasies, and homosexuality.[62] It was within this new liberal context that a book entitled *Türkiye'de Eşcinsellik* (Homosexuality in Turkey) by Arslan Yüzgün attracted intense media attention in 1986.[63] While Yüzgün took advantage of this to promote his book, the awakened public interest also paved the way for open discussions on queers as political subjects.

In an interview, Yüzgün told journalists that since there were 500,000 homosexuals in Istanbul, they represented an important segment of society. Based on his research, he claimed, homosexuals were *hopeful* that social democrats would act in their interest, unlike the conservative political parties that tended to repress homosexuals. In the same interview, Yüzgün said he was establishing a political party that would primarily represent the needs and problems of homosexuals in Turkey. As in the media report on Ersoy's trial, the report's concluding paragraph cites Yüzgün, who provides a glimpse of

57 Norman Fairclough, "Discourse and Text: Linguistic and Intertextual Analysis within Discourse Analysis," *Discourse & Society* 3, no. 2 (1992): 193–217.

58 Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Arnold, 1995), 61.

59 Margreth Lünenborg, *Journalismus als kultureller Prozess: Zur Bedeutung von Journalismus in der Mediengesellschaft* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2005), 50.

60 Bayramoğlu, *Queere (Un-)Sichtbarkeiten*.

61 Yener Bayramoğlu, "Border Panic over the Pandemic: Mediated Anxieties about Migrant Sex Workers and Queers during the AIDS Crises in Turkey," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (February 2021) https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1881141.

62 Nurdan Gürbilek, *Vitrinde Yaşamak: 1980lerin Kültürel Iklimi*. (İstanbul: Metis, 1992).

63 Arslan Yüzgün, *Türkiye'de Eşcinsellik (Dün, Bugün)* (İstanbul: Hüryüz, 1986).

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hope: "What comes out in my research is that no matter what sort of repression homosexuals face in Turkey, they intend to maintain their lifestyle and do not regret being homosexual."[64]

Here, optimism and hope for the future spring from the assertion that no matter what kind of repression queers are subjected to, they believe they will survive in Turkey. This faith in queer resilience, the fact that they do not regret and will not give up, as well as the large number of homosexuals cited and their longing for a new, more liberal political direction, give a sense of hope for future change. Furthermore, this short report on Yüzgün exemplifies the association of queer hope with futurity that is articulated in Muñoz's writings: as a promise that the restrictions of the poisonous present can be overcome.[65] Yüzgün and his immediate circle imagined a queer political party that would stand up for queers' needs and try to solve the problems they faced in everyday life. Compared to the actual socio-political context of Turkey in the 1980s, that was a utopian vision for the future.

Such utopian and hopeful visions can be observed in the more recent past as well. When the governor of Istanbul banned the city's Pride march in 2016, the decision of queer activists not to simply give up, but to shift the event's location, opened new possible contexts and sparked a hopeful, creative approach to activism that had not previously existed. Instead of marching together down a single street, Istiklal Street, activists spread out into backstreets and different neighborhoods, reading their press release in places that the Pride march had never reached before. They appropriated and subverted the "Disperse!" command shouted by police before launching attacks upon the demonstrators. The digitally coordinated Pride parade was publicized on the day of the march via social media with the hashtag *#dağılıyoruz* (#wedisperse). A public declaration of hope for queer futures, a vision of a world that can overcome the restrictions of the present, was proclaimed in the press release issued by the Pride committee in 2016:

> Pride march makes people dream: If this world could be a different world, what kind of humans would we be? What would we wear, what would we desire, what would we do, what would we say? How would the streets of this city look? If we organized on the basis of love, what would pull us apart from each other? How would it be, if our bodies, our labor, our futures were in our own hands? Although we cannot hold our march, we are not giving up filling the streets of İstiklal with these dreams in our heads.[66]

64 *Hürriyet*, "İstanbul'da 500bin eşcinsel varmış" July 7, 1986: 17.

65 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

66 *Bianet*, "26 Haziran'da Yürümüyoruz, İstiklal Caddesi'nin Her Köşesine Dağılıyoruz," June 24, 2016, https://m.bianet.org/bianet/lgbti/176231–26-haziran-da-yurumuyoruz-istiklal-caddesi-nin-her-kosesine-dagiliyoruz.

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The commonalities between the sources of hope drawn upon in the discourse of the 1980s and in the discourse of the Pride march in 2016 are striking: refuting the repressive present, queers are all the more persistent in articulating their dreams and demanding better futures. They refuse to leave public space. Their resilience becomes a spring from which hope bubbles up. Nonetheless, there are also differences in the ways queer hope is mediated. Unlike the texts published in the mainstream media in the 1980s, *Bianet*, a leftist online news portal, allows "more space" for queer hope by publishing the queer activists' entire press release rather than merely citing excerpts. This difference not only reflects the ideological backgrounds of the different media outlets, but also the changing media landscape: online publications and digital media afford new possibilities for resistance[67] and activism[68] that print media lacked.

An explosion of queer digital visibility erupts in examples such as Pembe Hayat's YouTube Channel, online platforms such as GMag, and individual Instagram accounts that create ever-growing counterpublics despite state repression. An exploration of such counterpublics can demonstrate how hopelessness maintains a constitutive relationship with glimpses of queer hope. For instance, a piece in *Kaos GL* summarizes the anti-democratic consequences of the post-coup attempt state of emergency in 2016. These include "the imprisonment of the most powerful oppositional party leader as well as parliamentarians" and "the expulsion of academics that continue to raise critical voices." After listing a number of anti-democratic events that have occurred since the coup attempt, the author wraps up with a defiant sentence: "Rest assured that all the people and institutions of this organized evil will be disbanded one day."[69]

This faith, despite a gloomy present, that a better future will one day unfold is a typical example of what Guyer calls faith in an unknown future.[70] This faith is what recurrently sustains hope and inscribes its traces into media discourse. In other words, hope is released in expressions of belief in a better future, in "wellsprings"[71] which, in turn, provide justification for continuing to demand change. Belief that the future will bring change lays the foundations for, and legitimizes, the very existence of a political discourse that seems wildly utopian in a repressive present.

67 Lukasz Szulc, "Banal Nationalism and Queers Online: Enforcing and Resisting Cultural Meanings of.tr," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9 (2015): 1530–46.

68 Serkan Görkemli, *Grassroot Literacies: Lesbian and Gay Activism and the Internet* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014); Serkan Görkemli, "Coming Out of the Internet: Lesbian and Gay Activism and the Internet as a 'Digital Closet' in Turkey," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012): 63–88.

69 Dinçer Demirkent, "Ahvalimizin Yok-Hukuku," *Kaos GL* 156 (2017): 50–1.

70 Guyer, "When and How Does Hope Spring Eternal in Personal and Popular Economics?"

71 Guyer, "When and How Does Hope Spring Eternal in Personal and Popular Economics?" 152.

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Solidarity as queer hope

In 1987 a group of activists, the majority of whom were trans women sex-workers, decided to go on hunger strike.[72] Although hunger strikes were a common form of demonstration against state violence in the 1980s, this one was the first of its kind. Until then the Turkish public had only heard about leftist prisoners going on hunger strike. What makes this event pivotal for my analysis of how queer hope is expressed through solidarity is that it was also the first time that queers demonstrated solidarity with one another as political subjects. First in Istanbul, and then in Ankara, queers went on hunger strike to demonstrate against police violence. While a hunger strike implies that the demonstrator risks annihilating their own future, they turn the starving body into a weapon,[73] which shows that they do still have a glimmer of hope: belief that the status quo can be changed. Showing solidarity with one another and demonstrating together against authoritarian violence, the trans women who went on hunger strike in 1987 evidently hoped and believed that their demands for justice would gain public attention – and even bring concrete change.

The first group of queers – predominantly trans women – to plan a hunger strike launched their action by organizing a press conference to present their demands. *Hürriyet* reported that they drew parallels between their own situation and the persecution of homosexuals in Nazi Germany. The photograph accompanying *Hürriyet*'s report depicts solidarity among queers, which was a completely new way of representing queer people at the time (see Figure 1).[74] Rather than the pathologizing, criminalizing images of trans women – usually in isolation – that were common in the 1980s media, for the first time ever we see queer individuals holding hands, expressing solidarity, making their political demands heard, and, what is more, demanding a better future. Even the headline, "Eşcinsel Dayanışması," which can be translated as "Homosexual Solidarity," emphasizes the queers' solidarity. Despite likening their situation to the atrocities inflicted upon homosexuals in fascist Germany, and the desperation of embarking upon a life-threatening hunger strike, queer hope was at the core of their very basic demands: for work permits and an end to police violence.

Whereas solidarity in the case above stayed within the queer community, it changes slightly when we consider the events that took place after the coup attempt in 2016. In the latter case, solidarity as a foundation for hope for the future often emerged as solidarity with other oppositional movements.

72 *Hürriyet*, "Eşcinsel Dayanışması," May 7, 1987: 3.

73 Banu Bargu, *The Politics of Starve and Immolate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 9.

74 *Hürriyet*, "Eşcinsel Dayanışması."

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Figure 1: Queer solidarity

"ARKADAŞLARA MORAL" İstanbul'daki arkadaşlarına yapı-
an baskı, zulüm, dayak ve işkence olaylarını protesto
tmek ve moral vermek için, Ankara'da 3 günlük açlık grevini başlatan 8 eşcinsel, "Kaplumbağalar kadar bile değerimiz yok..." diye konuştular. Eşcinseller, Hitler dönemini aratmayacak baskılarla karşı karşıya kaldıklarını söylediler. (Fotoğraf: Mustafa BOZDEMİR)

Eşcinsel dayanışması

Source: *Hürriyet*, "Eşcinsel Dayanışması," May 7, 1987: 3.

Unlike mainstream newspapers, queer magazines can even formulate activist strategies to overcome authoritarianism. A text published in *Kaos GL* starts by outlining the dire conditions of the present, which the author likens to trauma and describes as a defeat that leaves little space for hope. Nonetheless, the text then proceeds to map out several strategies by means of which activists can overcome this hopeless situation. In doing so, a way out is envisaged: "1) Stay alive 2) Stay alive at work 3) Create new solidarity networks and sustainable platforms."[75] The proposal that creating alliances with other groups that oppose the regime will help to overcome the current situation is repeated several times. Feminists and queer citizens, the author argues, "should not just focus on themselves," but should have "a feminist perspective on the public sphere, which they are also part of." Despite the initial characterization of the situation as hopeless, the author concludes: "maybe we should hope for more, we should look at events with different eyes in order to create new selves."

The hope that emerges here is intrinsically different from the hope that operates within the neoliberal logic of individual success and progress. This difference becomes particularly clear when it comes to solidarity as a source

75 Alev Özkazanç, "Tasfiye edilmiş bir feminist akademisyenin ahval üzerine düşünceleri," *Kaos GL* 156 (2017): 10–13.

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of hope. Unlike personal success wished for by individuals for their own exclusive benefit, which Berlant terms cruel optimism,[76] calls for solidarity inevitably bring subjects together. As has been seen in the examples from Turkey since the coup attempt, solidarity as a foundation for queer hope is about more than just solidarity within the queer community. This solidarity stretches beyond the queer movement, pushing its activists to question the movement's boundaries, and even the limits of their "own identities" in order to create "new selves."[77]

In that sense – in contrast to the pessimism of writers like Edelman,[78] who is critical of politics of optimism – in places such as Turkey queer hope is represented as essential to the survival of queers. This resonates once again with Muñoz's insistence on the necessity of hope, particularly the necessity of hope expressed through solidarity among subjects, communities, and places that are marked by impossibility. Muñoz criticizes pessimistic Anglo-American theorists, claiming that they only seem able to conceptualize queer futures as the futures of white subjects in the Global North. For many subjects, ignoring the future and focusing on the present is not an option, because the present has so little to offer: "The here and now is simply not enough."[79]

Queer hope beyond borders

With his argument that "the here and now is simply not enough," Muñoz emphasizes the need to believe in a future conceived not only temporally, but also spatially. Hope for a better future is also hope for places that do not yet exist or horizons that cannot yet be reached. Hope, or more specifically utopian hope, becomes attached to imaginary places, as in Thomas More's creation of utopia as an island.[80]

In authoritarian times, in which Turkey is perceived as an inhospitable environment for queer lives, hope is often projected beyond Turkey's borders. In public discussions on unlawful regulations, anti-democratic developments, or human rights violations, Europe is often portrayed in contrast as a utopia, as everything that Turkey is not. Europe has often been mentioned in media discourse to lend weight to arguments that LGBTI+ rights are serious issues. For instance, when Yüzgün organized a press conference to announce that he was establishing a new political party that would defend homosexual rights, he drew on Europe as an example: "Several European countries have organizations that defend the rights of homosexuals." He referred to an

76 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

77 Özkazanç, "Tasfiye edilmiş bir feminist akademisyenin ahval üzerine düşünceleri."

78 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

79 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 96.

80 Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Penguin, 1965).

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organization in Thessaloniki in Greece, telling journalists that "even in Thessaloniki" the rights of homosexuals were defended.[81] Furthermore, in some cases, European criticisms of anti-LGBTI+ discrimination in Turkey serve to lend reports authority: some texts emphasize European media interest in queer demonstrations in Turkey to assert the importance of such political demands. When queer activists decided to go on hunger strike to demonstrate against police violence in 1987, Turkish newspapers' reports mentioned European interest in the hunger strike.[82]

For Miyazaki, the locus of hope lies in the space between the real and fiction.[83] In a similar way, Genda argues that ideas about places, nations, or states that people desire constitute "a desirable fiction, which is neither true nor false. Such fictions are interpreted as hope for a desirable change in the direction of a society. The fictions become a basis for stimulating the imagination of society and individuals regarding their future directions."[84] Imaginations of better queer futures that situate queer hope elsewhere need not aspire to the Global North; hope may also be projected onto cities and towns within Turkey, or even rural Anatolia. When KuirFest, a queer festival including film screenings, workshops, and concerts, was unable to take place due to the ban imposed by Ankara's governor's office in 2017, *Kaos GL* published a text pointing out that queer events had not been banned in nearby provincial, very conservative cities such as Yozgat or Çankırı.[85] The author's rather tongue-in-cheek suggestion that queers should perhaps leave Turkey's large cities and move to smaller towns in Anatolia was at once humorous and serious. Moving across the borders of towns, cities, and nations is proposed as a possible way out of the dangerous present. Transcending borders in another way, translocal and transnational networks are often identified as potential sources of support for those seeking to defy repression. In such discourse fragments, hope is bolstered by transnational or translocal solidarity. Take, for instance, the following fragment:

> In order to relocate people, whose lives are endangered, to safer cities, solidarity networks within the country need to be built up. In cases that would benefit from such relocation, existing solidarity networks between the cities should be activated, and international networks should be drawn upon to further this goal.[86]

81 Hürriyet, "İstanbul'da 500bin eşcinsel varmış."

82 Hürriyet, "Eşcinsel Dayanışması"; *Milliyet*, "Eşcinseller Kendini Yakacak," May 3, 1987, 13.

83 Hirokazu Miyazaki, *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Miyazaki, "The Economy of Hope," 26.

84 Yuji, "Hope and Society in Japan," 119.

85 Tanju Tariz, "Vali Beye Sordum: Grup Yasak mı?" *Kaos GL* 159 (2018): 30–1.

86 Ayşen Candaş, "Yeni Zorluklar ve LGBTİ Hareketi," *KAOS GL* 150 (2016): 18–20.

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In some cases the crossing of borders and relocation of events becomes entangled with the hope of subsequently being able to return. For instance, KuirFest's 9th edition (2020) was called "#DönerizElbet" ("We'll surely be back"), asserting the hope that the festival would return to its home to Ankara in the future, in better times.[87]

One might argue that the hope expressed in such propositions is escapist, if the message is that the only way to deal with the present situation is to abandon one's home. But the desperate need to escape the current situation is balanced by faith in solidarity across borders. Thus, it is not an individualistic hope to simply escape that is expressed, but a collective effort to help the most vulnerable survive the present moment so that a better future for all can be demanded. For instance, when the Pride parade was once again banned in Istanbul in 2016, LGBTI+ activists who had recently moved from Turkey to Berlin organized a Pride march in Berlin in solidarity with Istanbul.[88] Their statement poignantly substantiates my argument that queer hope that is pursued by escaping across borders is accompanied by solidarity with those who are "left behind." Although the event had been organized outside Turkey, it relates to the discourse of hope within Turkey:

> As Turkey's LGBTI+ in Berlin, we might be far away from the streets of Istanbul, but our hearts are beating with our friends on this special day. Join us while we march against all kinds of borders and the system that uses and abuses its power, its police forces, and its laws to reiterate homophobia and transphobia! We will march with love, with longing, and with hope![89]

Conclusion

I have drawn attention to some of the discursive patterns of hope that emerge in the archives of apparently hopeless times. As I have shown, queer hope can function as a force that sustains queers' determination to maintain their presence in the mediasphere despite militarist, nationalist, Islamist, and authoritarian repression. While queer hope manages to leave its trace in the mainstream media largely due to the intertextuality of journalistic discourse, which combines different and even contradictory genres, representations, and narratives, digital media and counterpublics open up new

87 *Bianet*, "9. Pembe Hayat Kuirfest, 23 Ocak'ta İstanbul'da başlıyor" January 10, 2020.

88 Nazlı Cabadağ and Gülden Erdiger, "We Disperse to Berlin: Transnational Entanglements of LGBTI+ Movement(s) in Turkey," in *Doing Tolerance: Urban Interventions and Forms of Participation*, ed. María do Mar Castro Varela and Barış Ülker (Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2020) 204.

89 Kuir Lubun Berlin, "Berlin Walks with Istanbul Pride March," July 1, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/events/hermannplatz/berlin-walks-with-istanbul-pride-march/191942421521216/.

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opportunities for the formulation of activist strategies oriented toward the future. Regardless of the media outlet, however, queer hope is often invoked as a justification for the public articulation of political demands. Only when ways out of the current political context are conceivable, and faith in the possibility of future change is upheld, can such discourses continue to demand better futures. As can also be seen in the digitally mobilized and coordinated response to the government's recent backlash against LGBTI+ students involved in the protests at Boğaziçi University,[90] digital media are fundamental to the creation of new ways that queer counterpublics can exist despite state homophobia and transphobia. I argue that whereas some queer scholars refute the value of hope and futurity,[91] in places like Turkey belief in the power of hope is represented as a survival strategy for queer lives. Visions of better queer futures invoked in authoritarian times, no matter whether they are located here or there, within Turkey or elsewhere, are inherently partly imaginary. Yet that does not prevent them from inspiring creative strategies that aim to transform fate – on the contrary, it may be what gives them their power to do so.

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