The Park, the Penguin, and the Gas
Performance in Progress in Gezi Park

Arzu Öztürkmen

This essay begins with a problem of genre: How does one construct a linear narrative of a multifaceted and complex past that is still in progress?

When the Gezi Park protests began at the end of May 2013, none of us had any idea of how it would spread throughout Turkey, inventing a wide range of performance forms that emerged as an urgent public expression of the political desires and frustrations of the polity. From the very beginning we surrendered to a sense of incompleteness and partiality; we were all limited by our subjective experience of the performance, in which we were all both improvising actors and members of a stunned audience. We say “we,” because we experienced this process collectively: some of us stuck in our homes, some in the streets and in “the Park,” and some abroad.
United through social media more than ever, this new construction of “we” conversely shows how the general Turkish public has been divided for the last two decades. Sadly, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan openly stated who “his people” were; we were not among them.¹

The demonstrations at Gezi Park began in Taksim, one of the central neighborhoods in Istanbul. The neighborhood as a whole includes Taksim Square, with the Republic Monument at its center, Gezi Park, and an area in between, once used for public transportation that was moved underground to pedestrianize the Square. The initial protest began within the boundaries of Gezi Park where trees were being cut down to rebuild a long-gone Ottoman building that would now include a shopping mall. The demonstrations quickly generated a new environment, including a wide range of theatrical elements. Manifestations occurred in many different cultural forms, often as improvisations on the ground and in social media, to express ideas and emotions. Some were expressed as creative graphics and images, others as newly invented slogans that were verbalized as chants or visualized as graffiti. In the midst of the protests, participants installed a fair and festival space within Gezi Park, attracting thousands of visitors. Captured on Facebook and YouTube, all of these images and words blended and blurred, often jumping from one genre to another, as they rapidly spread throughout Istanbul, across Turkey, and around the world. For example, futbol slogans became political statements, curses became a sign of righteous political transgression, and mothers of our cherished children proudly and publically displayed themselves as the mothers of looters. In other words, meaning was destabilized by the endless breadth and depth of the possibility of a new political voice.

To narrate the events as a linear story is extremely difficult, as many different acts happened simultaneously and independently, while others developed in response to previous ones. This essay is therefore the modest outcome of a collaboration of a group of friends, who each contributed their personal narratives and research. Saadet Özen, a history scholar and a documentary filmmaker experienced the events in Gezi Park through the gaze of her own political activist past, and her knowledge of urban space as a longtime guide in Istanbul. Yasemin Baran, also a history scholar, was a newcomer to street demonstrations. As a resident of Taksim since childhood, she has developed a personal bond with Gezi Park. Jale Karabekir, also a longtime resident of Taksim, and a pioneer of the Theater of the Oppressed in Turkey,

¹ Over the years, Erdoğan developed a populist notion of millet, literally meaning “nation” but rhetorically referring to the conservative front whose constituents voted for him. His public address on 16 June 2013 to a crowd organized by his party in response to Gezi events is just one example among many of his appeals to his people: “Here is the Picture. If anyone wants to see Turkey’s picture, despite the international media! International media, hide this as well, alright? Let’s hide it, BBC. CNN hide this too. Reuters hide it. You produced false news for days. You showed the world a different Turkey. You are now face to face with your lies. This nation is not the nation you mediated to the world. This nation is not a nation that plays pots and pans at night” (see Gercekgundem.com 2013).

Figure 1. (preceding page) Turkish police fired massive volleys of tear gas and jets of water to disperse thousands of antigovernment demonstrators in Istanbul’s Taksim Square on 11 June 2013. (Courtesy of BULENT KILIC/AFP/Getty Images)

Arzu Öztürkmen is Professor of oral history and performance studies at Boğaziçi University. Following her dissertation Folklore and Nationalism in Turkey (University of Pennsylvania 1993), she published several articles on the cultural history of Turkey, including performance in the Ottoman world, history of Turkish national days, and folk and modern dance. Her oral history research consists of a multi-sited ethnography of the memory of conflict in a Black Sea town. She is coeditor of Celebration, Entertainment and Theater in the Ottoman World (Seagull 2014) and Medieval and Early Modern Performance in the Eastern Mediterranean (Brepols 2014). Her contemporary research explores the Turkish television drama dizi as an ethnography of the television industry.
acted as a gatekeeper of her own nearby neighborhood in Cihangir, while continually reporting on her experiences through her dramaturgic vision. Yeliz Çavuş, Sevînç Cağlanoğlu, and Burcu Özkaçar were in the streets during the demonstrations and helped to reconstruct the timeline of the events based on direct experience and internet research. As we were in the midst of the real events, Dalia Kandiyoti and Ahu Yıldırım reported on how the Gezi events were echoed and protested abroad. Each of us was a witness to, and consumer of, performances surrounding the events in Gezi Park from a different perspective, contributing therefore our own subjective perspectives to the overall narrative.

Although we were not there as academics but rather as participants, the folklorists among us marveled at the creative forms that emerged from the protests. Gezi Park was the stage for performances that both accompanied and comprised the demonstrations, layered as “performances within performances” in a Bakhtinian dialogue. Performances occurred in response to one another and multiple performances took place simultaneously. “Gezi-lore,” as Özen named it, ranged from verbal art as performance (including personal experience narratives of solidarity and heroism; public book readings, often facing the police; chanted slogans; and graffiti writing) to popular and theatrical performances (including carnivalesque fairs and festivals, dance, music, drama, and puppet shows) to video and performance art. At one point certain official websites were hacked, creating another kind of drama.

What became significant was the surprise effect of events that turned an otherwise everyday occurrence into a performance. It was this unexpected element that became the key to the way we perceived and remembered Gezi.2 The performances that occurred between the official authorities and the Gezi Park occupants and supporters were all internally dialogic or intertextual, taking place in a fast-forward sense of linear time. My attempt to document the wide range of performances follows the chronological timeline of the events at Gezi Park, situating them in relation to Turkish cultural memory and linking them to the global cultural present. Those of us who are in our 30s and 40s, quickly realized how our experience of the events at Gezi Park triggered our memories of a lifetime of public demonstrations, street terror, and political humor.

**Memory**

Turkey has a long history of revolts and public demonstrations. Since the beginning of the Republic in 1923, political movements have poured into the streets. In the early Republican years, there were a series of Kurdish riots, all bounded however within their own localities.3 Following WWII, there were clashes between rising Marxism and extreme nationalism in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. Nationalist groups torched the Tan newspaper office in 1945 Ankara, and the anti-Communist students took the rector hostage at Ankara University in 1947.4 In 1955, Istanbul witnessed what is now being referred to as the “Events of 6–7 September,” an organized mass looting that targeted shops of Greek and other non-Muslim communities on İstiklal Street in Beyoğlu-Taksim.

For those of us born in the 1960s, Turkey’s traumatic political events have been inextricable from our daily lives. From 1960 up to the late 1970s, student and labor protests along with anticommunist demonstrations were widespread, not only in urban centers, but across Turkey as well. In the post–military coup years of the 1980s, however, our generation grew up away from street terror, holding nevertheless a strong awareness about Turkey’s insecure international status. Though they were not explicit activists, the youth of the 1980s had a solid memory and

---

2. For more on the surprise effect of an unexpected performance see Schechner (2009).
3. Among others, were the Şeyh Said rebellion in 1925 and Dersim riots of 1937.
4. For more on extreme nationalist events of that era, see Öztürkmen (1998), Kabacalı (1992), and Karakuş (1977).
Many of these murders remained unsolved, not because it was impossible to get the facts on them, but because official authorities stopped pursuing the cases at a certain point during the investigations. The long-ignored Kurdish movement was proposing Nevruz as their own holiday, while organized political Islam supporters were inventing their own celebrations, such as the Holy Birth Week (Kutlu Doğum Haftası). By the turn of the new millennium in Turkey, the way politics was being “performed” had changed a great deal.

The performance of politics, particularly at the street level, has been evolving since the 1970s, when “street terror,” public demonstrations, and televised political debates were part of the Turkish social life. The so-called street terrors might be performed as a night sortie of wall painting, a spontaneous political speech on board a city bus, or a quick confetti toss of little strips of paper with slogans. Towns and cities were like huge gaming arenas, where police and people of different ideologies played hide-and-seek in the streets between “rescued regions” (kurtarılmış böge), neighborhoods organized on the basis of their political views. The May Day workers’ parades in Istanbul, for instance, were a grand rally, proceeding through the Barbaros Boulevard of Beşiktaş to fill Taksim Square for a mass gathering. Some of these events would end in real brutality, like the bloody Sunday of 1 May 1977, when “some forces” directly fired on the crowd, killing more than 30 people and wounding many others.

The news on television — the news hour, the ajans, as my mother used to call it — would be a family event, as were many of the televised political interviews and debates. Sadly, “political murders” constituted a “news genre” and the reporting was designed to manipulate public opinion and instigate agitation. On 1 February 1977, we awoke to the news that Abdi İpekçi, Turkey’s leading journalist, had been assassinated by Mehmet Ali Ağca, who would also later attempt to kill Pope John Paul II. By the age of 15 I had already seen two military coups and witnessed local bombings and killings. While many of my European peers spent their leisure time riding bicycles in green parks, I was fighting with my classmates on political issues, watching murders on the news every night on TV, and, the next morning, reading the graffiti commenting on them all over my own neighborhood. There was no way a child could remain immune to what was going on in the country.

---

5. Many of these murders remained unsolved, not because it was impossible to get the facts on them, but because official authorities stopped pursuing the cases at a certain point during the investigations. This made people skeptical about the state’s involvement in the process, often referred to as the “deep state,” meaning a hidden structural unit within the state.
In the 1970s, when the civil war between extreme right and left meant random flying bullets and neighborhoods divided according to political allegiances, the stakes of being militant were high. The years following the 1980 coup were heavily controlled by curfews and political arrests. Stories of torture and exile came out only decades later as oral histories or published memoirs (see Güven 2007; Yaşar 2009). During election periods, political parties would run their own campaigns and hold mass gatherings; but under the gaze of the military, these events were different from the demonstrations of the 1970s. The 1987 referendum — on whether party leaders banned from active politics could return to their posts — offered perhaps the first opportunity for the opposition to stage demonstrations since the military coup. Although the opposition won and the former political leaders came back to the political arena, the dynamics had greatly changed since the 1970s. The general population in Turkey had complied with many of the policy and structural changes that came after the coup. But the fact that former leaders were allowed to come back confirmed their growing concern about a government dominated by the military.

The year 1993 came as a breakthrough in the way politics were to be experienced in the streets. The year began with one of the “political murder” news stories, in the subgenre “journalist assassination”; social democrat Üğur Mumcu was killed when his car was bombed on 24 January in Ankara, triggering an outpouring of public mourning in mass street marches. Then, on 2 July, the Madımak hotel in Sivas was set on fire. Trapped inside the burning building by the agitated crowd outside the hotel, 35 people, mostly of Alevi origin, perished.6 As political tensions heightened, the Susurluk scandal broke in the fall of 1996, during the peak of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. The identities of victims of a car crash at an intersection in Susurluk, in Balıkesir province, revealed the close relationship between the government, the military, and organized crime. The victims included the deputy chief of the Istanbul Police Department, a parliamentarian who led a powerful Kurdish tribe, a belly dancer, and a contract killer who was on Interpol’s “Red Notice” wanted list. Scandals, of course, are public dramas of wrongdoing, and performance elements like display, surprise, and gossip are inherent characteristics (see Adut 2008). The Susurluk case gave people a focus for their discontent. After a few months of debate, a public protest campaign, “One second of darkness for a continual light,” was launched, calling on citizens to turn off their lights for one minute each night at 9:00 p.m. to protest government corruption. The public response was incredibly strong and creative: some people flashed their lights on and off continually for the minute, and many banged empty metal pots with spoons from open windows and balconies. This way, those who could not come into the streets could join the protests from the confines of their homes. Finally, we should also mention the Republican Rallies (Cumhuriyet mitingleri), which exploded around Turkey in 2007 as a reaction to the steady rise of political Islam (see Alyanak 2010). Although thousands poured into public squares to defend secularism, one of the founding principles of the Republic, there was suspicion that the events were organized by leaders from nationalist circles working undercover.

The evolution of political expression from the 1970s to 2010s went through phases, with peak moments of performance. Cultural forms of protest included televised debates, live theatrical performances, campaign meetings, protest rallies, and funerary marches. Public assembly in Turkey has always been a highly controlled domain by the state.7 Nevertheless, even when it was curtailed in the streets, political debate continued to be one of the most popular genres

6. Alevis are known as the followers of Anatolian folk Shi’ism, a practice seen as remote from the Sunni mainstream. The events were put onstage by Dostlar Theatre Company in a documentary theatre play called Sivas ’93.
7. Although article 34 of the Turkish Constitution and article 3 of the Law on Demonstrations and Public Meetings (Law 2911) state that every citizen has the right to hold peaceful meetings and marches without prior permission, Turkey has often been criticized for the excessive use of force by security forces in response to such meetings. See justice.gov.tr. (2014) and Kanunlar (2014).
of Turkish television in the 1980s and 1990s. Leaders of competing political parties would sit around a table for televised debates before the elections. Staying up all night to watch political debates was a family tradition that continued beyond election periods with such programs as Siyaset Meydanı and Ceviz Kabuğu.

Political comedy was another outlet for debate. Dating back to the 1970s and the 1980s, entertainment clubs called Gazinos showed political sketches and comedians doing impressions of political leaders, and theatres like the legendary Devekusçu Kabare offered highly acclaimed performances about contemporary events. Satire about political leaders or situations reached its peak in the 1990s with Levent Kirca’s TV program of sketches, Olacak O Kadar, all tolerated or ignored by the political leaders of the time.8

All this changed with Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, the AKP (Justice and Development Party)—the ruling party led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—and their policies of self-representation (see Cizre 2007). First of all, Erdoğan, since the early days of his career, preferred giving speeches than participating in televised debates. The fact that he quickly earned a majority in the parliament gave him confidence to decline offers for roundtable debates. The most he would allow was controlled interviews with chosen journalists. Humor, especially impressions, would make him furious, and he took legal action against almost any caricature or sarcastic comment about him on the grounds of protecting his personal rights. As there were no more real televised political debates or popular shows, the tradition of publicly mocking politics was summarily suppressed.

To many, the generation who grew up under AKP supremacy was apolitical, consumerist, addicted to multimedia, and had little in common with the generation of their parents. So when the Gezi controversy began, no one expected such resilience from “the youth.” When they were gassed and hosed by the police, they amazingly did not back down but came back to the battleground. They were using all sorts of media to communicate what they were doing, while building strategies to help one another. Sure, there were no bullets fired or bombs dropped, but people were killed and wounded nonetheless. One slogan that protesters wrote on the walls summed it all: “You touched the generation who beat the police in GTA,” a reference to the videogame Grand Theft Auto (see Kürkçü 2013). Just as they were used to from the game, facing challenges each step of the way and returning for another encounter, the protesters persisted—surprising the older generations who accused them of being passive, insensitive, and spoiled.

Events and Performances

The timeline of the Gezi Park protests give some indication of the roller coaster–like “evenementiality” of our experience (Vanzago 2012).9 Signing petitions and joining demonstrations to stop the demolition of our lieux de memoire, such as movie theatres and cultural centers, have been a regular part of our lives for the past two decades.10 For Yasemin Baran, a resident of the Taksim neighborhood since childhood, Gezi Park was a landmark that had long lost its popular
status. Contrary to what “the foreign media often mistakenly believes,” she explained, “it is no way comparable to Hyde Park nor Central Park”:

During the 1980s and ’90s, it became a neglected and dirty place, frequented by unemployed men and lower-class mothers who brought their kids to the rundown playground...
I, for example never sat down in the park with a book, although I always passed through it on my way to my house, to feel a moment of escape from city noise in the serenity of nature. (Baran 2013)

It was only in the last 10 years that the Park was renovated and maintained, probably because of the luxurious residence buildings constructed right next to it. As a resident of the area, Baran was on the mailing list of the Gümüşsuyu Association, an NGO formed to preserve and beautify this historical neighborhood. Many residents were already skeptical about the recently launched pedestrianization project, and resented being ignored while developers initiated such grand projects right next to their homes. Gezi Park came to greater attention when certain trees were marked by red crosses, raising questions and leading to rumors that they would be cut to build a neo-Ottoman architectural style shopping and residence complex. When news of the renovation of Gezi Park first appeared in January 2012, responses from related NGOs in newspaper articles and press statements were immediate (Özdemir 2012). When bulldozers got into position on 27 May 2013, a group gathered in the park to block them from cutting down the marked trees. We were among many to sign public petitions to prevent the demolition of Gezi Park.

“Everywhere Is Taksim, Everywhere Is Resistance!”

28 May–1 June

On 28 May, Istanbul Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) deputy Sırrı Süreyya Önder, who had joined the sit-in protest in the Park, threw himself in front of the bulldozers. This heroic act, televised nationally, was the first “performance” of the Gezi events, an act that transcended Önder’s political identity.11 Later in the day, police moved into the Park, using tear gas to disperse the protestors.

This was the moment when the “Woman in Red” was photographed by Osman Örsal, an image distributed around the world by Reuters. The police spraying tear gas at a young woman in her casual red dress became one of the iconic images of the Gezi protest, and a symbol of “unbalanced power” (orantısız güç). It was an image and a rallying point that prevailed throughout the events.12

Despite the public outcry over the brutality of the police, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a statement on 29 May that further elevated the tensions: “Whatever they do,” Erdoğan said, “we have made up our minds and will do it,” meaning that the shopping mall will be constructed despite the protests (Hürriyet 2013a; emphasis added). The protests continued to
grow after Erdoğan’s statement and many people responded to the tweeted calls for supporters to join the encampment in the Park. On 30 May at dawn, the police carried out another operation: burning the tents of the occupiers. Their aim was to vacate the Park and to start cutting down the trees. As tweets circulated calling for backup to “defend” the Park, the sit-in protest continued, with everyone waiting for something to happen. On 31 May at dawn, police carried out the first large-scale brutal operation against the Gezi resistance. The excessive use of gas and water cannons was unexpected violence, and it caught the Park residents off guard. “I went to the Park to say farewell to the trees,” said Yasemin Baran:

On the 31st of May when I rushed to the Park, I saw many young people desperately trying to replant a huge fallen tree, carrying its heavy and damaged body and running around with buckets to find water. Then it got more and more crowded and we discovered for the first time, that we were not alone. It was not about “a few trees” [referring to Erdoğan’s remarks]. It was about a feeling of suffocation, of helplessness, it was a loud outcry against an ever-tightening grasp on our civil rights. The real surprise was in fact, not the government’s actions, but our reaction. (Baran 2013)

That day, 31 May, was the turning point of the Gezi protests. A wide range of people from different backgrounds poured into Taksim to defend the Park. By 8:00 p.m., an estimated 100,000 people were in Taksim. Using water cannons and tear gas, police had blocked the roads leading to Taksim Square. Tweets circulated all night long, sharing information about where and how the police attacked, where to escape, take refuge, get first aid, and also where to watch what had been going on. As Saadet Özen stated, the striking aspect of all this, “was not simply
the gathering of an unexpected number of people without a leader, but the expressivity of the protests” (Özen 2013). The main slogan of the protests emerged that night: Everywhere Is Taksim, Everywhere Is Resistance! In solidarity with those injured during the protests, Gezici Muzisyenler Platformu (Mobile Musicians Platform) gave what I believe to be the first public concert related to the Gezi protest in Kadıköy, another central neighborhood of Istanbul (Bayraktar 2013).

The night of 31 May Taksim and Beşiktaş were battlegrounds. Police sprayed tear gas and used water hoses while the protesters took refuge in small streets, apartment building corridors, shops, schools, companies, hotel lobbies, and even in the houses of people they did not know. “Resistance” (direniş), a concept rooted in the Turkish leftist tradition, was adopted on this night by the protesters who did not give up and continued to pour into Taksim Square. The term united protesters. Later many reported the important role of the Çarşısı group, the Beşiktaş futbol team fans, in raising their spirits. Famous for their rhymed slogan “Çarşısı! Her şeye karşı!” (Çarşısı! Always in opposition!), these futbol fans had a tradition of getting organized, producing slogans, and rallying the crowds. All of a sudden the performance of futbol fandom was transformed into a chant for Gezi protesters.

Although Çarşısı is credited with being the primary organized group to support the Gezi protesters, Özen reminds us of the role of two other groups. One comprised the leftist oppositional organizations, who, she says, were present from the beginning. They were not visible during the initial days because they could not carry their self-identifying flags in the midst of the clashes. The other group was made up of the residents of the Gazi Mahallesi (Gazi neighborhood) located at the outskirts of Istanbul. Populated by left-wing and marginalized Alevi and Kurdish communities, the Gazi neighborhood had a long history of opposition and resistance to government authorities. In contrast to the anarchic stance of Çarşısı, the Gazi community has always been politicized, particularly after the 1995 Gazi riots, when the neighborhood was subjected to attacks whose perpetrators were never identified. Enduring police violence many times, Gazi residents learned in time to defend their families (see Dural 1995; Tüleylioğlu 2011). When the Gezi Park events started, the Gazi neighborhood had been the first site to give support, even though they were miles away from Taksim (eminhaber.org 2013). Özen reports that many Gazi residents also poured into Taksim at the very beginning of the protests, but perhaps without revealing their identity as boldly as Çarşısı. They became more visible, as on 11 June when a large group from the Gazi neighborhood began to walk towards the Park, occupying a highway, when they heard that police violence was again at a peak in Taksim (Sozcu.com.tr 2013a).13

On 31 May, the hide-and-seek with the police continued throughout the night, as protesters moved through the streets of Taksim, heading towards the neighborhood of Beşiktaş. This was also the night that inspired numerous personal narratives of heroism. Here is one anonymous narrative, told to me a few months after that night:

As we gathered with my friends for the protest, which would be my first, we became petrified with the news of Lorna, a friend’s friend who had been shot in the head with a canister of tear gas. Our friend said, “they are crazy, Lorna’s head was cracked open and she is dying in hospital.” As fear swept in and as we realized the potential danger we were in, we felt discouraged. But the anger and the feeling that if we stopped and did not resist we would drown in an insatiable injustice, made us throw ourselves into the streets. Within 10 minutes of our walk we were attacked by the police; the crowd was gassed and sprayed with water. That was the first time I had been stuck in a large crowd of people running

---

around in a panic. Smelling the pepper gas from far away and coughing, I was struck by the excessive use of power and then literally ran for my life. In the chaos we all lost each other and I ran down a narrow street. There I was safe from being crushed by the panic-\ing crowds. It took us half an hour to get together again and we continued marching towards the Park, which was now under the siege of the police. We were a group of women, some of us quite amateurish in shouting slogans and we were feeling quite uneasy. In fact, if we had felt just a bit more panicked, we would have been ready to go home. But then a large group of men from the next corner joined the protest, with their baritone voices and professional slogans. They were the famous Çarşi group, fans of Beşiktaş futbol team. I cannot forget this moment of encounter. They changed the whole vibration of things, and encouraged us all. Their self-confidence was almost contagious. As we marched along the way leading to the Park, it got more and more crowded. People in the shops, people in the windows, were all joining in chanting the slogans; and doctors were throwing their hygiene masks from the windows to help the protesters. I think we tasted and then got intoxicated with the delicious feeling of social solidarity for the first time that day. I can say that from then on a spirit of kindness and benevolence predominated among the protesters, and in the following days I often found people smiling at each other for no other reason than to acknowledge their shared cause. We finally reached the closest point to the Park, and of course the zone of the tear gas and water cannons. The dynamic of the resistance was predictable and did not change till the end of the protests: we ran away as gas was thrown and then returned to our places. As they increased the gas attack we took refuge in the Hilton Hotel, a very luxurious and old Istanbul hotel that welcomed the protesters, who were now seriously worn out from the gas attacks. I could not return home, as all roads and boulevards were under siege by the police. That night, I experienced the heaviest of the attacks. A gas bomb fell at my feet and as my lungs burned and tears rolled from my eyes, my fight-or-flight mechanism took over. I found my way thanks to a few people who calmed us by saying that it was just gas and that it would be all right, and we followed them literally blindly as they led the way. We were running in the dark still unable to breathe properly and I will never forget and be always thankful to the people who opened their apartment doors and let us just climb the stairs to get some air. I will never forget the variety of curses I heard directed at the Prime Minister as we were climbing the stairs. We couldn’t leave that building for nearly three hours as the police kept throwing gas and water.

While all this was happening, the main national news channels—including TRT, NTV and CNN Türk—completely censored the battle. As Taksim and Beşiktaş were being attacked with gas and water, CNN Türk was broadcasting a documentary on penguins. Of course this triggered a series of responses across media in which “the penguin” became another icon of the Gezi events. The general approach was first to free the penguins of their guilt by absolving them for being used by media, and then enlisting them to represent the Gezi events. Social media exploded with images of protest penguins, bravely facing water cannons in Antarctica, carrying slogan cards on the ice, wearing gas masks, or posing as “standing penguin.” On 5 June, actor Sermiyan Midyat amazed his audience by taking off his shirt during a live interview with CNN Türk to display a T-shirt with an image from the penguin documentary (izlesene.com 2013).

That same night of 31 May, the first resistance song was also uploaded to YouTube. Turkey’s most acclaimed rock group, DUMAN (ironically, meaning smoke) released “Eyvallah,” telling the police:

Alternative news channels HALK TV, ULUSAL TV, and ARTIBİR earned their highest ratings by covering the Gezi events that evening while other national channels ignored them. At this point, we heard news that protests had spread to Ankara, İzmir, Mersin, and other cities.

After midnight, at around 3:00 a.m. on 1 June, thousands of protesters gathered in Kadıköy district on the Asian side of Istanbul to walk across the Bosphorus Bridge (Hürriyet 2013b). Heading to Taksim to join the main protest groups, some were singing “Bella Ciao,” the popular song of the Italian antifascist resistance movement in the 1940s. Despite the police force, like many other groups, they arrived in Taksim and stood face to face with the police. In the afternoon, after hours of suspenseful waiting, the police began to withdraw from Taksim Square. As Prime Minister Recep Tāıyip Erdoğan’s noontime speech was being televised over and over again, thousands of people, among them a group of popular actors and actresses filled the Square.

This was the moment when a political drama began as an enacted dialogue between the PM and the crowds. “Where they gather 20, I will gather 200,000” Erdoğan said (Gazetevatan.com 2013a). The crowds responded to his statement by pouring into Taksim. This was the first exchange in the dialogic relationship. “Conquest,” a term loaded with military meaning

15. Just as CNN Türk broadcast the penguin documentary, STAR TV continued to broadcast a live beauty pageant. Beyaz Show, a major entertainment program hosting university students each week, was canceled, without any explanation.
Heyday of the Performances in and around the Park

1–11 June

It is a very difficult task to document the exploding performativity around the Park. For about 10 days, the Park was the site for many rites typical of a festive event, with everyone conspicuously displaying their group identities, exchanging food and goods, picnicking, storytelling, and slogans. Referring to the International Istanbul Bienal, Burcu Özkaçar remarks how the Taksim neighborhood was transformed into a “Biennial of Protest,” both as a display of creative and humorous slogans and graffiti and of all kinds of performance (Özkaçar 2013). “Jumping to the rhythm of the slogans” was performed both in Istanbul and Ankara as a mass improv, as thousands of people jumped together, shouting “Jump! Jump! Jump! You’re a fascist if you don’t do it!” or in some cases, shouting “Jump! Jump! Jump! You are Tayyip, if you don’t do it!”

From 1 to 11 June, Taksim Square was again suspended in a festive time frame. Beginning on 2 June, Gezi Park was organized as a festive place, a not-to-be-missed city fair for the next 10 days. Free of police presence, different social groups took their stands within and outside of the Park. Although tension remained low in the Taksim area, clashes broke out between police and protesters in other neighborhoods, especially in Beşiktaş, the site of the Prime Minister’s Istanbul office. That day, on his way to the opening ceremony of the buildings for the Mediterranean Games, Erdoğan used the condescending word çapulcu, looter, to describe the Gezi protesters: “I will not seek permission from a bunch of çapulcunun [looters] to implement my plans for Taksim” (Radikal 2013a). When Erdoğan left Turkey for a three-day official visit to North Africa, the people responded with a series of lavish humorous retorts. This was the second round of the dialogic experience. On 3 June, a Facebook initiative, Black Monday, was launched, calling people to wear black to join the protesters. This was an invitation to people who could not go to ground zero, a challenge to indoor spectators to overcome their fear of...
visibility. The following day, even some television celebrities wore black, among them the journalists of the popular magazine program Her Şey Tadında. This was the night when Anonymous and RedHack took down several government websites, protesting press censorship. Some members of Çarşısı took possession of a bulldozer in the area and drove towards the police forces, who were throwing tear gas. The next day in Ankara, a group of supporters produced a puppet show, using a remote control toy bulldozer and police cars. On social media, referring to the police vehicles, Toplumsal Olaylara Müdahale Araçları (TOMA; vehicle for intervening in social events), was subversively renamed POMA, an abbreviation for Polis Olaylara Müdahale Araçları (Vehicle for Interfering in Police Events) (Milliyet.com.tr 2013a). Apparently, Çarşısı took possession of a TOMA and came up with this new term, which persisted even after the protests. The reconfiguration of meaning continued as a TOMA, which was used to support fireworkers in Viranşehir, was named YOMA, abbreviation for Yangın Olayına Müdahale Araçları (Vehicle for Interfering in Fire Events) (Timeturk 2013).

If Çarşısı was in the forefront of the battlegrounds, the Anti-Capitalist Muslims also surfaced as significant actors with their oppositional stance to AKP’s consumerist policies. They were also the protagonists in a series of “display of respect” performances. June 5th was a holy Muslim day, celebrating the Isra and Mi’raj, Prophet Mohammad’s ascension. Although many other events happened that day, the Park community’s activities were focused on the performance of Muslim practices being shared by people of many different faiths and beliefs. This solidarity would continue with the practices of Friday prayer on 7 and 14 June. There again “respect” was performed when leftist groups made sure that Anti-Capitalist Muslims could peacefully pray, a moment referred to by CNN Türk: “They [the leftists] protected those who prayed” (CNN Türk 2013). Saadet Özen describes the Anti-Capitalist Muslims’ successful strategy in getting acknowledged as part of the Park’s central community. After all, while many leftist organizations were pushed aside, Anti-Capitalist Muslims, including their female members in black hijab, situated themselves in the Park, all as part of a display of friendship and mutual understanding.

Beginning on 5 June, Gezi Park was also the site for “performing freedom.” Taksim Square, to which the state has long denied public access, was now open to all for football games, for screening a movie, and for daily yoga classes. As the police continued to use gas and water cannons around the park, the battleground spread towards the Elmadag area, where the five-star Divan Hotel lobby became a site of refuge. At the peak of the street battles, when people were taking refuge in the hotel, Buğra Temel, a young protestors and also a performer, sat at the piano in the lobby to give the first recital of the Gezi events, playing Yann Tiersen’s Mother’s Journey (Gümüş 2013). The moment was caught on camera and was immediately shared on Facebook. Local followers called his performance “the tune of the Gezi events.” Yann Tiersen himself saluted Temel’s performance with a tweet: “In Turkey during the protests music was a refuge,” stated Tiersen, “This is very touching” (Tiersen 2013).

During the days that followed, the Park was transformed into a festival and fairground, where a Revolution Market and a Public Library were established. Different social and political groups opened stands promoting themselves. Meanwhile, public encounters between the officials and the protesters continued. On 6 June 2013 at 6:00 p.m., 2,000 academics marched from Tünel to Taksim Square, including 93-year-old Nermin Abadan Unat, Professor

---


18. Owned by the leading industrialist Koç family, the Divan Hotel has been well-known in the area since 1956. During the Gezi events, gassed and hosed people took refuge in the hotel, which was soon turned into an infirmary.
Emeritus of Turkish social sciences. In the early hours of 7 June, AKP followers collected in large crowds near the Atatürk Airport of Istanbul to welcome Erdoğan back from his visit to North Africa. On 8 June, led by Çarşı, futbol fans from different teams marched to Taksim Square (Hürriyet 2013g). For a time, the public demonstrations were free from tear gas and water cannons, even as Erdoğan continued to refer to the demonstrators as çapulcunun: “We don’t do what a few looters did,” said the Prime Minister, “They set things on fire and destroy. That’s the definition of looter” (Radikal 2013a).

This statement launched a shower of verbal, performative, and material cultural responses. It was obvious that by calling the protesting crowds “looters,” the PM was invoking the memory of the chaotic 1970s, when street terror prevailed. Erdoğan’s thinly veiled reference to the 1970s inspired posters and slogans that were displayed in Taksim Square. AKM, the Atatürk Cultural Center, was covered with all sorts of Marxist icons and all manner of slogans, including, “Shut up Tayyip!!” AKM had been a site of clashes between the government and performance artists since its closure for the so-called renovation. Fearing its demolition by the AKP, people now plastered the cultural center with protest signs.

Cursing had already emerged as a dominant folklore genre of the Gezi. It was displayed on walls, cars, and in social media. Many of the curses directly targeted the PM below the waist. In many cases however, obscene curses were abbreviated as OÇ, which stands for “son of a bitch,” or AMK, “putting on your vagina,” which means “fucking you.” There was also opposition to the blatantly sexist cursing among the protest groups. Women from different feminist organizations organized a publicized collective activity to change or erase many of the sexist and homophobic slogans along İstiklal Street (Tahaoğlu 2013). Creative changes were made, writing over AMK (putting on your vagina) with AŞK (meaning “love” in Turkish) or painting over the curses with the sign for “woman” ♂. Passersby and area merchants applauded the painters. A group of young men supported the effort with cries of, “The world would shake, if women were free.” A similar feminist demonstration took place in İzmir. Others however found this a mere act of “political correctness.” Cursing, as one informant stated, is a valuable form of expression. The fact that it is gendered does not devalue it, as outrageousness is what makes a curse a curse.

The Atatürk Cultural Center was not the only site where protest signs were displayed. The walls of buildings on streets and roads surrounding Taksim Square as well as the ground surrounding the Republic Monument were emblazoned with slogans that targeted the government and its leader. However offensive, the slogans were amazingly creative. In many ways, they showed the Turkish public’s need for political humor. In the post-WWII years, humor magazines like Markopasa (1946) and Karakedi (1951) reflected all the tensions of Turkey’s transition to the democratic multiparty system. Gırgır, which continued to publish throughout the 1970s and 1980s, offered a forum for opposition after the military coups of 1971 and 1980. Even under these circumstances, political humor was disseminated in print, and also performed in theatre and on television. The Erdoğan government’s control over the Turkish media had censored this genre of political humor. Long suppressed, the form re-ignited in verbal and performative forms, though in more grotesque, carnivalesque versions than the measured sarcasm of previous eras.

As Saadet Özen reminds us, publicly posted slogans were used as a means to reach the otherwise unreachable PM. As mentioned, Erdoğan preferred giving speeches to taking part in roundtable or face-to-face debates with other leaders, where he might hear opinions from the other side. The slogans included demands expressed in social media, as graffiti, or even on the dusty windows of cars—forms not used before. The daily small talk of young people about ecological concerns, unwanted renovation plans, and protests against state violence, seemed to be turning into slogans written on walls, transcending traditional state-citizenship hierarchies and language manners. Many slogans directly targeted Erdoğan: “No Recep No Cry!” “Tayyip! Love Nature!”; after being gassed, “Tayyip Bieber”19; “Welcome to Fight Club

---

19. Bieber here refers to biber, “pepper” in Turkish; and biber gazı, meaning “tear gas” in Turkish.
The term “marginal groups” is a term used to refer to leftist militant groups since the 1970s. In this context, the press, the Governor, and a member from Çarşı used the term as a reference to the 1970s (haber365.com 2013; t24.com.tr 2013c).

Facing real physical violence necessitated organization, strength, and solidarity during the Gezi events. The fact that those who could not come to Gezi still helped the protesters by assisting them with donations for gas masks and food, or by opening their houses as infirmaries and places of refuge, added to the wave of solidarity among supporters. It was not a coincidence that futbol fans emerged as the leading group cheerleading the solidarity among supporters. Özen points out that the stadium is one of the rare places in Turkey where the masses can organize, brandish slogans, and learn to take common action and confront official authorities. The mass protest of Galatasaray fans against the PM in 2011, or the heckling of Istanbul’s mayor at the Istanbul Tennis Tournament showed that the sports arena has emerged as the expressive space for oppressed public opinion. Hence the futbol-reference slogan on one of the walls: “Anyone who loves his God, Come to the Defense!” (Allahını Seven Defansa Gelsin!).

**Rising Tensions**

11–16 June

On the grounds that Taksim Square was now home to what were referred to as “marginal groups,” riot police entered the Square on 11 June, again with tear gas and water cannons.20 Clashes lasted all day and well into the night. The Governor’s office stated that the aim was to “clear banners from the Atatürk Cultural Center and from around the Republic Monument” (Ensonhaber.com 2013). Over time, there emerged an obvious difference between the original demonstrators claiming the Park and many other political organizations—feminist, leftist, anarchist—connected to the resistance. On different occasions, members of the core Gezi groups expressed their unease with the emerging violence—particularly stone-throwing, damaging vehicles, and smashing shop windows, and sexism from some of the political groups. Yet

---

20. The term “marginal groups” is a term used to refer to leftist militant groups since the 1970s. In this context the press, the Governor, and a member from Çarşı used the term as a reference to the 1970s (haber365.com 2013; t24.com.tr 2013c).
on 11 June, the government staged excessive force once again, with heavy tear gas and water cannons. When officials shut down the electricity in Taksim Square, protesters built their own fires for light. On 12 June, the Supreme Board of Radio and Television (RTÜK) fined a number of channels, including Halk TV, Ulusal TV, Cem TV, and EM TV for “harming the physical, moral and mental development of children and young people” by broadcasting coverage of the Gezi Park protests (Özgenç 2013). Anonymous hacked RTÜK’s website in response.

This was also the day that Italian-born, German-bred pianist Davide Martello brought his piano into Taksim Square. Calling himself a klavierkunst (piano artist), Davide Martello has expressed his interest in playing his piano in all the world capital cities (Martello, n.d.).21 As a well-known international performer, his arrival to the so-called “Turkish spring” captured immediate international attention. “I’d seen the TV violence—insane violence—in Turkey,” Martello told the BBC, “and I couldn’t understand why. I just came to spread peace with my piano” (Werman 2013). To Gezi participants and the general Turkish audience, however, Martello was simply “the pianist at Taksim,” a valuable status for him as a performing artist.

The fact that a huge piano was set up in Taksim Square was a feat of public display in itself, regardless of what and why Martello played. As a klavierkunst, Martello’s intention has always been to perform his compositions in response to special landscapes and architectures, and in this sense, Taksim Square offered a perfect site. His “grand piano” was a self-made instrument with digitally corrected sound and a special heating system that allows him to play in cold weather. Taksim Square was rather hot that night, and Martello’s repertoire responded both to

the Gezi events and the Turkish audience surrounding him, including the policemen. During his first day, he began with his original composition “Lightsoldiers” and continued to play for about 13 hours, fascinating the surrounding crowd including the police officers. In press and social media his performance was called “an intermission” in the Gezi events, or a “disproportionate art” as an antidote to the “disproportionate violence” of the policemen. Martello’s repertoire was mixed, and included everything from Beethoven to the Beatles’ “Let It Be” to Al Bano’s “Felicita.” But it was obvious he got some guidance with such selections as “Çav Bella” (“Bella ciao”) which he played as the crowd chanted the Turkish lyrics; and Zülfü Livaneli’s “Yiğidim Aslanım” and “Karı Kayın Ormanı,” the iconic songs of the 1970s Turkish Left.22 The fact that he stopped performing during evening prayer also made news (Hürriyet 2013c).

There were different responses to Martello’s performance. After each song, the crowds would take their turn and shout the Gezi slogan Her Yer Taksim, Her Yer Direns¸ (Everywhere Is Taksim, Everywhere Is Resistance). The same evening, cameras recorded moments when even the policemen were not able to remain indifferent. In one of these, police officers hauled away a drunk man who was standing too close to Martello (Espriler1 2013). It was a rare moment as the crowd applauded the police when they took the drunk person away from Martello, and some policemen applauded Martello at the end of his performance. Martello even reported that a policeman told him he played well (Werman 2013). One of the headlines in social media was: “Beautiful things happen in Taksim: Police were applauded, Pianist played, Police applauded” (Espriler1 2013). There was, however, also some skepticism about Martello’s presence. Some comments in social media focused on his national identity. Framed as German, Martello was linked to German Prime Minister, Angela Merkel, known for her disapproval of Turkey’s accession to the European Union. Some news reports hinted that he could be a German or even a MOSSAD spy (Haber7.com 2013a). Another article found it very suspicious that food poured into Gezi Park and implied that German foundations supplied the food to the protesters (Ramog˘lu 2013).23 Martello played until the 15th, when tear gas was once again shot into Taksim. The moment when he left his piano on site was captured on camera and shared in social media (Internethaber.com 2013). After police “cleansed” Taksim of the “marginal elements,” Martello’s grand piano was “taken into custody” to be released on the 18th when it was widely reported in social media (Arslan 2013).24

Martello’s music was only one part of his performance, and his was one among many performances. In the cloudy days of the Gezi events, he did not dominate the others taking place in Taksim. And while it contributed to the cause, the thought that Martello’s performance could lead to peace, a wish he expressed in a BBC interview (see Werman 2013), that it could influence the police or Erdoğan’s decision, was rather naïve in the context of Turkish politics. On 13 June, while Martello was performing, Gezi mothers also captured the spotlight, initiating for the first time their own version of “mothers’ protests,” a form of protest most often associated with mothers who have lost their children, such as the Madres de La Plaza De Mayo in Argentina. Mothers’ street protests have long been familiar in Istanbul, especially in Taksim. Saturday Mothers (Cumartesi Anneleri) have gathered for sit-ins every Saturday at Galatasaray


23. Skepticism about German foundations has long been discussed in the Turkish press because of the foundations’ alleged involvement in processes related to elections, gold excavation, and dam construction enterprises (see Hürriyet 1991a:1; Hürriyet 1991b:1; and Hablemiño˘glu 2009).

24. For more information see www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oaf0bU7VLU; www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7_JVFt0Hxl; webtv.hurriyet.com.tr/20/51074/0/1/alman-piyaniat-piyanosuna-kavustu.aspx (all accessed 25 August 2013).
Like the Divan Hotel, Lycée Notre Dame de Sion was also an important refuge site that had opened its doors to gassed people during the peak days of the events. Istanbul Medical Chamber sent out a press release protesting this development and assuring the injured that their names would never be released (Istanbul Tabip Odası 2013).  

While it is often used for political and social events, Kazlıçeşme does not come close to Taksim, which has long been a lieu de mémoire, particularly for the Left.

For Istanbulites, closing of the roads has been a familiar experience, the state denied access to Taksim for many years to syndicates and other left-wing NGOs celebrating Workers Day on May 1st.

During the subsequent days there was public discussion regarding the rapprochement between Erdoğan and Gezi people. The government announced on 14 June that it would comply with the court decision suspending the demolition of Gezi Park (sozcu.com.tr 2013b). The news created a sense of victory among the Gezi supporters. Yet, simultaneously, the Ministry of Health launched an investigation into the Istanbul Medical Chamber for organizing an un certified emergency clinic in the middle of the Park, causing great anger among the physicians who ran to the help of the injured. On 13 June, when PM Erdoğan finally sat across a table from a group of artists and NGO representatives, the Gezi side of the table had mixed feelings (Sesonline.net 2013). As skepticism and pride prevailed on both sides, the meeting did not have a happy ending.

On the evening of 15 June, police moved into Gezi Park, ending the occupation of the park and standing guard at Taksim Square to prevent any further gatherings. The façade of AKM and the circle around the Republic Monument were “cleansed” of “extremist” signs, the make-shift barricades and relics of the Gezi events were collected, and slogans on all of the walls were painted over, leaving the square cleaner than it had ever been.

On 16 June a police officer shot a gas canister at 14-year-old Berkin Elvan who was on an errand to buy bread, fracturing his skull. In response, the main labor unions, KESK and DISK, along with the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects and the Turkish Doctors’ Association called a one-day strike for 17 June. In the midst of these reactions to the attack on the boy, Erdoğan was addressing one million people gathered in Kazlıçeşme at the so-called “Respect for National Will” rally (sabah.com.tr 2013b). The glamour of Erdoğan’s spectacular event was tainted by a television interview in which a female Erdoğan supporter expressed her loyalty to the leader with a rather shocking turn of phrase: “I am ready to be a hair in his ass.” While the cursing used through the protests was too much for some people, this “compliment” was a disturbing breach of manners for others. The statement exploded on social media, with a number of video clips, many of which were from posts abroad.

As many social groups tweeted calls to gather at different sites to organize a move to take Taksim back, police cut access to the main roads leading to Taksim. Hundreds were walking on the roads from Gezi neighborhoods to Taksim. In Taksim, the Divan Hotel became the focal point for the night, standing at the crossroad where the police gassed and chased incoming...
crowds. The hotel once again opened its doors to the injured, turning its lobby into an infirmary. The fact that the Koç group, which owned the hotel, had recently been denied a contract by the government turned this hospitality into a dramatic encounter between Erdoğan and the Koç family. Rumors ran on social media that evening that Mustafa Koç, the CEO of the group, called the hotel manager and told him to accept everybody in need. Tensions between the PM and the Koç group were reflected in media reports, both in Turkey and abroad (see Hürriyet 2013e; Gürsel 2013; Cornell 2013).

During this period of increased tension and confrontation, slogans were the most creative performative form of expression. The “language of Gezi,” in Saadet Özen’s words, used old slogans and adapted them to their new situation. The slogans that were once the battle cries of the Left, like “Damn fascism” or “Damn the junta,” clearly named an opponent. Gezi protesters adopted this form, without naming the opponent. Hence, the new slogan of the Gezi events: “Damn some things!” The Gezi language was constructed to defy the old categorizations. This was also true for LGBT slogans. This group of protesters took the nationalist slogan “We are soldiers of Mustafa Kemal” and subverted the militarism of the old chant, changing it to “We are soldiers of Mustafa Keser” (Sabah.com.tr 2013c). Whereas the Mustafa of the nationalists’ slogan referred to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of Turkish Republic, Mustafa Keser was a popular folk singer. The slogan also came to mean, “We are soldiers of no one.” The fact that AKP circles produced a counter-language right away proved the impact of these slogans. The party media strategists advised their deputies on what kind of discourse to stage. They suggested that deputies should side with ecological issues, keeping up the police morale while carefully curtailing abuse. They also invited them to speak out against any vandalism happening during the Gezi events and any misinformation circulating on Twitter. In the final analysis, however, their priority was their own voters, so they continued to praise them for calmly staying in their houses (T24.com.tr 2013a). Erdoğan directly blamed social media for the emerging Gezi language, Twitter in particular, calling it a “headache” and a “menace to society” (Sabah.com.tr 2013a; BBC.com 2013; Champion 2013). The government requested cooperation from Twitter to reveal protest-related subscribers (Radikal 2013b). The Twitter saga continued; it was banned on 20 March 2014, forcing company officials to visit Turkey and come to a consensus with the government (Arsu 2014; Coşkun 2014).

The rapid circulation of information was almost a performance in itself. Groups like RedHack joined the Gezi events by hacking the National Parliament site. In a political movement with no leadership, the internet offered a massive platform where democratically filtered and approved ideas emerged. By targeting “guilty” tweeters, the PM had clearly chosen to stand in opposition to social media. A few hours after he called the protesters çapulcu, slogans popped up on the internet and then on the walls of the Gezi site: Çapuling or chapulling entered internet dictionaries, while “Everyday I’m çapuling” became the title of a video-clip with many references to youth culture. “Everyday I’m çapuling” was a take on “Everyday I’m Shufflin,” a catchphrase from the 2011 dance/pop single “Party Rock Anthem” by the American electronic hip hop duo LMFAO. And taking it back one step further: “Everyday I’m Shufflin” refers to Rick Ross’s “Everyday I’m Hustlin,” performed by Katt Williams in the Grand Theft Auto game. This language was the lingua franca of the internet — a platform for communication that could not be shut down. The virtual world was where we worked and communicated, encompassing and shaping what we call “real.” Government arrests and bans were discouraging.

29. The bid proposed by the Koç Group was for a bridge and highway contract. It had been accepted in December 2012 (Radikal 2012) but on 22 February 2013 the contract was canceled by the Ministry of Finance (Ekonomi .bugun.com.tr 2013).
30. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4HkQtaX0rI (accessed 2 September 2013).
31. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqlGZKQheF8 (accessed 2 September 2013).
but the communal brainstorming facilitated by the internet continued to generate new methods and solutions for our emerging politics. The more news of government bans circulated on the internet, the faster the virtual world responded.

When Taksim was “lost” to the government forces, everywhere became Taksim, literally. On 17 June Çarşı announced that Abbasağa Park in Beşiktaş would be the new Gezi Park until the latter was again available for public use. This was a pioneering initiative: Gezi was displaced and relocated to multiple sites. That same day the evening news announced that a man was standing! Performance artist Erdem Gündüz stood in Taksim Square facing the Atatürk Culture Center without moving for eight hours (see Mee 2014). The police, who had taken complete control of Gezi Park, did not even notice. His act of standing was a new form of passive activism par excellence. The peacefulness of the “Standing Man” protest rendered all other weapons useless. Duran Adam, the standing man, seemed to be no threat to the police. Gündüz’s protest was so influential that the following day the number of standing men and women in Taksim Square reached 300. It was then that the police told the protesters to move away on the grounds that they were blocking traffic. They detained 10 of the protesters who refused to move (The Week 2013).

Erdem Gündüz quickly became a celebrity on social media, as the hashtag “standingman” was a new trend on Twitter. Who was this standing man? A multimedia artist specializing in contemporary dance, performance art, and fine arts, Gündüz decided to walk into the center of the square at 6:00 p.m. on 17 June, where he remained for about eight hours. When he was “outed” by social media, the police searched him and his bag, finding nothing illegal. People brought him water and biscuits, and stood by him as the hours passed. He later defined his protest as an act of civil disobedience and stated that he was not just aiming for a change in the government, but a change of the system (see Girit 2013). Ironically, in 2004 Gündüz had also protested the barring of veiled students from attending classes at universities. He had worn a headscarf himself, an act of protest today’s government would fervently approve (Milliyet.com.tr 2013b).

Standing as a form of protest spread both throughout Turkey and in many countries around the world. In Turkey, standing protests were performed in lieux de mémoire of the recent political past, one of these being the location in Ankara where Ethem Sarısülük had been shot by police during the demonstrations in that city. Standing protests also took place at the Madmuk Hotel in Sivas, and on the spot where Hrant Dink was assassinated. In foreign countries, mostly Turkish people joined the multi-sited performance (see Haber7.com 2013c; Odatv.com 2013). Turkish media spotted other standing protests performed to call attention to domestic concerns in other countries, including Italy and Brazil (see Hürriyet 2013; Sabah.com.tr 2013). The reaction from the government came from Erdoğan himself, who translated the image of the standing man to his political benefit: “Some people produced standing men. You may all stand still... But us, we say, no stopping on that road, we say go on. They may continue to stand meanwhile. Towards the goal of 2023, we run, we run with firm steps”—referring to the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic (Iyigünler.net 2013).

Gündüz received the prestigious German human rights award, known also as the M100 Media Award. “His weapon has been his creativity,” proclaimed Potsdam mayor and M100 chair Jann Jakobs. The jury of journalists stated, “With his silent protest, he became the icon of peaceful resistance and has been emulated around the world” (Khaleej Times 2013).

Forum Performances
17 June and onwards

After the police took control of Taksim during the brutal encounter on 16 June, Çarşı, whose leaders had been taken into custody during the raid on Gezi Park, had released their press statement declaring Abbasağa Park in Beşiktaş as the new gathering site. Taksim, they claimed, had been transformed into a police district. They also emphasized that they resisted provocation and
disapproved of violence against the police with any weapon, from primitive tools such as stones and sticks to knives and firearms. However, they had made a decision:

So you pushed us out from Taksim, our dear brothers, sisters, police officers, state officials? You took Gezi away from us? Did you beat us up? Eyvallah! All right. From now on, the second Taksim, the second Gezi Park is Abbasağa Park! We will be waiting for you there! We are sitting there! We are singing songs. From now on, and “for now,” we will wait for you there! Come and kick us out from there as well! We will then go to Emirgan Park! Kick us out again from there too. We will go to Fethiapaşa Korusu! Kick us out from there again. We will go to Yıldız Park! Kick us out again. We will be waiting for you at the pier of the Third Bosphorus Bridge! Because, everywhere is Taksim, everywhere is resistance! (t24.com.tr 2013d)

And so began the era of the forums, each established in a different public park. In the beginning, the forums were perhaps founded to find other physical locations for the resistance. But they moved beyond the disappointment of losing space to the long-term goal of keeping alive the memory of Taksim. Futbol fans also played an effective role in the initial organization of forums. The moderators of the Abbasağa forum were from the Çarşı group, and those of Yoğunçu Park consisted of Genç Fenerbahçeliler, young fans of the Fenerbahçe futbol team. Between 17 and 21 June, 41 forums were founded in different parks. Organized almost like the Greek amphitheaters, the forums soon became new centers of performance of all sorts. Speechmaking was the main genre, sometimes performed as storytelling, sometimes as political discourse, but always kept short to allow maximum inclusion. During the first days, people told their personal experiences of Gezi, and later the subject of the speeches shifted to future projects and proposed solutions (Gezgin 2013). On 24–25 June, forum members decided to establish “working groups” (everywheretaksim.net 2013). Some forums even established their own “parliaments.”

Forums vary in terms of their performance elements. First of all, audiences usually gathered in a semicircle, but the power relation between the audience and storytellers shifted as the two-minute limit allowed everybody to be both onstage and in the audience. The audiences very soon adopted a hand sign language similar to that used in the Occupy Wall Street protests, but in a more simplified version and with different interpretations depending on time and place. Applause, for instance, was a domain where forum participants were extremely careful. In order not to disturb the neighborhood residents, the audiences tried to remain quiet, so if they wanted to applaud, they fluttered their hands above their heads with palms open. If someone talked too long, they would roll their hands. If they disagreed, they crossed their arms on their chests. Saadet Özen points out that many of these signs were borrowed from sports culture. The sign for “speed up” was the same as the “walk” signal in basketball. Fluttering hands for applause was also a stadium sign language used in Turkey. Besides respecting neighborhood residents, another reason to refrain from applauding was to have clear sound for live broadcasts and recordings. Although Gezi protests shared many features and sentiments with Occupy Wall Street, Western media had chosen to label it the “Turkish Spring,” nominally establishing a connection to the so-called Arab Spring (Haber7.com 2013b).

Even though there were delays because of summer break and Ramadan during August, working groups continued to meet regularly, some organizing new means of civil disobedience and protest. One of these was jumping the turnstile at the Kadıköy ferry as a protest against AKP’s policy of transporting crowds to its own rallies for free. Withdrawing savings from banks was also a protest method used since the early days of the Gezi protests, especially from big companies supporting pro-government media. As a neighborhood, Beşiktas attained a special meaning, since the PM’s Istanbul Office was located there. One of the first items on the agenda of the working group that was made up mostly of architects and city planners, was protesting the changes to the local transport routes after the Shangri La Hotel opened in the
neighborhood. One form of protest was riding bicycles around the hotel, another was holding a tea party in front of the PM’s office (Çapa 2013).

Working groups had no authority to make decisions. Decisions were published on social media only after getting confirmation from the forum community. Forum attendees visited other forums in Istanbul to present and share their projects. However, for security reasons, coordination between forums was done only in person by authorized spokespeople. In addition to this, during Ramadan almost all forums organized fast-breaking meals and solidarity dinners.

As the forums continued on 22 and 23 June, protesters gathered in Taksim Square to remember those who had lost their lives during the demonstrations. Chanting “Police do not betray your people” and “Police! Sell simit, live honorably,” they targeted the conscience of the police. Responding to a call on social media, thousands poured into Taksim, leaving carnations in Gezi Park, particularly where the trees had been cut down. The police waited until 8:30 p.m. to attack. Protesters responded by throwing carnations at the police, a symbolic act referring to the rock throwing for which the government criticized Gezi protesters.

As people gathered in the Park, inventing new forms of storytelling and communal sign language, organizers announced that the 2013 Istanbul Gay Pride Parade would take place on 30 June. The LGBT movement in Turkey dates back to the early 1990s. Established in 2007, Istanbul LGBT has been officially recognized as a legal association by the Istanbul governorship since 2011. Participation in the Gay Pride Parade had increased tremendously in the past 10 years, reaching its peak with almost 40,000 people in 2013. The impact of the Gezi protests took the Pride Parade to a whole new level. As participants assembled in Taksim Square before marching through İstiklal Avenue, they were joined by Gezi Park protesters, making the 2013 Istanbul Pride Parade the biggest ever held in Turkey (Düzer 2013). The traditional Pride Parade slogans were recontextualized during the Gezi events, with references to old leftist slogans. The most well-known slogan of the Left—“Shoulder to shoulder against fascism”—was now shamelessly transformed to the obscene “Leg over your shoulder against fascism.” Similarly, “Revolution, the only way” became: “Ayy, this is really Revolution!” According to Özen, these slogans, which could have never found an honorable place in the highly moral revolution of the 1970s, were now accepted by the crowds of Gezi protesters. The Parade continued with the well-known dialogue of the LGBT movement, as one group asked, “Where are you my love?” and the other answered, “I am here my love,” only this time, the call for solidarity was extended towards the Gezi participants.

The merger of the Pride Parade with the Gezi movement was a unique experience for many new to street protests. Burcu Özkaçar, who had regularly attended the Parades for the past five years was most impressed by the increased number of heterosexuals: “My father and my boyfriend, for the first time in their lives, attended a Gay Pride Parade,” said Özkaçar. “Although they did not walk with the crowd, they marched alongside, as curious observers” (Özkaçar 2013). The parade included all of the usual carnivalesque theatricality—cross dressing, conspicuous display of the body—but this year, one participant was dressed as a tree, with reference

---

32. As of September 2013 forums gathered under @direnabbasaga had 18,387 followers on Twitter; @parkmeclisi had 8,100; and finally @abbasagammsp had 1,469 followers. Today coordination among different forums continues online (see http://everywheretaksim.net/tr/category/gezi-forumlari-tr/).

33. Simit is a sesame bagel, the cheapest traditional food, and framed here as the easiest job for the unemployed.


to the Park.16 Yet, at some point during the Parade, there was also an encounter with Alperen Ocakları, a political group associated with nationalism and Islam. While the Pride Parade shouted: “Shoulder to shoulder against fascism,” Alperen Ocakları responded, “Allahu Ekber.”37 The Parade also received condescending comments or tweets from the AKP circles. Şamil Tayyar challenged the Pride people to come to Kazlıçeşme, the arena where the PM had formerly gathered his supporters (T24.com.tr 2013b).

Performances that began with the Gezi protest continued in multiple ways. On 7 July, people gathered for the first “Gas Man Festival,” with an ironic reference to tear gas. The next day, on 8 July, the Istanbul governor reopened Gezi Park. On 10 July, Ali Ismail Korkmaz, a 19-year-old student died after being kicked to death by a group that included undercover police. A group of celebrities and academics published a signed open letter to Erdoğan in the British daily The Times, describing his government as “a dictatorial rule,” that “led to the deaths of five innocent youths,” and comparing his Kazlıçeşme mass meeting to the annual Nuremberg rallies organized by the Nazis (Ülkedehaber.com 2013). On 31 July, thousands gathered in Taksim to support Berkin Elvan, the 14-year-old teenager, who was still in a coma after being hit by a gas canister as he was on his way to buy bread. Berkin died on 10 March 2014, after surviving for nine months in a coma. His funeral drew thousands who marched for him with a piece of bread in their hands (Wohlwender 2014; Milliyet.com.tr 2014). In the context of rumors of corruption among the sons of ministers, including the PM, bread became the icon of the funeral and other memorial events. This escalated the tensions between the government and the marchers, which ended in clashes with the police on the evening of the funeral. As protests continued, two more people died. There were many more demonstrations than this essay can trace, and the funerals of those who lost their lives during the Gezi protests and thereafter deserve greater attention. There were other less somber events as well, like the weddings between couples who met during the protests.38 Jale Karabekir, director of Tiyatro Boyalıkus Company and pioneer of the Theater of the Oppressed in Turkey, canceled all shows in her theatre, Sahne Cihangir, but “performed resistance” on the ground, calling on her Facebook followers and her audiences to join the Gezi protests. She also organized workshops in the parks and at the forums, using the techniques of the Theater of the Oppressed. There is also the open-ended dramatic story of Fuat Yıldırım, the Dolmabahçe Mosque’s imam, who opened the Mosque’s doors to gassed people seeking refuge. It is perhaps one of the most important tales of the events. Despite government pressures, Yıldırım refused to accept that protesters drank alcohol in the Mosque as Erdoğan suggested. He told the officials that he could not lie as a man of faith (Kamudan.com 2013). Removed from his post, he has since been coping with public pressures from all sides. Belief and performance came up in another event on the first day of Ramadan. Hundreds of people gathered for the fast-breaking dinner along İstiklal Avenue, the busiest pedestrian road in Istanbul, for what was named yeryüzü sofrası, literally meaning “earth’s table.” Sitting down on the ground and passing food and drink from hand to hand, many joined at the earth’s table with those who broke their fast. The experience was unique, and the visual imagery of İstiklal Avenue that evening will remain in our memories for years to come.19

37. Allahu Ekber means Great Allah (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSPPboEw4P0; accessed 9 September 2013).
39. Many images can be found through a google image search of “yeryüzü sofrası.”
Documenting and Remembering Gezi Park

The roller coaster effect of the Gezi Events also produced a need for documenting and archiving experience.40 A pool of personal stories that included all the elements of an epic, including romantic and comedic narratives, poured into different forms of expression including songs, books, and academic panels. In the domain of music, six songs were composed and released by acclaimed musicians as the events were taking place.41 The number of books and photo albums published on the Gezi protests totaled 20 by October 2013. In the midst of this outpouring of data, historiographic debates began on how to document the verbal, visual, and aural memories of the protests. The popular history magazine *NTV Tarih* devoted its July 2013 issue to the Gezi Park protests, asking historians how history being written as it happened would be read in the future. Their attempts took a dramatic turn when the publishing company, concerned about government reactions, not only canceled the issue, but closed the magazine entirely. The canceled issue heroically appeared later on the internet.42

Similarly, the History Foundation organized a workshop called “As Now becomes History” on 5 October 2013. The workshop hosted the main groups who were on the frontline of Gezi events, including urban planners, lawyers, and doctors who helped the protesters, feminists, the LGBT community, radio broadcasters, Anti-Capitalist Muslims, and academic researchers. I was invited there as an oral historian to comment on the content and methodology of constructing different archives of the Gezi events. Each group had a different experience and a different perspective on what to preserve, while all felt that the process of re-telling what had happened was a new duty. Çarşı was not represented at the workshop. Their philosophy is that what was lived was lived and there will be other experiences to come; to narrate an event is not the issue, what is important is to live it. Our futbol language frames it very well: “they looked upon the game forward” (*Biz önümüzdeki maça bakarız*). A similar diversion from the original platform of the protesters could also be traced in the narrative of the Anti-Capitalist Muslims. They expressed their uneasiness with humiliating Erdoğan’s hearty supporters, who were often framed as uneducated, with unquestioning minds, like the lady who said on camera after the public meeting in Kazlıçeşme that she was willing to be the hair on Erdoğan’s ass. Their aim from now on would be to reach these people and move them towards a more critical stance. It seems that they chose “campaign” as their new form of expression.

As the workshop continued, news circulated about a traffic jam in Istanbul. There were conspiracy rumors that blocking the traffic was a new form of protest by putting city officials in the spotlight (Gazetevatan.com 2013b). It is extremely hard to blame Gezi protesters for the city traffic, when the government has an insatiable appetite for adding new compounds to Istanbul, which is already crowded with buildings. But it shows that the issues that sparked the Gezi protests have persisted.43
As the impact of the Gezi Park protests continues to be felt, let us conclude with the personal experience of Burcu Özkaçar, who tells us the story of her gradual involvement in the Gezi protests:

My participation in the Gezi resistance was a belated one, after getting over of my first shock, and after losing Ethem and Mehmet. On 22 June, when the police responded to our carnations with their water cannons, I was in Taksim for every protest. I belonged to the post-coup d’etat generation, raised with warnings that “one should first finish her studies” and “care about her own personal record!” I was shocked on 31 May in Gezi Park, when we found ourselves almost in a computer game. Unlike our parents’ generation, we were totally untrained to respond to violence. So I stayed in the library until 22 June, to observe from a distance, while reading, thinking, and discussing. But being a mere “intellectual” eventually made me angry. There was a banner in Gezi: “Revolution nearly blinked!” I had heard of revolutions and revolutionaries many times, but I did not really know what it all meant. Forget about a revolution, I had never seen such a crowd in my life! Later on, when I evaluated my position and decided to get rid of the bell jar of academia, I told myself: This is revolution! My own change was revolution! [...]

In the following days, I began to attend the forum in Duatepe Park near my university. In the first night of the forum, we were quite timid, as it was our first experience and we did not know what to do. Some bold friends came forward and spoke up with their rich voices. They were shouting “Government, resign!” and “No more Tayyip!” This tone was dominant in the first days. Over time, things settled down. On the one hand, we started discussions about the government; on the other hand, I heard women sitting behind me reminiscing about going to the cinema in the summer when they were children. We started chatting and had sunflower seeds and tea together. One thing we had learned in Gezi Park was to share our food and drink with everyone. I still wonder if it was really me who went through all this. Did I do that? Within a month?

During the forum in Duatepe, we also talked with flat owners, and expressed our complaints about rent fees in our neighborhood. There was a different atmosphere that the Gezi resistance had granted us. There was a new language. I had waited for a long time for this atmosphere to come. There were other nearby forums I also visited. One was in Sanatclar Park, where I saw a guy standing behind his tripod, looking like Yılmaz Güney. There were only eight hours between my question “What are you recording?” and volunteering to be his assistant director on his movie, Gezi Resistance. We had 10 days together, with “Yılmaz Güney” walking ahead and me following him. Meanwhile, we also attended the wedding ceremony of Nuray and Özgür (their love came out of the Gezi resistance days). The police did not allow us to go into Gezi Park, so Nuray and Özgür could not marry there. But after the official ceremony, they ran to the Park. Police attacked people with tear gas and water cannons. We recorded the struggle. We conducted interviews: with a transsexual, with Çarşı futbol fans at the Abbasaga forum in Beşiktaş.

Abbasaga was like a fortress after Gezi. It was probably the most populated Park forum. We learned from lawyer friends what to do if taken into custody. Food was served to everyone, people had fast-breaking meals in the Parks, even in pedestrian streets. We had a meal along the İstiklal Avenue at the heart of Taksim! Even today, I am astonished to have experienced all this. I still ask myself if it was me who did all of this.

44. Ethem Sansülük and Mehmet Ayvalıtaş were among those killed during the Gezi events along with Ali İsmail Korkmaz, Abdullah Cömert, Medeni Yıldım, and the police officer Mustafa Sarı.
45. Yılmaz Güney (1937–1984) was the legendary actor and film director of Kurdish descent.
But soon, the frequency of phone calls increased from those who kept warning me about “my personal record.” They were telling me: “My dear, come to Izmir.” I went to Izmir not to keep my personal record clean but because I thought of Berkin who sleeps for months in an intensive care unit. I put myself in Berkin’s place. I went because I thought about what would happen if I was killed like Ali Ismail. I went because I could cry for Ethem, Ali, Abdocan, Mehmet, Medeni, and Mustafa. When I remembered their families saying, “My son is missing,” I went. I went because I didn’t want my family to have to say this. Many had died in hope of bringing light to darkness. They left endless grief in our hearts. They left tears in many households. They left us sleepless at night. In order not to set fire to my parents’ hearts, I came. And here, now, I keep myself busy with things that are far from disturbing anyone. I do the best I know how: I WRITE!”

(Özkaçar 2013)

References


Baran, Yeşemin. 2013. Personal correspondence with author, 6 August.


BDP. 2013. “Sırrı Süreyya Önder Gezi Parkı Gerçeklerini Açıklıyor.” YouTube, 8:15 min. 11 July. www. youtube.com/watch?v=gIS0seEaMxw (5 October 2013).


Güncakan, Berat. 1996. Cumartesi Anneleri. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.


