Preface

This book begins with a dilemma we all share: time. This dilemma is not personal but rather structural and intrinsic to social scientific methods and, in the particular case of this book, to ethnography itself. Ethnography, more or less, claims to keep its finger on the pulse of the present, the contemporary. But there is always a gap between ethnographic research and the time of its fruition into a book. Ethnographic time is not writing time, and neither ethnographic nor writing time is publishing time. Ethnographic accounts of the present inescapably betray their initially intended temporal framework. Instead of accounts of the present, they become archives of the contemporary.

The protagonists of this book, trans people in Turkey, are no exception to this ethnographic dilemma. Much has changed in Turkey between the time of my main fieldwork in 2010 and the writing of this preface in 2022. Therefore, this ethnography of trans lives in Turkey actually offers a contemporary history of transness in the country. The experiences, struggles, and stories from more than a decade ago still weigh heavily on the present and emergent conditions of trans lives. Yet this historical proximity can sometimes feel like distance when one considers the events and processes that have radically shifted the geo- and sociopolitical context of Turkey over the same period of time. It would be challenging to offer a comprehensive portrayal of all this change in its multiple and differential scales. Instead, I will highlight a few of these key events and processes: the launching of Twitter in 2011 and the gradual growth of other digital platforms; the Gezi protests in 2013; the 2015 general elections and the proceeding war against Kurds in Kurdistan; the coup attempt in 2016; a series of purges of Fethullah Gülen's supporters, Kurdish politicians and activists, and Academics for Peace; a rapid and exponential increase in migration from the war-torn geographies of Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and, more recently, from Ukraine and Russia; the COVID-19 pandemic; an aggressive, interventionist and neo-imperial foreign policy in the Middle East; and an accelerating economic crisis and hyperinflation that began in 2021. The intensifying authoritarianism, national securitization, and an economic depression have had tremendous and devastating impacts on queer and

trans lives, precisely because they have shaped the everyday life of everyone who lives in Turkey.

Within the specific context of queer and trans lives, this turbulent social and political environment has produced particularly harmful public discourses and acts of violence and discrimination. The year 2015 marked the inception of gradually intensifying state warfare against queer and trans lives and their demonization in the public eye through ideological and practical instruments. Since then, the state has steadily developed a more systemic and official anti-LGBTI+ agenda and framed it through a discourse of national security, family values, public morals, and social order. The state has banned political events, campaigns, and activities regarding queer and trans issues, and has targeted those of us who were part of these struggles—claiming that we are threats to public decency and social order.

Two political events in 2021 amplified the gradual targeting, securitization, and criminalization of queer and trans activists and feminists by the Turkish state: feminist, queer, and trans protests against Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on March 20; and the Boğaziçi University student protests that began on February 2. These two events happened around the same time, heightened the visibility and recognition of LGBTI+ issues, and also consolidated collaborations and alliances between some feminists and queer and trans activists.

The Istanbul Convention, which is formally the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, was signed in Istanbul in 2011. Turkey was the first state to ratify the convention, in 2012, followed by thirty-three other countries. The treaty advocates for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of gender violence. It approaches gender violence not as an individual issue but rather as a political one, as a systemic problem permeating every sphere of life. Signatory states of the Istanbul Convention are legally bound to punish perpetrators, as well as to prevent violence and protect victims. The convention also stresses the protection of victims from violence based on their sexual orientation and gender identification, deploying the concepts of "gender as a social construct" and "sexual orientation." It is this specific emphasis that the Turkish government and its allies exploited to organize a smear campaign against the treaty, demonizing it for its inclusion of queer and trans people. Opponents of the convention argued that the treaty encouraged people to "become LGBTI+" and encouraged women to divorce, both of which were politically promulgated as contradicting the so-called Turkish family structure and its values. For instance, the state Directorate

of Communications officially stated, "The Istanbul Convention, originally intended to promote women's rights, was hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality—which is incompatible with Türkiye's social and family values."[1] Several state officers, including the minister of the interior, Süleyman Soylu, started labeling LGBTI+ people as "perverts" and "threats to our children" through their official social media accounts and public speeches. And this anti-LGBTI+ position was not unique to Turkey. The growing right-wing authoritarianisms across the globe in countries such as the United States, Brazil, and India effectively used anti-LGBTI+ agendas to consolidate their power and international alliances with each other. In the meantime, the Middle Eastern countries of Egypt, Lebanon, and Qatar gradually invested in the growth of a more systemized antiqueer stance that led to a series of bans and crackdowns on queer activities, places, and signage. A lethal consequence of this panic was the suicide of a prominent Egyptian communist and queer activist, Sarah Hijazi, who was arrested and tortured by the Egyptian government for raising a rainbow flag at the 2017 Cairo concert of the Lebanese rock band Mashrou' Leila, whose lead singer was openly queer. Later, Sarah Hijazi was granted asylum in Canada, where she took her own life. Her death shook not only the broader queer Arab world with great sorrow and grief but also queer people in Turkey, leading to her mourning on several online platforms.

This systemic growth in anti-LGBTI+ government politics in the Middle East was accompanied by the rise of right-wing governments in eastern Europe and northern Asia, specifically those of Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Russia. Within this context of the transcontinental coalescence of an anti-LGBTI+ policies and sentiments, Turkey increased its violent pressure on queer and trans lives and denounced the Istanbul Convention in 2021. In response to Turkey's withdrawal, senior government members announced that they would tackle domestic violence through judicial reform. They would write an Ankara Convention that would claim its power from "Turkish traditions and customs."

In response to the withdrawal, feminist, queer, and trans movements organized around the slogan "The Istanbul Convention saves lives." They took to the streets and social media to insist that women's lives and gender violence matter. The withdrawal meant the weakening of legal measures to prevent violence and femicides, thus encouraging perpetrators. At the time of the withdrawal, femicides and hate crimes in Turkey were in fact on the rise. In the context of the COVID-19 restrictive measures in Turkey, the risk

of domestic violence against women, queers, trans people, and children increased. There was indeed a growing need for more, and not fewer, tools to prevent and eradicate gender violence in all its forms. However, state officials have ignored this need and have instead endorsed public circulation of hatred for women, queers, and trans people on social media and beyond.

The student protests at Boğaziçi University, my alma mater, constituted the second important political event that contributed to an anti-LGBTI+ environment in Turkey. Boğaziçi is a prominent public institution recognized for its liberal democratic campus life. It has historically been an institutional home for critical and creative thinking and innovative research in Turkey and abroad. It is one of the rare remaining public spaces for encounters among students who come from all walks of life regardless of class, ethnic, religious, sexual, and gender differences. Especially for first-generation university graduates like me, who moved to Istanbul from more conservative urban and rural environments in Turkey, Boğaziçi was a radically transformative and life-changing place.

Boğaziçi's democratic campus culture and critical education have long been targeted by the Adalet ve Kalkıma Partisi (AKP; Justice and Development Party) government and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's presidency. Until the coup attempt in 2016, university rectors, who occupy roles similar to university presidents in the United States, used to be democratically elected by faculty members, and then the president would be legally bound by the election results when deciding on the appointment. After the coup attempt, statutory decrees changed this procedure. The electoral process has been removed, and today rectors are directly appointed by the Turkish president. Furthermore, the Boğaziçi rector had always been someone from that university community. But as of 2020, rectors and deans from outside Boğaziçi have been imposed on the university by the Turkish president and, in the case of deans, by the rector who is also appointed by the Turkish president. These top-down decisions have disrupted the democratic culture on campus and have galvanized both faculty members and students, who have been protesting for almost two years. On the first day of the protest, a queer woman student climbed up on the main gate and waved a rainbow flag against a sea of police officers blocking the entrance to the campus. In response, the university was placed under siege by the state's security forces. Student protests were harshly repressed by police violence and threats of torture while in custody. Kurdish queer and trans students were particularly targeted for arrests and physical attacks. Protesters were

detained for simply carrying or waving a rainbow flag. The rainbow flag gained a semicriminal status during these protests.

Even though neither being queer nor being trans is illegal in Turkey, the state has turned to and mobilized extralegal instruments to demonize LGBTI+ activists and certain feminist groups and to separate their political struggles from each other as well as from other oppositional groups. The state security and legal forces have intensified their capacities to criminalize LGBTI+ people, single them out as the criminal or "terrorist" type, and hence divide the coalitions of dissidents. The rainbow flag became a defacto semi-illegal flag during these protests. Currently, the police search for rainbow flags in protesters' backpacks and purses at every entry point to a political demonstration. Protesters have been detained for simply carrying or waving a rainbow flag. At student hearings, judges started asking with impunity whether the defendant was a LGBTI+ person. During the Istanbul Pride March of June 2022, 373 protesters were detained. While in police custody, the protestors were handcuffed behind their backs and forced to stay in detention vehicles for several hours in that position—many considered this an experience of torture. The police also attacked lawyers when they showed up to defend those demonstrators being held in custody. Five lawyers worked into the early morning to legally support 373 people, making sure to be present at their hearings on a voluntary basis. The lawyers themselves were abandoned by the Istanbul bar in spite of their calls for more legal support from fellow lawyers.

This state-backed institutional warfare was further augmented with the countrywide coordination of several civil society groups under the banner of "the Great Family Gathering" in 2022. On September 18, as many as 150 nongovernmental organizations coordinated a march in Fatih, a central conservative neighborhood in Istanbul, to stand against, as they noted, "the increasing LGBTI+ propaganda and imposition in Turkey." Fundamentalist religious groups stood side by side with ultrasecularist and nationalist ones, collectively calling on the state to ban all LGBTI+ groups and activities, including queer and trans content on Netflix and other digital platforms; to penalize people who publicly advocated for LGBTI+ issues; and to force LGBTI+ people from Turkey to migrate abroad. The state, through its broadcasting regulator, the Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu (the Radio and Television Supreme Council), officially approved the rally's call for screening on popular TV channels. The petition campaign, "Protect your family and generation from perversity," received thousands of signa-

tures. Other cities followed Istanbul in orchestrating their own marches and petition campaigns. These rallies gradually defined LGBTI+ people as a national security problem and sought the categorization of LGBTI+ organizations as "terrorist organizations," thus demanding that the state take precautions to protect Turkish social and family values. The labels "terrorist" and "terrorism," as a figure and a site, respectively, have continued to expand at an unprecedented pace to include feminists, queers, and trans people in addition to the usual suspects, such as Kurds, Academics for Peace, left-wing organizers, and supporters of Fethullah Gülen, the latter of whom indeed began as strong allies of the AKP government and the invisible actors of the state.

To circle back to the opening dilemma of this preface, writing an ethnographic account of the everyday conditions of trans lives in this sociopolitical context is even more challenging if one is a migrant scholar in the United States writing about home, Turkey. It is more difficult to navigate the temporal and spatial boundaries of ethnography when one's research field is not a site that one enters and exits but rather part of one's individual, social, and political makeup, that is, one's home and life. When and how research ends, or whether it ever ends, becomes a personal reckoning if one is also invested in the socially and politically transformative capacities of critical knowledge production and its sustenance over long periods of time. If one is in a continuous cycle of being in and out of the time-space of home, then how does one freeze the time-space of home into research, into a book?

At the time of this book's publication, multiple variations of "LGBTI+" are constantly and frequently vocalized as a target of state discourse on TV channels and are a key concern in the state's political agenda. As much as it is horrifying and concerning, this ascending obsession with LGBTI+ at both the state and societal levels also shows how feminist, queer, and trans movements in Turkey have become key actors in state politics, powerfully shaping the political environment and discourse. The bridges and alliances among feminist, queer, and trans movements have only grown more solid and vital. Since my own participation in these struggles, a new feminist, queer, and trans generation has grown, fearlessly pushing back on increasing authoritarianism, while also gradually assuming and becoming central node of political agency in the country. The pages that follow offer you earlier chapters of this ongoing, beautiful story, a story that has multiple futures.