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Shady Ancestors: Queering digital diaspora research

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Abstract: Over the last couple of decades, queer theory has stimulated researchers in different disciplines to fundamentally question central concepts around identity, body, gender, sexuality, and belonging. Scholarship on diasporic media, however, has been slow to engage with queer theory's contributions; much research still works with definitions of diaspora based upon simple notions such as 'ethnic belonging' and fails to interrogate the hetero- and cisnormativities that structure phenomena such as mediascapes, border regimes, and migration discourses. After discussing some of the theoretical and methodological interventions that queer theory can bring to digital diaspora research, this article presents a case study to exemplify how queer theoretical discussions can be implemented in research. *Madi Ancestors* was initially planned as a festival in a theater building in Berlin to remember and celebrate Turkey's queer idols, but was then forced by the COVID-19 pandemic to migrate from a physical space to a digital platform. My explorative analysis of this process demonstrates how media practices bring forth a sense of queer diasporic belonging both locally and transnationally. Drawing on rich data gathered through digital ethnography, intimate insider research, interviews, and ethno-mimesis, I show how queer theoretical examination of digital diaspora can detail new forms of belonging, intergenerational kinship, and the fragmentation of diasporic spaces through digital media.

Keywords: queer, migration, diaspora, digital diaspora, Turkey

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Introduction

The triangular conjunction of *queer*¹, *digital media*, and *diaspora* productively destabilizes each term's grounds. As Gayatri Gopinath (2005) has argued, by foregrounding questions of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization, *diaspora* inevitably exposes queer theory's white-centric perspectives and its roots in the Global North. Queer theory, in turn, problematizes concepts of belonging that in diaspora studies are often all too simply defined along the lines of ethnicity and nation. Furthermore, digital media technologies have shown that certain approaches to understanding diasporic identifications – concepts like “turning back to home” or “leaving home behind” – are based upon a linear conceptualization of migration from an origin to a destination; a notion that is inadequate to describe an increasingly digitalized world in which diasporic subjects are able to transcend national borders as they forge and maintain feelings of belonging and engage in interactions (Bayramoğlu & Lünenborg, 2018). Queer theory, completing the triangle, critically engages with the ambiguities of digital media, which may be seen to promise opportunities for new forms of ephemerality (Haber, 2019), intimacy, and belonging (Dasgupta, 2017; Payne, 2014; Shield, 2019), yet also reproduce norms around sexuality, gender, and the body, as well as violently marking certain people as sexually and/or racially other, causing social exclusions and fragmenting publics. Thinking these three approaches together can thus open up new ways for media and communication scholarship to question the preconceptions, normativities, and blind spots within research.

To explicate my theoretical and methodological considerations, I will work through my case study of a queer diasporic project in Berlin. *Madi Ancestors* (hereafter referred to as *MA*) was initially planned as a festival to remember and celebrate key figures as Turkish queer idols. When the COVID-19 pandemic prevented a live event being held in a theater building in Berlin in 2020, the organizers decided to migrate their project from a physical space to a digital platform. This turn of events transformed the entire concept, enabling not only Berlin's Turkish diaspora to ‘attend’ and participate, but also people in Turkey. As I will show, the digital platform not only helped to build up a transnational solidarity network to mitigate some of the negative impacts of the pandemic upon queer subculture in Berlin and Turkey, but also to create digital visibility and document queer diasporic histories at a time characterized by harsh border regimes, state homophobia, and transphobia. Drawing on several recent methodological discussions inspired by queer methods, I will exemplify how *digital ethnography*, *intimate insider research*, and *ethno-mimesis* proved fruitful methods for my study of how the

¹ Neither queer theory nor “queerness” are terms understood in a universal way. While some scholars use *queer* simply as an umbrella term for LGBTI+ identities, others emphasize queer theory's critique of the very concept of identities, and resulting identity politics, including LGBTI+ identities. In this paper, while I purposefully avoid setting a fixed definition on queer theory or queerness, I draw upon them as critical, theoretical, activist, and mediated ways of engaging with and interrogating hetero- and cisnormativities as well as their intersections with equally questionable concepts of belonging, kinship, nation and identity.

festival was transformed from the offline to the digital. Drawing on the ethnographic material gathered during my research, I argue that queer interventions into diasporic media research can critically destabilize oversimplified concepts of belonging and supposed binaries between diaspora and country of origin, and shed light upon the fragmented nature of the diasporic counterpublics that digital media enable.

A triangular approach: queer theory, digital media, diaspora

While research on diaspora has often explored notions of belonging to communities defined in terms of ethnic, religious, and national affiliations, queer diaspora studies have turned towards an examination of the sense of shared (un-)belongings and transnational connectivity that can be formed around desire, sexuality, and non-normative gender identifications (Fortier, 2002). This shift has provided an important intervention into “naturalist assumptions about the heterosexist foundations of both the nation and ideas of home” (p. 194). Most such studies have explored queer diaspora through the lens of intersectionality, highlighting multiple discriminations and belongings (El Tayeb, 2011; Gopinath, 2005; Manalansan, 2006). The few studies that have focused on Turkey’s queer diaspora have tended to do so in relation to concepts such as citizenship and identification within a specific urban/national context (Petzen, 2004; Yörükoğlu, 2020), without taking account of cross-border interconnectedness in an increasingly digitalized world.

In an increasingly globalized world, as Arjun Appadurai (1996) has shown, mediascapes facilitate flows of ideas, images, and information, which not only provide material for “imagining communities” (Anderson, 1983) but also enable such communities to be created and sustained across geopolitical borders. As digital media infrastructures expand across the globe, the meaning of proximity is being redefined as digital media enable diaspora to stay ‘in touch’ with homelands, creating new forms of intimacy, affectivity, and connection (Alineyad & Ponzanesi, 2020), as well as developing new transnational strategies to influence the culture, policies, and discourses of countries of origin and settlement (Alonso & Oirzabal, 2010). And yet the feeling that digital media can transcend geography could just as well trigger uneasiness for people who would rather prefer to distance themselves from family, nation, and/or diaspora (Dhoest, 2019). While existing studies on media and Turkey’s diaspora (Bek & Prieto-Blanco, 2020; Keles, 2015; Kosnick, 2007) have expanded our understanding of how Turkey’s diasporic belonging entangles with everyday media practices, they did not engage with the implications of heteronormativity for the diaspora, the nation, and border regimes. Ahmet Atay’s (2015) research is an exception here, providing an important contribution by investigating how the internet is becoming an essential site for Turkey’s queer diaspora.

To grasp the meanings and roles of digital media in queer lifeworlds, it is necessary to take a multi-sited approach that transcends national borders as well as boundaries between different kinds of spaces such as digital–physical or mainstream–subcultural – whereby these should be seen as continuums, not mutually exclusive categories. As Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal (2010) argue, transnational media have been key to the emergence of borderless audiences that cannot be defined in terms of race, ethnicity, or language – categories that borders were once seen to demarcate (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 8). Nonetheless, we should be wary of romanticizing digital media’s capacities to transcend border regimes: as an exciting body of recent research on the digital surveillance of borders (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019) makes clear, digital technologies produce their own new borders in an unevenly connected world. Queer migrants and diaspora are by no means unaffected by this. For instance, Rikke Andreassen (2021) has revealed that the social media posts of queer refugees in Denmark are taken into account when their asylum cases are decided upon. An individual’s social media presence can thus have life-changing if not life-threatening consequences. Examples like this underscore the importance of queer theory’s dedication to grappling with ambiguities rather than seeking to define neat categories to simplify the messy world – a further compelling argument for bringing queer perspectives to critical digital diaspora studies.

Queering methods in digital diaspora

Queer theory has already inspired some methodological innovations that have pushed disciplinary boundaries and shifted epistemologies. Media studies scholars working in humanities contexts have been particularly open to the influence of queer theoretical discussions on methodologies, whereas those working in social sciences-oriented communication studies, especially those who place a premium on empirical data, have tended to be less open to queer methods. Attempting to queer methods in the social sciences can often be challenging, because queer methods intrinsically imply a powerful critique of established, and often taken for granted, processes of categorizing empirical data. A substantial part of data analysis in social scientific research is based on identifying and ‘coding’ patterns within data in order to formulate generalizations and categorizations. Rejecting this, scholars such as Manalansan (2018b), who experiment with queer methods, argue that research needs to embrace the messiness of everyday experiences. This proposal offers inspiration for the exploration of everyday media practices as well, suggesting that research should not try to order data into ‘neat’ categories but should try to grasp the fleeting moments of queerness embedded within everyday interactions with media. According to Browne and Nash (2016), queer methodologies can be productively implemented in research that aims to question orthodoxies and probe theoretical and methodological boundaries, and to promote understandings that simultaneously constitute and destabilize research considerations (Browne & Nash 2016, p. 12). Another reason why queer

methodologies may be met with suspicion is their critical stance towards single-method approaches, which again implicitly questions methodological orthodoxies. For scholars such as Ken Plummer, deploying queer methods intrinsically means refusing to be loyal to any single conventional method (Plummer 2005, p. 366). Using a combination of different methods and data types and rejecting disciplinary orthodoxies, what Jack Halberstam refers to as a “scavenger methodology”, offers ways to approach aspects of queerness that conventional methods would risk erasing or making invisible, since they are inevitably difficult to identify, define, and categorize (Halberstam 1998, p. 13).

As I observed the transformation of *MA* from an offline festival to a digital platform, I implemented different methods to help me understand how media practices brought forth a sense of queer diasporic belonging both locally and transnationally. I was particularly inspired by Nick Couldry’s (2004) media practice theory, which is a non-media-centric approach that aims to shed light on how everyday life and practices become deeply entangled with media. This led me to choose not to focus on media content and/or media institutions, but on the transnationalization of queer diasporic practices through digital media. Three methods that proved particularly useful in my study of *MA* could also be of relevance to others interested in queering (diasporic) media research:

Digital ethnography: Unlike media-centric ethnographic research such as cyber ethnography or netnography, digital ethnography follows a non-digital-centric approach (Pink et al. 2016, p. 10). Rather than simply undertaking participant observation within digital settings, doing digital ethnography means studying digital media practices and technologies as they are embedded in people’s everyday lives. *MA* was not initially created as a platform for digital interaction and communication among the broader queer diaspora, so limiting my observations to online practices would not have enabled me to gain insights into the offline practices that accompanied them. Doing a digital ethnography allowed me to explore how and why artists and activists in Berlin and Istanbul came together to create the platform. During this process, I documented my participant observation in field notes.

Intimate insider research: Feminist scholarship on ethnographic research has inspired several methodological innovations that reject positivistic researcher/researched or subject/object binaries (Abu-Lughod, 1990, pp. 13-14). While feminist scholars have shown that it is possible to experience subjective attachment and express empathy with research participants, and that building friendships with the people encountered during the fieldwork does not render data ‘unscientific’, some queer researchers have found that recruiting informants among existing friendships can bring unique insights. Inspired by this exciting body of work, this article is based on my own ‘intimate insider research’ (Taylor, 2011), as some of the people involved in *MA* were my own close friends. Instead of

observing the digital culture from a distance, intimate insider research allowed me to participate from within my own network of friendships.

Ethno-mimesis: Another compelling methodological innovation that not only blurs methodological boundaries, but also makes a transdisciplinary approach within a single research project possible, was first proposed by Maggie O'Neil (2009). O'Neil coined the term 'ethno-mimesis' for artistic approaches to making sensitive ethnographic data visible or communicable. She invited informants and participants to create images and write texts and/or poems about their own migration stories. Instead of eliciting visual material, I chose to work with audio. The interviews I conducted as part of *MA* have become a podcast series that was uploaded to the website itself and to Spotify.

Madi Ancestors

When Seyfi Dursunoğlu died in summer 2020, my close friend Leman came to my apartment in Berlin to share their sadness with me. Dursunoğlu's death touched us deeply, not least because Huysuz Virjin, Dursunoğlu's drag queen persona on prime time Turkish TV in the 1990s, had played a major role in queering Turkey's media, and had also helped us both on our own journeys to find ourselves. As we reminisced and discussed Huysuz Virjin's significance for queer visibility in Turkey's popular culture, Leman came up with an idea: to collaborate with queer migrant artists and activists in Berlin to commemorate Huysuz Virjin. Leman proposed organizing a festival to remember the importance of Turkey's queer idols for Turkey and for Turkey's queer diaspora in Berlin. The festival would open up a space, not only for remembering, but also for discussing the legacy for queer diasporic history of Huysuz Virjin and further queer idols such as Zeki Müren and Bülent Ersoy. These three well-known and much celebrated singers and performers occupy a prominent place in Turkish popular culture. Despite them all having contributed significantly to the queering of Turkey's mainstream public sphere (Altınay, 2008; Ertür & Lebow, 2014; Selen, 2012), none of them have ever actively associated themselves with the LGBTI+ struggle in Turkey, and not all of them even came out as queer.

Soon after that first discussion, Leman contacted several queer migrant/diasporic artists and activists to tell them about the idea. The festival would include film screenings, panel discussions, and concerts to inspire discussions about the legacy of Dursunoğlu, Ersoy and Müren. Unfortunately, the festival had to be canceled when Germany's second COVID-19 lockdown was imposed in November 2020. Unwilling to completely abandon the initiative, the activists and artists decided to migrate the festival from a physical space to a digital platform. A website dedicated to the project would become the site for a digital festival: the films that were to have been screened in the theater would be made available for streaming from the website. The planned panel discussions became a podcast series, a decision

influenced by the popularity podcasts had gained during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. The musicians who would have performed live were invited to make a collage of songs written and/or sung by Müren, Ersoy, and Dursunoğlu, which were later uploaded to YouTube and Spotify.

Rethinking diasporic belonging

When the organizers decided to move their project from a physical space to a digital platform, they changed the title as well: “Berlin remembers Turkey’s queer idols” became “Our Madi Ancestors.” The title *Madi Ancestors* is an oxymoron whereby each part serves to destabilize the other’s grounds. The word *madi* comes from *lubunca*, a language created primarily by trans women in Turkey to communicate with one another in public spaces without eavesdroppers’ understanding (Kontovas, 2012). In *lubunca*, *madi* marks something as shady, evil, bad, or “throwing shade”. So, although the platform was designed to remember the importance of the queer idols as “ancestors” of queer culture it simultaneously cited them as bad examples for queer heritage. *MA* saw them as bad examples because they were “saying bad things and doing wrong things”, as Leman explained in one of the podcasts. Since they never openly supported queer communities in Turkey, but instead expressed their support for nationalism, militarism, and president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who called LGBTI+ people “cursed perverts” (*T24*, 2020), they were to be seen as public figures with a troubled political legacy. Unlike the kind of heroic ancestors that feature in the founding myths of nations, religions, or ethnic groups, *madi* ancestors were flawed; celebrating them despite their failings demonstrated that imagining communities across generations and geographies does not always have to be rooted in positive feelings. Bad examples of the past, negative feelings (Caserio, 2006; Muñoz, 2006), cruelty, incorrectness, failure (Halberstam, 2011), and fragility (Bayramoğlu & Castro Varela, 2021) can also be embraced to produce new narratives of belonging by choice. The *madi* ancestors’ presence in the public sphere, as figures whose appearance or performance clearly did not fit with cis- and heteronormative conventions – although that was never spoken about – gave strength to people struggling to deal with a sense of alienation in a normative lifeworld at a time when there simply was no LGBTI+ movement in Turkey. This was the motivation to claim these figures as ancestors, despite their *madi*-ness, as Leman explained in the podcast:

These people existed, and although there seems to have been a secret agreement and promise not to talk about their queerness in public discourse, on the streets, or in everyday talk; they still made LGBTI+ existence conceivable. Before the LGBTI+ movement came into being, or while it was still taking its first baby steps, there was a saying: “I thought it was just me and Zeki Müren”, “I thought it was just me and Bülent Ersoy”. I think these sentences are really important. When there was no community at all, they [Müren and Ersoy] broke the feeling of loneliness. (*Madi Ancestors*, 2021b)

Those who participated in the project all emphasized the importance of these figures not only for Turkey, but also for Berlin’s queer diaspora, in creating a feeling

of belonging to a community that is not built around ethnic affiliations, biological kinship, or similar political ideologies. Gizem, a musician who produced music for the digital platform based on the songs of Zeki Müren, Bülent Ersoy and Huysuz Virjin, observed that a disturbing sense of lacking knowledge about one's own heritage is often experienced in the queer diaspora:

There has been migration [from Turkey to Germany] since the 1960s, and music migrated with the people as well. [...] I am a musician who's been living in Berlin for the past seven years, but I have come to realize that I don't know on whose heritage I am creating new work in Berlin. (Madi Ancestors, 2021b)

Some diaspora studies of how a sense of belonging can be evoked through music have focused on music that laments lost homelands or expresses nostalgia for places left behind. Gizem, however, sees music as a way of writing a new historical continuity between different queer diasporic generations, a continuity that does not (yet) exist in public consciousness, and, one might argue, is kept invisible, but can be discovered. Gopinath has observed that diaspora that is imagined through music builds on either intergenerational interconnectivity between heteronormative immigrant men or through revolutionary politics (Gopinath, 2005, p. 58). Within this framework, imagining diasporic belonging through music is often understood in terms of heteronormative and masculine continuity or notions of belonging through political comradeship. Queer diasporic kinship through music, however, appears far more “ephemeral”, to use a term chosen by José Esteban Muñoz in his writings about diasporic music hidden in undocumented, unarchived fleeting moments. While the significance of music as a shared reference point for ethnic diasporas has been emphasized, its role for queer diasporas has rarely been documented or archived, or even acknowledged. Heard briefly, unrecorded sound waves leave no trace in audio histories. Queer diasporic connection through music is “lost in space or lost in relation to the space of heteronormativity” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 72).

The participants in the podcast series also told personal stories about how they had discovered and now remembered Hatay Engin. Hatay Engin was a singer who lived in Berlin and used to perform in diasporic places, such as *gazinos*, in the 1980s. Like Zeki Müren, he performed wearing outfits that could be read as ‘feminine’, ‘flamboyant’, or even drag. And like the other madi ancestors he never spoke about his sexuality or non/normative gender in public. Gülây, who took part in the podcast series, remembered Hatay Engin with ambivalent feelings. She recounted how Hatay Engin had been part of her childhood when her mother and grandmother, first generation immigrants from Turkey, used to go on steamboat trips starting from Kreuzberg in Berlin. The trips were women-only events, long and boring for Gülây, with Hatay Engin singing classical Turkish music on board. Years later, when Hatay Engin began singing in public again – in Südblock, a queer bar with diasporic connections in Kreuzberg – the now grown-up Gülây experienced rather disconcerting flashbacks:

And later, however, when Hatay Engin performed in Südblock, I was reminded of my childhood, of course – and the people from my childhood, the friends of my mother also came for the event. Of course, I now saw him completely different than I had in my childhood. What disturbed me, or what made me think, was, seeing to what extent people internalize transphobia and other forms of hostility such as racism in order to get by in society at all. He was saying homophobic things on stage! I realized then, OK, so this is a person who denies himself completely to get applause and recognition from the audience. (Madi Ancestors, 2021a)

Rather than celebrating the heroism of past queer figures' rejection of normativities, as certain queer theorists (e.g., Warner, 2000) tend to do, the podcast series of *MA* documented the disturbingly ambivalent facets of early queer (diasporic) public figures. Gülây and other participants pointed out that figures like Hatay Engin had performed homo- and transphobia on stage in order to navigate through their hostile environments. This resonates with Manalansan's (2018a) queer of color critique. Manalansan argues that life as a queer of color is so awash with normativities that queers may be forced to comply in certain moments in order to simply survive in societies that are structured not only by heteronormativity but also by racism (Manalansan, 2018a, p. 1288). In a similar way, the testimonies in the podcasts as well the entire digital platform *MA* embraced the early queer figures despite their flaws and harmful acts, because they recognized those figures' need for queer (of color) survival strategies within heteronormative and/or racist societies.

While the podcasts documented instances of such ambivalent and ephemeral queer moments in local diasporic spaces, the entire digital platform became a way of creating transnational connectivity between Berlin and Turkey. This was not always a harmonious process – on the contrary, the translocal connection opened up new contestations around concepts of belonging. The website exemplified queer diasporic interconnectivity between Turkey and Germany not just through its participants' transnational biographies, but also because stimulating such interconnectivity was the essential aim that structured the whole project. The Berlin-based organizers collaborated with graphic designers, activists, and writers living in Istanbul. This was seen as a way to demonstrate that border regimes can be transcended, while making a genuine economic contribution that could help those suffering from the impact of the pandemic as well under the increasing authoritarianism in Turkey. All around the world, queer spaces such as night clubs were struggling economically from the long lockdowns, but Turkey's queer spaces were also impacted by measures to repress queer public presence imposed by the increasingly authoritarian regime in Turkey (Bayramoğlu, 2021; Özbay & Öktem, 2021; Yalçınoğlu, 2020).

Much scholarship on queer migration and diaspora has tended to portray migrants' biographies along the linear and teleological lines of a story 'from repression to liberation', implying that queer migrants are relieved to close the chapter of their former homeland once they arrive at a new destination. But categories of belonging are not simply adopted or abandoned when a person crosses national bor-

ders. And with the affordances of digital media, most migrants and diasporic subjects are likely to maintain transnational relationships in various forms. This has been shown in research on queer refugees and digital media practices (Bayramoğlu & Lünenborg, 2018), which found that refugees use digital media to engage in activism not only in the country of settlement, but also to raise their voices against the inequalities in their former home even after arriving in the country of settlement. The digital interconnectivity between *here* and *there* renders an oppositional binary between diaspora and nation untenable, and with it, the idea that diaspora could be seen as a mere copy of the nation (Gopinath, 2005, p. 13). As a case study, *MA* demonstrated the messiness of diasporic media practices that destabilize categorizations and presumptions about migration, diaspora, belonging, and nation: while the project allowed queer activists and artists dispersed across different territories to collaborate and even profit economically from the website, it also led to contestation over terminologies and definitions. Although most of those involved seemed to share a sense of common purpose in their desire to unveil and document intergenerational continuity across music and subcultural spaces, and most identified in some way with non-normative sexualities and/or gender identities, affiliations in terms of ethnicity, language, or migration experience/status proved far more “difficult” to articulate as a group. The project team had secured funding for “a Turkish queer migrant project.” However, this description did not reflect the diversity of personal trajectories of the people who worked on it. For instance, during one meeting soon after the funding had been obtained, one of the participants, Gülây, objected to calling the organizing team “Turkish queer migrants”. Having been born and grown up in Berlin, Gülây did not see herself either as a migrant or as Turkish. So neither label were applicable in her case. As the group sought an alternative, even “diaspora” proved inappropriate as a defining concept for the whole project, because some of the participants based in Turkey were neither migrant nor diasporic subjects. Almost ironically, the digital interconnectivity that enabled the creation of a translocal space to share personal narratives, music, and videos between Turkey and Germany ultimately made it all the more clear to the participants that overcoming geographical borders did not mean overcoming differences of experience or the desire to articulate those differences.

Diasporic media and normativities

The idea that people can feel a powerful sense of belonging to communities defined not by heritage or geography but along lines of desire, sexuality, body politics, and/or gender identities not only *queers* the assumptions of diaspora scholars who have defined communities solely in terms of national or ethnic identities, it also questions an assumed opposition between diasporic media and mainstream media. Much scholarship on diasporic media starts out by identifying diasporic media content and media practices as *other*, and then analyzes them as counterpublic practices intended to oppose discriminatory representations of ethnic minorities in mainstream media (Horz, 2018; Ogunyemi, 2015). Within such a framework, diasporic media are seen as empowering tools employed by the diasporic minority to

counter the discourses and policies of the country of settlement. This view rests upon a supposed irreconcilability between the discourses of mainstream media and diasporic media, based upon the ethnicity of those producing the content. Bringing a queer perspective that challenges presumptions and binaries to a study of diasporic media can allow a more complicated and messy picture to emerge.

Let me illustrate this by drawing on an example from *MA*. The artists and activists involved in the project stated that their objective was to counter not just the discriminatory discourse of German mainstream media representations and public debates on migration and/or the Turkish ethnic minority, but also the multi-faceted normativities that pervade and shape Turkish media, Berlin's diasporic spaces, and transnational communities. Putting these aims into practice, participants used the podcast series to discuss issues ranging from racism in Germany to authoritarianism in Turkey to homo- and transphobia within the broader diaspora.

I would say, yes, Kreuzberg is one of the coolest districts ever in Berlin, and parts of Neukölln are also part of it. Still, it can change from street to street. I can't say that there is no homophobia or transphobia in Kreuzberg. The handling of it is just not good. It is instrumentalized to say, 'look how bad the migrants in Neukölln and Kreuzberg are.' And I was once spat at on the street with my girlfriend. We were not even walking hand in hand. But they saw us as a lesbian couple and so we experienced hostility [...] There are such topics and there needs to be safe spaces to discuss such topics. (Madi Ancestors, 2021a)

Such critical engagements with various forms of injuries, violence, or other experiences made in diasporic and mainstream spaces are rarely found in the realm of mainstream and/or diasporic media. Gülây used the podcast series as a platform to raise critical debate, not only tackling the mainstream but also diasporic and queer diasporic places. She emphasized that to avoid harming one's own community (*instrumentalization* of such stories), such a multi-faceted critique of different forms of discrimination within the diaspora should only ever be articulated among those who share similar experiences within designated *safe spaces*. Although the podcast was ultimately made available to anyone who downloads it, and hence cannot be seen as 'safe', the interview was conducted as a private dialogue in a closed space between two people who trusted each other; so that Gülây felt safe to articulate her critical standpoint. The conversation was recorded in an NGO, which operates as a safer space for migrant and refugee women, trans and non-binary people. In such spaces that are used by people who share similar experiences, according to Gülây, violence within the diasporic community can be addressed and solutions can be sought without the fear that the wider public and/or mainstream media could instrumentalize the issues raised to substantiate negative community portrayals. Gülây knew the purpose of the interview and knew she would subsequently listen to the edited podcast, which would only be made audible on the digital platform with her consent. Nonetheless, the podcast blurred the boundaries that divide different spaces, publics, and identities. Now that anyone with an internet connection (and able to understand German) can listen to Gülây, her own voice that was recorded within the walls of a safer space has been disembodied; it can now move between

spaces, devices, publics, and lifeworlds, blurring the categories of *here* and *there*, mainstream and subculture.

Diasporic fragmentation and digital diaspora

The last observation that I would like to present relates to social exclusions or the so-called “digital divide” that has been widely discussed within media and communication scholarship on diaspora. Even before the smartphone era, Michel S. Laguerre (2010) began speculating on the kinds of social exclusion that digital connectivity might produce for diasporic subjects. Laguerre identified several problematic aspects. Most of these – since outdated – aspects relate to the socio-economic effects of racial inequalities, and many other media and communication scholars have retained this focus on the economic bases of digital divides (Laguerre, 2010, pp. 53–54). My case study of *MA*, however, shows that a purely economic perspective or an analysis that is limited to racialized differences is insufficient to explain how digital media can create exclusion and fragmentation among or within diaspora. As Jan van Dijk (2020) has pointed out, although access to the internet has become more widespread, particularly since the proliferation of smartphones, there are still intergenerational differences and differences between social classes concerning how people use digital media (Dijk, 2020, p. 141). Dijk notes a “usage gap” that reflects intergenerational and class-related differences between people who use digital media for entertainment, shopping, and interpersonal communication and those who also use digital media for career and education.

I would like to relate this to a further example from *MA*. Migrating the offline festival to a digital platform brought some challenges. One of the initial motives for the live festival had been to open up a space for intergenerational dialogue within the queer diaspora. Guests of different ages with different migration trajectories were invited to take part in panel discussions. The transformation of the festival into a digital format prevented such face-to-face “intergenerational dialogue” from taking place. The alternative that was developed in response to the pandemic situation, the podcast series, proved alienating for the oldest participant, however, who said he felt uncomfortable with the “nature” of being on a digital platform. Unlike most conclusions that are drawn by scholars who address digital divides within diaspora, this participant was not hindered by economics, nor did he lack the knowledge required to use digital technology. During a phone call, the participant said that he simply was not part of the “digital age”. While he had been keen to join a public discussion on stage and to talk spontaneously about the history of Berlin’s queer diaspora, the idea of being interviewed as part of a podcast series, which would be recorded, edited, and therefore “less spontaneous” (or “less ephemeral”) made him feel nervous and uncomfortable. In the end he decided to completely withdraw from the project.

Furthermore, while the activists and artists involved in the project liked the idea of having a digital platform, because this would allow them to be truly “transnational” and reach people in Turkey as well as those in Berlin, the adaptations required to move from offline to online caused fragmentation and even exclusions within the local diasporic space. In targeting a transnational and global audience, the project’s organizers feared neglecting “the local”, because the online circulation of information promoting the existence of the digital platform would only reach those already networked digitally. To counter this, the artists and activists placed announcements on various digital platforms as well as posting promotional stickers on lampposts and the walls of buildings of certain neighborhoods in Berlin and Istanbul. This shows how multiple strategies are required in order for diasporic media to build bridges between the local and translocal without risking causing fragmentation of the diaspora within the local context. During the podcast discussions, Gülây expressed her concern that digital spaces are not easily accessible for all, pointing out that “not everyone has a smartphone or laptop”, and even those that do might not be well informed about how and where the queer diaspora comes together digitally. The challenge of how to reach local people in cyberspace was recognized by *MA*’s organizers early on. The stickers were a very ‘old school’ response to the challenge. Moreover, the stickers also served to queer heteronormative public space. Evoking Muñoz’ (2009) poetic writings, the stickers were fragile and ephemeral, often only visible for a couple of hours or days before someone tore at them or covered them with new pastings. Briefly glimpsed, they may or may not have passed their message to a glad viewer before being defaced, displaced, or erased.

Conclusion

In this paper I have illustrated some of the theoretical and methodological potential of doing research at the intersection of queer theory, diaspora, and digital media. As the case study of *MA* demonstrated, digital media practices can be empowering for queer diaspora, but also bring forth challenges: navigating in and across different spaces and media necessitates the renegotiation of ideas about belonging, exclusion, and identities. While digital media can blur boundaries that were previously presumed to hold certain spaces and identifications distinct, such as nation and diaspora, here and there, queerness has the potential to destabilize notions and categories of belonging around ethnicity, language, religion and migration status.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest several new directions for future research on queer diaspora. Myria Georgiou (2012) – without a focus on queer sexualities and/or gender identities – has proposed employing a triangular spatial matrix spanning the local/urban, national, and the transnational, as a strategy for researching the transnationalization of everyday life with and through media across different spatial contexts. Such an undertaking requires multi-sited

research with attention to different spatial realms. Attending to perspectives, practices, and trajectories through which country of origin and diaspora interact and mutually shape one another, always within wider networks and contexts, exposes the inadequacies of both ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002) and of conceptualizing diasporas as self-contained subcultures. Furthermore, the diversity of phenomena and issues implicated in studying queer diaspora and/or with media calls for an interdisciplinary combination of multiple methodologies. To date, scholars researching diasporic media have tended to employ methodologies that focus on just one aspect of media content, such as its production, the text, reception, or media usage (Smets, 2019). We now need more research that brings together different aspects and diverse methods in innovative ways to explore queer diasporic media texts and forms in their entanglement with social life, diasporic and public spaces, and transnational communication. Such an approach can benefit from the insights gained in recent groundbreaking discussions on queer methods, which question disciplinary and methodological boundaries, as well as in discussions on methodological cosmopolitanism in diaspora studies: “a shift [away] from research that reproduces the either/or analytical framework” (Georgiou, 2012, p. 375). Methods inspired by queer theory offer some exciting potential directions but also have their limitations. While it was possible to adapt the interviews conducted for *MA* to create the podcast series, it goes without saying that some interviews, particularly those revealing sensitive information about the participants, could not be made publicly audible. Furthermore, while intimate insider research might be feasible for researchers who position themselves as part of the researched community, being closely involved brings its own challenges and is not always possible or necessarily advantageous. Finally, as my observations of the project *MA* demonstrated, we also need to be careful not to unquestioningly embrace the digital as a solution that can unite diverse groups and overcome differences of experience simply by transcending geographical boundaries. Practices involving media are embedded in everyday lives that are embedded in societies structured by inequalities and exclusions – hence, their research needs to be rooted in those everyday complex entanglements.

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