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International Resource Network (IRN) News–Middle East Participates in the 5th Annual Anti-Homophobia Conference in Turkey

By Naveed Alam

“**N**o disenfranchised minority is free unless all disenfranchised minorities are free.” With this introductory statement **Judith Butler** went on to draw the links between precarity, performativity, and sexual politics as she delivered the keynote lecture during the 5th Annual Anti-Homophobia Conference at Ankara University on May 15, 2010. The two week long (May 1-17, 2010) Anti-Homophobia Conference was organized by KAOS-GL, an Ankara based LGBTQ rights group, with events planned in different cities of Turkey including Istanbul, Izmir, and Diyarbakir. IRN-Middle East cosponsored the Judith Butler lecture in Ankara.

The lecture was nothing short of electrifying. People started to line up outside the Aziz Klulu Hall at Ankara University about half an hour before the event. KAOS GL made sure no was turned away. There was literally no standing room, the audience squeezed into any available space besides the approximately 300 seats. The live video ensured the lecture reached the crowds in the lobby and the adjoining rooms. The impressive turnout not only highlighted the successful outreach by organizers but also the vibrancy of queer scene in Turkey.

As a representative of the co-sponsoring organization I offered brief remarks about IRN-Middle East before the lecture. It was also a great opportunity to promote IRN and solicit support for our IRN-Middle East launch event in Istanbul tentatively planned for September, 2010.

Butler’s theme of precarity was especially relevant in the context of Turkey, a state where the complexities of democ-

racy, secularism, and militarism are continually shaping and reshaping a modus vivendi. Add to this mix of complexities the newly emergent, vital yet precarious queer movement representing a population differentially “exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection.” A police force that harasses and perpetuates violence against transgender population—one of the vanguard challengers of the prevailing gender norms—such police, according to Butler, becomes criminal. These remarks proved prescient when soon after the March against Homophobia on May 17, organized as part of the conference, a major incident of police violence against the transgender population was reported in Ankara.

Queer is a dynamic,
not an identity.

The effect of Butler’s presentation could be measured immediately. The audience gathered outside the hall playing drums and chanting slogans. Once the rainbow flag was unfurled the procession turned into an impromptu march drawing the attention of the general public outside the university. Some honked, some clapped to show support; others emerged out of the shops, restaurants, buildings and stood along the street observing the marchers from a distance. As part of the efforts to organize the IRN Mideast launch

Cary Alan Johnson presents “Gender, Sexuality and Human Rights (Africa)” in CLAGS-IRN Seminar in the City on March 22, 2010.

Photos by Chun-Ping Yen



Cary Alan Johnson



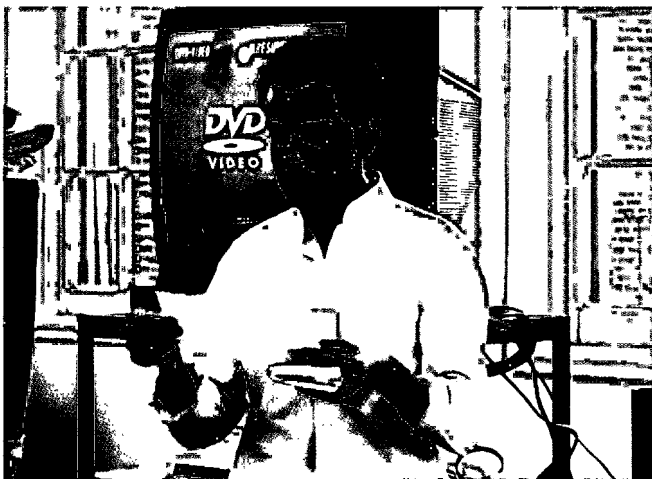
Audience

event I visited Istanbul and met with members of various groups active in queer arts and activism. **Jale Karabekir**, artistic director of the theater group *Boyali Kus* (the Painted Bird; besides being the title of the **Jerzy Kosinsky's** famous novel, painted bird also hints at the practice of children in certain Eastern European countries painting a bird just to watch the fellow birds isolate, hurt, or even kill the painted bird) discussed the possibility supporting the proposed IRN event through street performances based on the Brazilian director **Augusto Baul's** Theater of the Oppressed. After attending the remarkable Kurdish performance of *Nora/Nuri* (based on Ibsen's *Doll's House*) directed by **Karabekir** at Kadikoy Theater in Istanbul I was convinced that the innovative style and minimal staging techniques of *Boyali Kus* Theater can be highly effective to serve the queer birds of a feather.

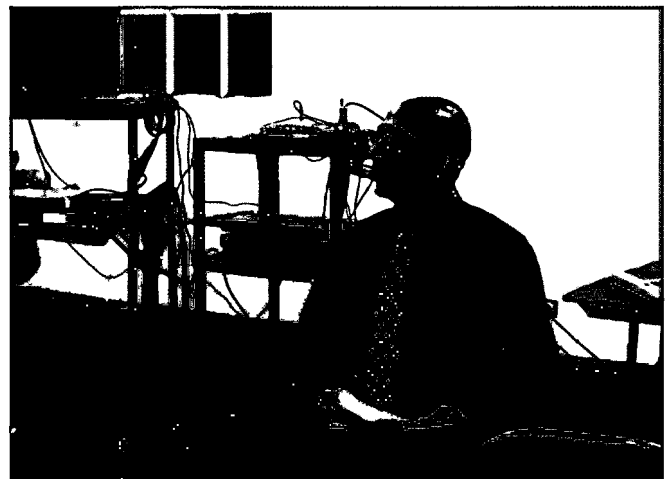
Pinar Ilkcaracan, director of Women for Women's Human Rights-New Ways (WWHR), invited me to her office to discuss collaboration between IRN-Middle East and WWHR's Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR), an institute resulting from the overwhelmingly positive response she received after the publication of the book she edited in 2000, *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies*. Two of the most important insights I walked away after downing cups and cups of Turkish tea in Ilkcaracan's wonderful company were: (a) CSBR's embrace of all non-conforming sexualities to contextualize sexuality in the Muslim societies. We want to address, Ilkcaracan mentioned, the general oppression of all sexualities including LGBT population, youth, single women, single mothers, unmarried couples, and heterosexual women and men since the sexual

oppression in these societies has a common source based on patriarchy, economics, and politics. (b) Ilkcaracan emphasized that she didn't include "culture" in the list of sources of sexual oppression because culture is a combination of current social and economic conditions and subsequently subject to constant change. In the aftermath of 9/11 one has to be especially aware of the danger of cultural essentialization especially on the part of western or western educated scholars studying sexuality in the Middle East. In the light of Ilkcaracan's remarks one of Butler's statements from her presentation in Ankara assumed a special resonance for me personally: Queer is a dynamic, not an identity.

My thanks to **Nevin Oztop** for helping IRN-Middle East be part of a great event organized by KAOS-GL. Thanks to **Begum Basdas** from Lambda Istanbul and **Murat Culku**, director Amnesty International, Turkey, for the warm welcome at their respective offices and willingness to support as well as co-sponsor any future activities by IRN-Mideast in Turkey. Thanks to **Erden Kosova** for providing a brief history of the queer and anarchist movements in Turkey from the unique perspective of an artist, activist, writer, and critic. My special thanks to **Murat Koylu**, Coordinator LGBT Working Group, Amnesty International, for introducing Istanbul and its queer world in a manner no other guide could have. None of the above contacts—I might as well say the whole IRN-Mideast's participation in the Turkish event could not have been possible without the tireless work of **Ertug Altinay**, the brightest feather in the cap of IRN-Mideast. With the help of our friends and supporters IRN-Mideast looks forward to Istanbul as the center of its forthcoming activities in the region.



Dagmawi Woubshet



Cary Alan Johnson