A feminist-phenomenology of women's activism against hydropower plants in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea region

Özge Yaka

To cite this article: Özge Yaka (2017) A feminist-phenomenology of women's activism against hydropower plants in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea region, Gender, Place & Culture, 24:6, 869-889, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2017.1340873

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1340873

Published online: 22 Jun 2017.
ABSTRACT
Taking a feminist-phenomenological perspective of the body, this article provides an empirically grounded analysis of the embodied subjectivity of women in the movement against hydropower plants (HPPs) in the culturally and spatially specific context of the Eastern Black Sea region of Turkey. Informed by a feminist engagement with Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of ‘the body-subject’, ‘the flesh’ and Einfühlung, the article places subjectivity within a relational ontology of sentience and intelligence in which corporeal experiences, senses and affects condition cognitive and agential processes. Bodily senses and affects are thus treated as media of subjectivity. The relationship between water and identity, established through memory, heritage and history, is also produced and/or conserved by the embodied relation between women’s bodies and bodies of water, within the connective ‘flesh’ of the physical world. The case of the Eastern Black Sea demonstrates how political subjectivity of women in the movement against HPPs is conditioned by an intimate embodied relationship with river waters that is sustained by a series of sensory-affective experiences. Their statements emphasize, over and over again, an interconnectedness with the rivers, which makes the cause of anti-HPP struggle vital and urgent for them. This feeling of urgency is a source of women’s radicalism in opposing HPPs. The article maintains the female subject as embodied and transversal, and stresses the centrality of corporeal experience, sense and affect in formation of political subjectivity. By developing a body-centred feminist-phenomenological approach to political subjectivity, it introduces a novel way of analysing women’s activism within and beyond environmental movements.

Introduction
The struggles against hydro dams are among of the main venues of local environmental struggles of our age (see, e.g. Espeland 1998; Rothman and Oliver...
Small scale, run-of-river hydropower plants (HPPs) have recently emerged as an eco-friendly alternative to large-scale dams. Run-of-river hydropower plants are hydroelectric generation plants whereby little or no water storage is provided. Instead, they use the natural downward flow of rivers and micro turbine generators to capture the kinetic energy carried by water. Typically, river water is taken from the river at a higher point, diverted to electricity generating turbines by a weir or a pipeline and released back to its downstream (see http://www.climatetechwiki.org/technology/or). Therefore, they are welcomed by institutions such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2011) and some of the most dedicated anti-dam activists (McCully 2001). However, widespread opposition to private and small scale HPPs in Turkey (see Hamsici 2010; Aksu, Erensü, and Evren 2016) point at another position. The experiences of local peasants, living in villages and valleys that are threatened by the vast hydropower development, prove the assumed socio-ecological virtues of the run-of-river HPPs wrong.

Even though run-of-river HPPs do not flood large areas, they have various destructive effects on river ecosystems, natural habitat, fish and wildlife passages, biodiversity and forestry, as documented by Chamber of Electrical Engineers of Turkey (EMO 2010), the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB 2011), Turkish Water Assembly (2010) and by independent scholars (Başkaya, Başkaya, and Sari 2011; Kömürçü and Akpinar 2010; Şekercioglu et al. 2011). Beyond ecologically destructive effects, HPP development is stripping riverside villages from river waters, as the water is diverted from its bed for some kilometres. This results in the dispossession of water (see, Ahlers 2010), which had been an essential part of livelihoods, everyday life patterns, social interaction and social reproduction, as well as identity formation (Gibbons and Moore 2011; Aksu, Erensü, and Evren 2016).

Women assume a leading role in struggles for water rights and access, as well as for protecting water resources, around the globe (see, e.g. Bennett 1995; Bennett, Dávila-Poblete, and Rico 2005; Levin 2016). Struggle against HPPs, that bloomed in many parts of Turkey, especially in the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions in which run-of-river HPP development is concentrated, are no different in terms of women’s central role. Many journalistic accounts of the anti-HPP movement stress the central role women play in the movement as well as their visibility and courage (see, e.g. Kasapoglu 2013; Kepenek 2014; Radikal 2015). However, a rigorous analysis of female subjectivity and activism within the anti-HPP movement is yet to be done. Taking a feminist-phenomenological perspective of the body, in this article I aim to provide an empirically grounded analysis of the embodied subjectivity of women that is emerging within the anti-HPP movement in the culturally and spatially specific context of the Eastern Black Sea region. The term embodied subjectivity here denotes the centrality of bodily existence – corporeal practices, experiences, senses and affects – in formation of the subject as discussed in detailed below.
Women’s activism around the issues of water has been studied on the grounds of centrality of water to the sphere of social production, with an emphasis on the gender-biased nature of housework (see, e.g. Bennett 1995). This article, instead, aims to point to a novel way of analysing women’s activism by the use of a body-centred, feminist phenomenological approach. In addition, it aims to open up new venues in the feminist geography literature on water and gender that mainly focuses on the implications of gender for water governance, water provision, water rights and water access (see, e.g. Zwarteveen 1997; Crow and Sultana 2002; Coles and Wallace 2005; Ahlers and Zwarteveen 2009; Harris 2009; Sultana 2009).

Taking inspiration from anthropological studies of water, such as the works of Strang (2004, 2005, 2014), which explores materiality, meanings and sensory experiences of water, this article utilizes theoretical vocabulary provided by Merleau-Ponty with a feminist lens to develop an account of political subjectivity of Eastern Black Sea women in the context of anti-HPP movement. It demonstrates that, in this specific context, women’s activism against HPPs is driven by their embodied, sensory relation with river waters. By stressing the centrality of corporeal experience, sense and affect in formation of women’s political subjectivity and by embedding subjectivity within the relations of tactility (see, Butler 2005), this article points at novel ways of studying women’s environmental and political activism.
Empirical context: HPP development in Turkey and local resistance

Private hydropower plant development in Turkey became possible after the establishment of an open energy market and a public regulatory institution (Energy Market Regulatory Authority – EPDK in Turkish), as a condition set by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to release credit after the economic crisis of 1998–99. (For the letter of intent of the government of Turkey promising to privatize the energy sector in the context of its request for financial support from the IMF, see https://www.imf.org/external/np/loi/1999/120999.htm; see also Atiyas, Cetin, and Gulen 2012). The Turkish Electricity Market Act was issued in 2001, allowing EPDK to grant licenses to private companies for building HPPs all over the country. Those licenses allow companies to sign agreements with the State Hydraulic Works (DSI), to transfer the usage rights of river waters to private companies for 49 years (see Islar 2012; Erensü 2016). Under the Justice and Development Party’s (JDP) reign from 2002 to 2014, EPDK issued 1195 licenses for HPP projects and 565 for thermal power plants. Around 200 HPP licenses were later cancelled due to local mobilizations, legal struggles and technical problems (Eroğlu 2016).

This wave of hydropower plant construction is a part of the boom of construction projects in housing, energy and infrastructure, which are central to the neoliberal-developmental discourses of the JDP government (see, Arsel, Akbulut, and Adaman 2016 for a discussion). This approach sacrifices urban and rural environments for short-term targets of energy and growth by putting double movements of privatization and commodification into force (see, Bakker 2003), in enclosing urban and environmental commons. In this sense, extensive private HPP development in Turkey, forced at the cost of disturbing nearly all natural river ecosystems of the country (Turkish Water Assembly 2010), could be seen as an extreme example of water commodification as discussed by scholars such as Bakker (2003), Ahlers (2010) and Zwarteveen (Ahlers and Zwarteveen 2009). This process involves framing water as commodity, disassociating it from its ‘cultural and social significance’ (Ahlers and Zwarteveen 2009, 414). River waters in Turkey possess immense cultural and social significance, besides their economic use, as the arteries of the rural Anatolian geography. The majority of rural life is concentrated by the rivers. In addition to their use in subsistence agriculture and domestic life, rivers and riverbanks serve as a spatial infrastructure providing public space for social, recreational, aesthetic and religious uses. Moreover, as in many parts of the world (see, e.g. Strang 2014) rivers are central to semiotics of Anatolian provincial life, being an intimate part of cultural heritage, belief systems and mythologies (see Deniz 2016; Oğuz 2016).

As private companies began to construct HPP projects a few years after obtaining their licenses, communities threatened by those projects started to organize themselves, specifically in the second half of the 2000s. A large and heterogeneous movement against HPPs rapidly appeared, which organised locally but shared
slogans and frames, such as ‘Water is Life’, nationwide (see Hamsici 2010; Erensü 2016). Some of those local organisations initiated regional and national networks such as the Sisterhood of the Rivers Platform (Derelerin Kardeşliği Platformu).

This article comes out of a broader project of a comparative study of anti-HPP movement that involves several field stays in the riverside villages in the Western Mediterranean, Eastern Black Sea and Eastern and Southeastern (Kurdish) regions of Turkey, as well as interviews with national activists of the cause in Istanbul and Ankara (see Figure 1). Data used in this article are derived from my fieldwork conducted in the villages of Fındıklı/Rize and Arhavi/Artvin in 2013 and 2014. Turkey is divided into 81 provinces and each province is divided into a number of districts. Fındıklı and Arhavi are districts of the Rize and Artvin provinces respectively. They are both seaside settlements with a number of villages and valleys higher up on the mountains, which ascent right from the coastline and rise up to 3000 meters. My research in Fındıklı and Arhavi was crucial in developing my argument, as in both towns river waters are not used for subsistence agriculture (see below), different from inner Eastern Black Sea towns such as Ardanuç/Artvin, which is included in my broader research.

My analysis combines qualitative methods of participant observation, documentary analysis of visual and written texts, and semi-structured interviews and recorded conversations with 69 people: 36 women and 33 men. Interviews in the villages of Fındıklı/Rize were conducted in July and August 2013, while interviews in Arhavi/Artvin were conducted in August 2014. Even though in-depth interviews, ranging from 60 to 120 min, were preferred where possible, some of the interviews are shorter conversations on the doorsteps of village houses. Group interviews as well as individual interviews were conducted, while talking to women was prioritized, even though men were more willing to talk in most cases. All quotations are taken from interviews conducted by the author, unless mentioned otherwise.

Gender and geography: women against HPPs in the Eastern Black Sea region of Turkey

In the Eastern Black Sea region (Northeast Turkey) cities and towns are squeezed in a narrow coastal strip between the Black Sea and high mountain ridges. Villages are mainly located at densely forested high valleys, and many rivers flow through those valleys towards the Black Sea (see Figure 2). It has historically been an isolated borderland, once bordering the USSR and now, Georgia. Due to its remoteness, the minority cultures of Laz and Hemshin are largely preserved in the East Black Sea region. While Laz people are a Kartvelian speaking ethnic group, Hemshin people speak an ancient Armenian dialect of Homshetsi. Muslim Greek and Muslim Georgian communities also continue to exist, although to a lesser extent. (For detailed discussions of society, space and identity in the region, see Bellér-Hann and Hann 2000 and Biryol 2012). Despite its isolated, rugged geography, the region is also very much integrated into the national space through migration and
education. The minority cultures and identities of the region, though protected, are also interestingly articulated into the dominant Sunni Muslim and Turkish identity.

Local struggles in the Eastern Black Sea region pioneered both the raising of public consciousness regarding the HPP issue and the initiation of networks such as Sisterhood of the Rivers Platform. This article focuses on the Eastern Black Sea geography because the HPPs development is densely concentrated there, and the movement against them is at its strongest in the region. The Eastern Black Sea is home to paradigmatic cases of anti-HPP struggle, such as the case of Fındıklı, which has enjoyed wide media coverage and public support. Another significant point is that the strength of anti-HPP struggles in the region challenges the common assumption that local environmentalisms of peasant communities are driven by their immediate economic dependence on environmental commons (see, e.g., Figure 2.)
Martinez-Alier 2002). However, villagers in the Eastern Black Sea do not rely on river waters for agriculture as the rainfall alone adequately supports their major crops: tea and hazelnuts. Therefore, the strong drive of Eastern Black Sea villagers to resist the HPPs cannot be explained by purely instrumental and/or economic interests. In this sense, the Eastern Black Sea case demonstrates that not all local environmental peasant movements are motivated by their immediate economic dependence of environmental resources.

Women in the Eastern Black Sea region have been at the forefront of the local struggles, as in some other parts of Turkey, but with a visibility and commitment that stands out. My initial fieldwork in the Eastern Black Sea region registered the need to conduct a specific study on women’s anti-HPP activism due to the striking difference between men and women in terms of their perceptions, motivations, argumentations and forms of resistance. Women were overwhelmingly less compromising and more radical than men who participated in the study. While men speak more cautiously and carefully to not say anything against the political authority that could be interpreted as a criminal offense or that can put their legitimate position in danger, most women, but especially middle-aged and older women, often mention beating, killing and being killed for the cause. The age factor is important here, as women grow more confident voicing their opinion with age. This is probably related to the more established position of older women within the patriarchal social hierarchy, where social status particularly increases for mothers of young men. They often show sticks, knifes or other ‘weapons’ and pose with them. In an incident I experienced in the Arılı valley of Fındıklı (Rize) during a recorded conversation with the whole family in front of their house, one young woman was complaining about her mother who posed with a big sharp cutter to a national newspaper, implying that she would not hesitate to use it on whoever comes to build a HPP. In response to her warnings that posing with a sharp object could be considered as a criminal offense, her mother said: ‘Isn’t taking our river a crime, Ayşegül?’

The women’s commitment and radicalism is often explained by the stereotypical Black Sea women’s personality, which is depicted as strong, courageous and devotional (see, e.g. Kasapoglu 2013; Yavuz ve Özlem Şendeniz 2013). Although many local movements against HPPs use it strategically and instrumentally (İşil and Arslan 2014), this stereotype, as all stereotypes, conceals certain aspects of the complex social fabric of everyday life, while overemphasizing others. Even though the nature of their hard agricultural labour makes them physically strong and reserves them a legitimate social position within the community, women are still economically and socially vulnerable in the face of the patriarchal organisation of social life. For instance, like women of many other parts of the world, Black Sea women do not have the ownership of the land they work on. They are also traditionally excluded from family inheritance, and thus dependent on their husbands and/or fathers for land. Given this, the roots of women’s courage and
commitment to preventing the HPP development have to be found elsewhere than in these stereotypes.

The way villagers articulated and framed their opposition reflects another striking difference. Asked about the reasons of their opposition to HPPs, men often opted for what I call a macro political discourse as it establishes immediate links with the HPP conflict and the large scale, often international, political field. The men’s discourses and frames merge insights of global warming with theories of imperial/hegemonic struggles between world powers on water. While village men frame their insights with conspiracy theories, male local activists articulate them in a broader anti-capitalist discourse. What is common in both is the perception of electricity production as simply a cover to take fresh waters from the Eastern Black Sea. Especially the male villagers often mention big plans of the US, Israel or Armenia to grab the water and land of the region. During a group interview in a coffee house in Arılı (Fındıklı/Rize) in August 2013, Yusuf’s (46) statement is representative of this narrative:

Scientists say that global warming will be a huge problem in 25–20 years. Turkey will turn to a huge desert apart from the East Black Sea .... that’s why foreign powers want to get hold of our rivers under the guise of electricity production.

Not one woman I talked to used conspiracy theories to frame her opposition to hydropower dams. Women, instead, talk about bodily practices, affects and senses that make the river an indispensible part of their social, cultural and biological existence that shapes the memory, natural and cultural heritage, identity and worlds of meaning: growing up with the sight of the river, not being able to sleep without the sound of the river, the feeling of peace and relaxation when they put their feet or their body in the river waters, the children that learn to swim in the river, the memories of their parents by the river, etc. Women’s narratives repeatedly registered that their ways of knowing the river and the radicalism of their commitment is grounded in their embodied interactions with the river waters. Observing this connection, I argue that a feminist-phenomenological perspective of the body-subject that is empirically grounded in a specific spatial and cultural context is helpful to analyse women’s activism against HPPs in Turkey, and potentially in other cases of grassroots environmentalisms.

The body-subject and potentials of feminist phenomenology

Longhurst and Johnson raised a significant question in a recent article examining research on embodiment published in *Gender, Place and Culture*: ‘Has ‘the body’ become a little more than a ubiquitous marker of identity and difference, emptied of its power to unsettle the masculinist epistemology of the discipline of geography?’ (Longhurst and Johnston 2014, 273). This is indeed a relevant question and not only for the discipline of geography. This article responds to this question by pointing to the potential of a phenomenological approach in reviving the body and embodiment for the purposes of feminist research. The appearance of the
body ‘as a ubiquitous marker of identity and difference,’ I argue, might be due to
the exhaustion of Foucauldian and poststructuralist insights that conceptualize
the embodied subject as constructed by power and discourse, within complex and
multi-layered mechanisms of subjection. Utilizing embodiment as a conceptual
tool to unsettle the epistemological orthodoxy, though, requires taking another
line of thought seriously, that inspired by the Spinozian tradition and French phe-
omenology. Deleuzian, new materialist and phenomenological feminisms’ take
on the body not only as formed but also as simultaneously formative, is central to
a new understanding of embodied subjectivity (see, e.g. Braidotti 1991; Bray and
Colebrook 1998; Coole 2005; Oksala 2006; Coole and Frost 2010).

This article builds specifically on the phenomenological perspective, especially
Merleau-Ponty’s work in connection with feminist scholarship on corporeality,
due to its relevance to rethink the relations between gender, space and subjec-
tivity in the context of anti-HPP activism. It underlines the importance of bodily
experience, senses and affects in the production of knowledge and subjectivity.
It also acknowledges the feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty arguing that he does
not recognize sexual specificity and difference (Irigaray 1993 [1984]; Butler 1989;
Young 1990; Grosz 1994; Olkowski and Weiss 2006). It holds, however, that the
critiques do not dismiss the conceptual strength of Merleau-Ponty’s framework
to acknowledge the female body’s generative status ‘instead of viewing it only
as a passive product of cultural crafting’ (Oksala 2006, 225). (See Butler 2001 for a
defence of the concept of flesh against Irigaray’s interpretation.)

The body and embodied subjectivity remains central to disturb the gendered
Cartesian epistemological order, as the latter is based on a conception of body
as res extensa, literally an extension of the thinking substance, res cogitans. What
unsettles that binary order is the ambivalent status of the body that cannot be
reduced to the category of the object (see, Merleau-Ponty 1962; Grosz 1994;
Esposito 2015). The body, instead, is the very condition of subjectivity, of knowl-
dge and consciousness, as they are necessarily abstracted from our corporeal
relation with the world.

A phenomenological approach is especially relevant to feminist geography to
operationalize ‘the body’ not just as a surface on which language, discourse and
culture act, but as our mode of ‘being-in-the-world,’ through which we experience
and inhabit the space. The body, as ‘our horizontal and vertical anchorage in a place
and in a here-and-now’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 5) situates the embodied subject
within a spatial, cultural and historical context. In this sense, the body-subject is
ultimately an ‘ecological subject’ ‘that captures a sense of human beings ‘immer-
sion’ in places, spaces and environments,…as gendered subjects’ (O’Loughlin
1995). Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the ‘body-subject’ (1962) underlines this nec-
essary situatedness, that the subject is spatially located through the materiality
of the body, and thus, constructs a passage between space and subjectivity. This
conceptual passage is useful to explore the connections between spatiality, tem-
porality, identity, corporeality and subjectivity, by shifting the focus to embodied
geographical knowledges, cultural/material practices and lived experience corporeally constituted through ‘physical, sensuous, emotional and affectual bodies’ (Longhurst and Johnston 2014).

**Memory, heritage and river waters: connecting water and identity through the body**

Water flows through our environments and bodies, sustaining not only ecosystems but also socio-cultural and economic ones (Sneddon, Harris, Dimitrov, and Özesmi 2002; Bakker 2003; Harris 2009). Rivers shape the spatiality of villages in the Eastern Black Sea region, as the village imitates the river’s flow, a result of villagers’ choice to build their houses by the river. They are the defining feature of the geographical setting in which villagers maintain their everyday life. It is not a coincidence that many Eastern Black Sea folk songs mention rivers, as the symbol of vitality, fertility, and joy, as the witness of love and sorrow, as something which is always there as people live their life.

The themes of memory, heritage, family and identity are touched on in the majority of my interviews with the Eastern Black Sea women. Bedriye (58) from Gürsu (Fındıklı/Rize) says: ‘I see my mother and my father by this river, every time I look at the river I remember them…We are keen on our history. How would I give up on my river?’ Şirin (60) from Arılı (Fındıklı/Rize) speaks about the same river:

- We grew up with this river up to this age. My grandmother, her father, our ancestors… all did grow up with this river. Why would I lose my river? Why would I destroy all the memories left to us?

As Ahlers (2010), 220, 224 states, ‘land and water are family heritage’ in rural areas and reducing them to simple commodities discounts ‘the meaning and identities produced in relation to water’. Eastern Black Sea women affirm this point. Fatma (71) from Balıklı (Arhavi/Artvin) says that they would not ‘sell’ their river even for billions. She reckons that money is not worth anything when the river is lost. Seniye (38) from Aslandere (Fındıklı/Rize) explains: ‘Rivers are not something that you can trade with money. They cannot be sold and cannot be bought. The rivers are the life for us’. Eastern Black Sea women perceive the river waters as an essential part of their family heritage, which cannot be traded with money. For them the river waters have non-monetary value, left to them by their parents and that should be left, as they are, to the next generations. This is the reason why Ayşen (34) from Konaklı (Arhavi/Artvin) rejected the money she was offered by the construction company to keep her silent. Echoing other women I interviewed she says: ‘I told them I would not trade my water, my land with money, even if I would be the only one left, even if they would offer me billions’.

Rivers flow from the past to the future, connecting the memories of the ancestors to experiences of the children. Women mention their children’s corporeal experiences with river waters (swimming, fishing, playing in water) as an important moment of heritage transfer. During our interview Refiye (72) from Yaylacilar...
(Fındıklı/Rize) showed me three young children in the river, shouting and playing with joy ‘they are my grandchildren’ she said, ‘look how happy they are in the river’. Nurcan (68) from Aslandere (Fındıklı/Rize), similarly, tells me that her grandson often calls from Istanbul, missing the river. ‘Grandma I will come very soon’ he says ‘we will go down the river with my dad to fish’.

The relationship between water and identity is well-researched, especially in the context of indigenous and/or minority cultures (see, e.g. Espeland 1998; Sylvain 2002; Boelens, Getches, and Gil 2010). However, the centrality of the body to this relation of identity and water is often overlooked. Eastern Black Sea women’s narratives demonstrate that the relationship between water and identity, established through themes of memory, heritage and meaning, is produced and/or conserved by the embodied connection between human bodies and river waters. As an example, as we were talking in front of her house, Şirin, who was telling me she is ready to die to protect the river, points to an area some hundred meters ahead along the river stream:

Look there is a waterfall over there, we used to take a break here with my parents on our way to the plateau (yayla); we used to eat and sleep always by the river during our journey.

The memories of Şirin’s childhood journey’s to the yayla, the name for the summer settlements on high plateaus to which Eastern Black Sea villagers move in the summer, mostly by walking, are bound up with the sound and sight of the river. For her, as for many other Eastern Black Sea women, cultural heritage, personal memory and family history survive through the everyday, sensory relation with rivers, as the sight, sound and the touch of it revive the past. This intimate and corporeal connection is the very heritage that should be transferred to the next generation. As Ayşen states: ‘we grew up with the river, swam in the river, we learned how to fish, now our children are learning swimming and fishing’.

Merleau-Ponty defines the body-subject as a ‘trace’, as ‘a survival of the past, an enjambment’ in his course notes (2003, 276). Corporeal survival of the past, in the bodies of women and waters of the river, is constitutive of their political subjectivities against the HPP development. Ayşe (50) from Arılı Valley (Fındıklı/Rize), explains her opposition to HPPs to a major national newspaper by referring to the relationship between the body and personal history: ‘I am so fond of this river (bu dereye düşkünüm ben). I spent my childhood by this river. I played with its water, with its rocks…’ (Radikal 2015).

Memories of the corporeal relationship once materially established, provide a basis for an imagined connection with the river, even when the bodily encounter cannot be realized. Bedriye is a retired nurse who divides her time between İstanbul and her village due to family requirements. She describes the experience of being away from the village, from the river:

I lie down on my couch in my flat in İstanbul but my feet are always in the waters of my river. Seriously. I’m speaking from my heart. The river is always with me, in my mind, in my imagination, in my dreams…
This imaginary connection, based on the memories of embodied encounters, is echoed by other women from other parts of the world, such as Shanti, who lives in the North Karanpura Valley of Eastern India and whose story is told by Lahiri-Dutt (2015, 50):

(the spring) was a place where we gathered everyday to bathe our children and ourselves...One morning TISCO company bulldozered that spring, with it the large asan tree next to it...I can still see the spring and the asan tree next to it, if I close my eyes.

**Body-subject and the sensory-affective relation with the river waters**

What Merleau-Ponty provides with the concept of body-subject is a radically different way of understanding embodiment, not an obstacle to be repressed by the subject (Esposito 2015), but the very condition of subjectivity. One relates with the world through corporeal involvement and experience; becomes conscious of herself and her environment through her bodily senses and affects. Bodily senses and affects, then, should be treated as media of subjectivity as ‘agentic properties emerge and endure within corporeal experience’ (Coole 2005, 131).

The body encounters the world, other human and non-human bodies, through senses. In other words ‘the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces’ (Highmore 2010, 121). Affects arise within these encounters, through sensate – haptic, aural, gustatory, olfactory and visual – perception (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010). The encounter of human bodies and flowing water generates the full spectrum of sensuous-affective responses that the human body is capable of. Not only our experiences of water are inherently embodied (Sultana 2009) but also ‘our experience of embodiment is deeply connected with water’ (Strang 2005, 99). This strong embodied relationship with the water of rivers is sustained by the full spectrum of sensory experience of touch, sight, hearing and taste in Eastern Black Sea region.

The sight of the flowing river has calming, relaxing, hypnotic and mesmerising effects (see Strang 2004, 2005). Seeing a river’s cascading and/or calm flow is significant for Eastern Black Sea women, as rivers are the central element of the affectual, aesthetic, cultural and sensory geographies of their lives. Zeynep (32) from Arılı (Fındıklı/Rize) shows me the river: ‘Look how beautiful it is! They want to take this beauty away from us. They want to leave us with the dry rocks of the riverbed...’ Raziye (62) from Yaylacılar (Fındıklı/Rize) says: ‘We live here, in this narrow valley, only with the joy of the river (derenin neşesi). When it is gone, it means we should also go.’

Zeynep also talks about the taste of the river as cooling and reviving: ‘when the weather is so hot in summer we go and drink from the river, because it is so refreshing...’ The sound of the river, Nurcan identifies with peace of the soul, is even more important. She likens the absence of its sound with death. Seniye emphasizes the invigorating properties of the river’s sound:

Yesterday I was working in our hazelnut field close to the river, I was tired, I went by the river, put my hazelnuts on a rock and slept with the sound of river about half an hour.
I woke up so fresh and energetic and I started to work again… River is life and soul (*candır, hayattır*) for us. If I would not hear the sound of the river, I would probably feel completely empty.

Her use of the word ‘empty’ is worth mentioning here, as it indicates a conception of the self, in which the ‘internal’ condition is immediately affected by its interaction with the ‘outside’, which differs from the classical conception of the solid human body, the outer borders of which keep its content firmly inside.

The flesh and *Einfühlung*: immersing in and identifying with river waters

As Strang (2005) describes, immersion is the most compelling sensory experience generated by the encounter of human bodies and bodies of water. Immersion in water produces a series of sensory, affective and cognitive responses from feelings of wellbeing to relaxation and heightened imaginary activity (ibid.). Narratives of the Eastern Black Sea women confirm this point. It is common among Eastern Black Sea women to go into the river waters with their clothes, especially after working in the tea and hazelnut fields in summer, to relax and refresh. Ülker (44) from Konaklı (Arhavi/Artvin) explains: ‘River flows just by my house. Whenever we feel hot, working in the fields or at home, we go down to river to cool off….’ The cooling touch of the river seems to be a part of the body regulation regime for women, as well as being the central means of recreation. East Black Sea women often mention the animating effect of river’s touch. Gülseren (67) from Aslandere (Findikli/Rize) describes herself as a frog as she loves to swim in the river.

We do not have beaches or swim suits. We swim here with our clothes… We have such a beautiful and clean river that you can drink from it while swimming… We cannot live without the river.

The way she mentions ‘I’ after ‘we’ emphasizes her personal connection with the river, from the viewpoint of the preconditions of corporeal living, something always experienced through the individual body.

Merleau-Ponty’s less known concept of ‘the flesh’ (Merleau-Ponty 1969) provides a conceptual framework to understand the sensory interaction between the bodies of women and the bodies of river waters. The flesh can be understood as a common web, shared by persons and things, in which tactile and sensory relations occur. It is the very condition of tactility, of touching and being touched, of seeing and being seen, and their inherent reversibility, ‘out of which both subject and object, in their mutual interactions, develop’ (Grosz 1994, 103).

The body as touching-touched, seeing-seen, the place of a kind of reflection, and, thereby, the capacity to relate itself to something other than its own mass, to close its circuit… on a sensible exterior (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 209)

The flesh of the body, Merleau-Ponty maintains, opens us to the flesh of the world, the corporeality of other things and other bodies, putting us in a circuit with them. It is through the flesh of our body that we become a part of the flesh of the world.
This idea of flesh, as a common web shared by human and non-human bodies, manifests itself as identification and/or merging with the river or with the earth in the narratives of Eastern Black Sea women. In the words of Zeynep: ‘We are all connected to the river. Old women, even more. They have lived all their life with the waters of the river. They have merged with it.’ The tactile relationship with the river seems to enact a ‘merger’. Bedriye, on the other hand, identifies herself with the earth, which requires water’s life-giving material properties to be vivified.

I feel as a piece of earth parched by thirst when I am in Istanbul. As soon as I set a foot in Fındıklı, by this river, my body comes to life, like when you water the land after a long dry season and it absorbs immediately.

These narratives are in line with the feminist studies on phenomenology and materiality, which stress the capacity of the body to extend into the world along sensory pathways (see, e.g. Strang 2005 and Bennett 2010). Feminist geography also underlines ‘how ‘environment’ is an extension of and extends into the body as a site of material reproduction and ecological impact’ (Nightingale 2011, 155). Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body as ‘prolongation of the world’ (1969, 255); as ‘a passage to an outside’ through which we ‘incorporate’ that outside, provides a conceptual ground for feminist analyses of the extended body to build on. The common sensory web of flesh suggests that there is ‘an indissolubility of my body and the world’ (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 279). It is not only that one becomes a part of the flesh of the world through the flesh of the body, but she also senses the flesh of her body only within the flesh of the world. There is a corporeal continuity between her body and other bodies, the bodies of other people, of animals and of things:

The body, as a structure of an ensemble, that is, as an opening to the things and to others, that is, as sensing itself in the things and in others – undivided in an undivided world (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 281).

Eastern Black Sea women also identify the river with life or vital functions of the body. Ayşe says: ‘What they do not understand is: the river is our life-blood. Taking our river from us is cutting our life-blood. That is it…’ Bedriye from Gürsu (Fındıklı/Rize) poetically expresses: ‘River means human, river means life (can), river means breath, river means our blood. What can I say more…’ These statements remind us the concept of Einfühlung, which could be translated as empathy. It is through corporeal Einfühlung ‘the world and others become our flesh’ (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 211). Merleau-Ponty claims that it is the body ‘as corporeal schema’, ‘the esthesiological body’ that furnishes us with the Einfühlung. It is in a circuit with the world, intimately and emphatically relating with human and non-human bodies. (ibid., 209). Consequently, the body, ‘as the power of the Einfühlung’, is the source of identification, projection and introjection, as well as libido and desire (ibid.). The concept of Einfühlung is, thus, helpful to deepen the phenomenological analysis in understanding the narratives of corporeal identification and/or merger with river waters, used by Eastern Black Sea women.
This identification of river with life is not merely symbolic. Bozok, Bozok and Akbas (2016) tell the touching story of 96-year-old Emine from a remote village of Borçka (Artvin) in the Eastern Black Sea region. Emine, who lives alone on a steep slope of a deep valley, told them that she could not hear anymore. During their talk, however, she heard them quite well. When they asked why she thought she could not hear, she responded: ‘I must have been deaf because I cannot hear the river.’ The river was the sound of Emine’s life and she can only explain the absence of it with the loss of her sense of hearing. In fact, what was gone was not her sense of hearing but the river itself (it was re-routed to a HPP in pipes), and with it, the background sound of a long life. This story demonstrates that the river intermediates the relationship between the embodied subject and its environment by stimulating bodily senses and affects. Its perpetual existence shapes perception in such a way that it effects how the embodied subject experiences her sensual capacities.

Corporeality and political subjectivity: understanding Eastern Black Sea women’s radical opposition to HPPs

Phenomenology’s attempt to relate bodily experience and engagement to knowledge and consciousness through sensate perception is useful to understand the strong and radical opposition that Eastern Black Sea women have against HPPs. Eastern Black Sea women’s determination and commitment, to the point of mentioning dying for the cause, is unmatched both by the activism of men in the region and of women in other regions. As Ayse concisely expresses, women are determined to protect their river and they can be much more aggressive, if men do not restrain them (Radikal 2015). What conditions Eastern Black Sea women’s strong political subjectivity against HPPs, I argue, is the intimate corporeal connection they have with river waters. Their knowledge, consciousness and agency are bound with their bodily experience, as shaped by a series of sensory and affective encounters with river waters. Butler (2005) stresses that one relates with the order of the intelligibility through body and sentience. Subjectivity, then, is formed through a relational ontology of sentience and intelligence, within a tactile universe, as this case shows.

The corporeal connection between the bodies of women and river waters owes both to everyday life practices of women and material characteristics of rivers in the region. The gendered division of labour in the East Black Sea region traditionally maintains the role of women as farmers of the household, as in many other parts of the world (Eaton and Lorentzen 2003; Federici 2012), a pattern that is not shared that strictly by the Kurdish and/or the Mediterranean rural populations of the country. In my fieldwork, I found that while women may or may not work in the fields in the Southeastern and Eastern regions according to the potency of religious and traditional conservatism, in the Mediterranean region both men and women are involved in subsistence and commercial agriculture. Women are outside everyday
within the dramatic natural landscape of the East Black Sea, whereas men either migrate to a bigger city or abroad to work or work in the town centre, or, just sit at the coffee house with their male friends. This division of labour distances men from their immediate environment while putting women in a very close, day-to-day relationship with it (see, Mellor 2003).

The ‘material properties’ (see, Strang 2014) of Eastern Black Sea rivers: their stream and flow, their clarity and transparency, their sight, sound, texture and taste, are also significant in the generation of a series of perceptions and affects that are firmly based on spatial and temporal experiences of the body, and inform geographical knowledges and embodied subjectivities. Eastern Black Sea rivers are cascading, fast flowing rivers that run through forested steep valleys. Watching their flow, and immersing the body in their clear, fresh, vibrant waters creates compelling sensate and affective responses. Materialities, as Bennett (2010) claims, are entwined with and constitutive of human subjectivity as this case shows. Moreover, spatial, cultural, social and sexual differences matter in shaping the embodied, sensory relationship with rivers, the emergent political subjectivity of women against the hydropower plants and the relationship between the two.

Conclusion

Johnson (2008) maintains the sexed body in space as a starting point for geographical knowledge. It is, I believe, also a starting point for subjectivity. Understanding the subject not as abstract but as embodied and corporeal, in sexually, spatially, historically and culturally specific ways, points to a conceptual potential to rethink the connections between the body, space, gender and subjectivity. Conceiving the body as a site of spatiality (Butler 2005), which opens us to the world and places us in that world, while acknowledging formative, agential, creative capacities of the body as a nexus of experience, sense and affect, as well as of mobility, materiality and interconnection has significant implications for a feminist geography.

In the case of anti-HPP struggles in the East Black Sea region of Turkey, the political subjectivity of women cannot be analysed in isolation from their embodied spatial and sensory experience of the river waters, which motivates their opposition against HPPs. Their statements emphasize, over and over again, an interconnectedness, an indivision in the words of Merleau-Ponty, with the rivers, which makes the cause of anti-HPP struggle vital and urgent for them. This feeling of urgency, deeply rooted in the *Einfühlung* of the ‘flesh’, is a source of radicalism and aggressiveness in their opposition against the HPPs. In this regard, subjectivity is formed out of inter-corporeal interaction not only with other human bodies, but also with the bodies of the non-human environment. Through the lens of a feminist-phenomenological approach, the female subject is understood not as abstract and self-centred but as embodied and transversal and ‘functions in a nature-culture continuum’ (Braidotti 2013, 61). This approach, by demonstrating the centrality of corporeal experience, sense and affect in the way opposition is
framed, opens new paths for studying women’s political subjectivity within and beyond environmental struggles.

Acknowledgements

I’d like to thank Einstein and Gerda Henkel Foundations for research scholarships, Nancy Fraser for consistently and strongly supporting my project, GSNAS Freie Universität Berlin and Collège d’études mondiales FMSH - Paris for hosting my research and Serhat Karakayalı, Erdem Evren, Pamela Moss, Lynda Johnston, Nur Yasemin Ural, Nihan Bozok and anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts. I’m grateful to Stephanie Alexander for her careful proof-reading.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Özge Yaka has received her PhD in Sociology from Lancaster University in 2011. She has held positions as an Assistant Professor at Ondokuz Mayis University in Turkey, as Einstein Postdoctoral Fellow and as a Visiting Professor at Graduate School of North American Studies – JFKI, Freie Universität Berlin and as a Gerda Henkel Research Fellow at Collège d’études mondiales – FMSH Paris under the Chair of Rethinking Social Justice of Prof. Nancy Fraser. Her research interests include critical social theory, social and environmental movements, global and environmental justice, corporeal feminism and feminist phenomenology, gender, protest and subjectivity and political ecologies of water commons.

References


Harris, Leila M. 2009. “Gender and Emergent Water Governance: Comparative Overview of Neoliberalized Natures and Gender Dimensions of Privatization, Devolution and Marketization.” Gender, Place and Culture 16 (4): 387–408.


Longhurst, Robyn, and Lynda Johnston. 2014. “Bodies, Gender, Place and Culture: 21 Years on.” Gender, Place, and Culture 21 (3): 267–278.


