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Gendered Relationships with the Infrastructural Environment in Adana, Turkey

In summer, the heat in Adana, Turkey, with a felt-air temperature, can reach up to 52°C (around 125° F). Those who can afford to go to the seaside or highlands can also escape disastrous weather effects. While staying in the city center, the rest must find other ways, such as using air conditioners or finding places where they can take shelter from the scorching heat. In this context, I focus on gendered relationships with urban watery spaces in the city of Adana around the Seyhan River, which is part of my MA thesis, based on 17 semi-structured interviews, including 6 women.

What conditions were in place for people to live in this way in Adana? As Chris Gratien (2022) indicates in *the Unsettled Plain*, the modern Çukurova, the region where Adana is, has emerged through sedentarization and settlement projects of the late Ottoman state (17). This prevented the locals from following their strategies to escape summer heat and malaria, meaning to leave the lowlands seasonally. Agricultural infrastructures have such a background in which mobility and immobility of certain communities became parts of the emergence of the region.

As the authors in *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene* do, I adopt a materiality-based approach to infrastructures, and I do not necessarily investigate how water is delivered to prospective users in line with the designed function. Furthermore, Farhana Sultana (2015) conveys how gender is negotiated pertaining to bodies and environments and proposes the emotional political ecology to show how joy and relief are juxtaposed with the fear and despair in the context of accessing and using safe water. (633). She especially demonstrates how gender matters in the case of extreme events such as floods and the resilience generated in response to them (Sultana 2010). I examine gendered relationships with not water as a resource, but with watery environments, composed of canals, the regulatory bridge, the Seyhan River, and so on. I look into

who becomes oriented toward water in which ways while the sun is up. Here, I use orientation in the sense that Sara Ahmed (2004) uses: being oriented is about how to “find our way” in conjunction with coming to “feel at home” (7).

I will mention the riverside and the canalside in such a context. The division I made between zones of the river and irrigation canal is not based on dualism between so-called nature vs the human-made. The infrastructural constructions and other ecological bodies have co-constituted the urban fabric and been entangled. The highlights I make are based on forms of water manifested through, such as the riverbank with its ambiguous borders between land and water, and the irrigation canals with high voluminous flowing bodies of water.

My endeavor is to trace different recent experiences, which can be said to be place-based, showing how there is no universal story of the watery environment within the same neighborhood. Firstly, I will present how generative relationships are built with watery environments in the context of urban heat and how these engagements are gendered. Secondly, I want to convey how different forms of watery environments are relevant to gendered relationships. Lastly, I want to raise a question about how to approach pleasure and risk in the climate context from a feminist and queer perspective.

There are two main engagements with the infrastructural environment outside the design. One is bathing in the irrigation canals, and the other is doing laundry in front of the regulatory bridge. I would like to highlight at least two positions, concerning those relationships, namely, the non-canal-bather and the caregiver.

I will use the term “bathing” to refer to this local practice, as it encompasses various expressions used by locals, who do not exclusively refer to it as swimming. Who enters the irrigation canals? It is predominantly boys and men from lower-income backgrounds. One of my

interlocutors, Yılmaz, a 61-year-old man who has undergone drowning, but continued bathing in the canal in his youth, talks about how certain masculinities are shown in canal bathing:

“It's very hard. I mean, but you have no other way to cool off. You have to learn. Because you're a boy. You're 7-8 years old. You have older brothers. We will tell you anyway. Jump in. We will save you...That's the culture. Everyone, almost all the boys, all the children growing up in Adana learn it.”

He further indicates that these young boys like showing themselves: “It's about proving themselves, showing off. They especially perform; they put on a show. Because they are confident in themselves,” In the neighborhood, many women say that they do not know how to swim. When I asked why women do not bathe in the canals, Seher, a 32-year-old woman, who was among the few who knew how to swim in the pool or at the sea, said that:

“How many times does a fish try to escape from an aquarium? Where can you show your courage as a woman?...If my brothers did it, I would want to try it too. And they would tell me no, and I would not understand why.”

I spoke with another woman, Seda, 34 years old, whom the others in the neighborhood call “like a man” as she narrates to me. She speaks of her brothers as supportive in the case of bathing in the irrigation canals. She was the only woman who could experience entering the canal, which corresponded with her non-conforming gender manifestation. However, she did not continue to bathe in the canal as boys did. In fact, she does not claim swimming knowledge in general as other bathers do.

“I cannot swim, I was always saying to myself...I do not know how to swim, ‘you will drown if you fall in [the irrigation canal]’...because I have a certain limit. I can't exceed that limit. If I do, I'll drown.”

Her practical sense of swimming is not the same as her brothers'. Drawing on Bourdieu (1990), the feel for the game, generated by the experience of the game, navigates the orientations, expectations, investment, thoughts, and actions; therefore, it creates a “subjective sense” (66). Lois

McNay (1999) mentions this practical sense as a “form of knowledge” that is acquired through bodily experiences (101). Seda does not seem to relate to this knowledge as an ordinary one as others do. However, she could surface this practical sense when she jumped into the canal to save her nephew from drowning. Her nephew’s aunt stated, “If it were me, I would not be able to jump. How did you dare?” The past experience in the canal could make her move for a rescue act in the state of emergency. Seda notes, “I am glad my brothers got me into the canal back then. If they had not, I would not have been able to save a life.”

Not claiming the swimming knowledge seems to align with the dispositions of the gendered order in which women are not imagined and recruited as the swimmer subjects of watery spaces. Nevertheless, her case indicates how dispositions are neither mechanical nor limitless. Unlike many women, she could bathe in the irrigation canals and have a practical sense to some extent, which could be done with the help of her masculinized existence, involving the presence of brothers and the ways she embodies her identity. The non-canal-bather position can show how cooling off in the canals entails certain community, proximity, and knowledge, which are not static. They constitute both capacity and sociocultural position in relation to watery contact. Furthermore, displaying the body and circulation of certain feelings is significant in the relationship with watery environments.

Women, at the same time, embody the caregiver position, which posits further different affective relationships with the irrigation canals. Emel, a 66-year-old retired teacher, as the eldest sister of her family, says that:

“It was hard to keep the children at home. They were going to the water. We were afraid that the children would die. My mother was always after the children. It was really hard to raise a child between two waters.”

Living between two waters has generated a risk zone for the boys, creating another dimension for looking after children. As the eldest sister, the assistant to the mother, she was both the non-canal-bather and the caregiver. Although she was also a child, she became one of those who took care of the children.

Women are not in a situation of zero connection with the watery environments. They converted the flood gates into a place to do the laundry. They call it *Çamaşırlık*, which refers to the laundry/washing area in Turkish. Like canal bathing, women have a prolific engagement with the watery environment beyond design. They tailored the watery environment to the laundry, which stretches the domestic work outside their homes. Seda tells about how enjoyable it was:

“As soon as summer came, everyone would take their quilts apart. They’d leave them in the sun. They dip them in the water and pull them out. It was really enjoyable...It was a lot of fun. We’re going to go into the water, dip our feet in, and stuff... Just as I was lowering the wool, the auntie hit it with a stick. ‘Auntie, my head is going to explode,’ ‘Don’t worry, we’re experts at this,’ she said. We’d get wet, fall, and slide on the rocks.”

For some, the heyday of *Çamaşırlık* was before the construction of the embankment wall in the 1990s, a concrete structure constructed in place of the riverbank. As locals call it, the river was taken in and became like a canal. Before the embankment wall, the riverbank was a shallow, gradational zone where land and water intermingled. This form allowed women to gather, do collective laundry, and immerse parts of their bodies in the water. Emel points out the withdrawal: “Nobody goes down there because it was surrounded by concrete.” This situation further underscores how forms of watery environments can be significant for gendered dynamics in general. Emel states that:

“When the neighbors would get hot in the heat, they would go into the river with their shalwar and tops. They would cool off there, take a good swim...So it was for

cooling off...[This was] before the evening. I mean, before the fathers come home from work.”

When the riverside becomes more “canalized” through enclosure with a concrete wall, the topographical form loses its gradual and ambiguous feature. Sultana (2010) mentions how water management stays blind to the local social lives, especially in terms of gendered social order (50). Similarly, we see that urban planning, giving shape to the watery environments, makes it more like a canal, which has gendered consequences.

Overall, I showed how watery environments can be a space of refuge in the extreme urban heat. However, there is no universal and fixed act of cooling off. In fact, material changes and gender order shape proximities and practices. On the one hand, the riverside and the canalside present how generative engagements happen in gendered ways, such as canal bathing and doing laundry outside. On the other hand, forms of the watery environments are significant pertaining to gendered relationships. The voluminous water flow in canals brings both joy and fear, and risk of drowning and relief from the scorching heat together. The shallow and diffused form of land and water in the riverside affect the practices of women, such as assembling within a watery space, cooling off in the heat stress, reducing the cost of washing, and meeting people. As in the case of irrigation canals, women become less proximate when the riverside gets closer to the canal form. Distance to the canal is both material and social, which is interwoven with the “affective form of orientation” (Ahmed 2007, 2). I contend that the non-canal-bather and the caregiver bodies are illustrative of how social lives around the watery environments are gendered and how forms of water matter in daily life. From feminist and queer perspectives, I still wonder in the context of environmental justice how we can further think about distance from an activity like entering the canal in extreme heat, in which pleasure, risk, and relief are intertwined.

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