

# Introduction

## GENDER, BODY, AND RELATIONALITY IN THE STRUGGLE FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL COMMONS

We, as women, won't allow them to construct a hydropower plant here. We don't even count on men. . . . Bring them on, if they dare, if any brave fellows think they can come here . . . let them try. We will cut them to pieces. We know how to use guns as well. We take the risk. They really shouldn't force us. Don't make people go mad.

Selime, a middle-aged woman from the village of Arlı (East Black Sea Region—EBR)

Selime is one of the countless women who fight against private, small-scale hydroelectric power plants (HEPPs) all over Turkey. The struggles for and around environmental entities, rivers in this case, are defined and discussed in the fields of political ecology, social movement studies, environmental justice, and environmental anthropology. In close dialogue with these bodies of literature, this book seeks to develop a novel, body-centered perspective on grassroots environmental movements in local communities, paying particular attention to gender as an integral aspect of our constitutive relation to nonhuman entities and environments. The body-centered perspective of this book is based primarily on an empirically grounded reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his followers. But I put Merleau-Ponty's work and contemporary (critical, feminist, post, and eco-) phenomenology in dialogue with broader critical and feminist theories, environmental humanities, human geography, posthumanist and new materialist perspectives, and Indigenous studies. The novel framework of the book emerged, slowly but surely, through these multi- and transdisciplinary engagements and

dialogues, anchored in profoundly empirical research, which enabled me to develop my body-centered approach into a comprehensive framework. Operationalizing this framework, I not only analyze the anti-HEPP activism in Turkey with a focus on the corporeal—that is, sensory and affective—experience of and interaction with river waters; I also develop a conceptual apparatus, encompassing discussions of gender, place, memory, identity, ontology, cosmology, ethics, and justice, that brings together the multiple dimensions of our relationship with and relationality to nonhuman entities and environments.

Hence, throughout this book I employ the body as a key methodological anchor not just to study lived experience, but to reveal how lived experience connects us to nonhuman entities and environments and to conceptualize the implications of this corporeal connectivity. *Fighting for the River* thus makes a double intervention, introducing and operationalizing a body-centered framework to study local environmental struggles, and framing them as *struggles for coexistence* (Escobar 2011; Larsen and Johnson 2017) to claim and protect the place-based, socio-ecological relations that involve nonhuman/environmental entities. Toward the end of the book, I develop the notion of *socio-ecological justice*, which frames human-nonhuman relationality as a matter of justice. My discussion of relational ontologies, ethics, and socio-ecological justice demonstrates the potential of a body-centered, phenomenological, and relational approach for rethinking our fundamental notions of living together with human and nonhuman others on Earth. *Fighting for the River* is, more than anything, an empirically grounded conceptual attempt to rethink our intimate (and gendered), social, corporeal, and affective relations with nonhuman entities and environments, and their implications for our socio-ecological existence, our identities, agencies, notions of justice, struggles, everyday practices, and ethical conduct—in short, for the future of our common life on Earth.

#### THE EMPIRICAL CASE AND THE EMERGENT ARGUMENT: FROM METHODOLOGY TO CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Turkey already has a relatively long history of constructing dams, especially in the context of the Southeast Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu*

*Anadolu Projesi*, or GAP), which was initiated as a regional development project involving multiple dams in the Tigris and Euphrates river basins.<sup>1</sup> However, with the exception of a few highly controversial mega dams such as Ihsu (Eberlein et al. 2010; Hommes, Boelens, and Maat 2016) and Yusufeli (Evren 2014), the new wave of hydropower development is dominated by private, small-scale, run-of-the-river HEPPs, which require little or no water storage.<sup>2</sup> They have emerged as a central element of the construction and energy-based growth strategy of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), the so-called bulldozer neoliberalism (Lovering and Türkmen 2011; see also Erensü 2018; Evren 2022) that has held sway over the last two decades.<sup>3</sup> HEPP licenses and construction boomed in the 2000s after the establishment of an open energy market,<sup>4</sup> as private construction and energy companies were given “extraordinary latitude to evict villagers, expropriate private land, clear state forests and steamroller normal planning restrictions to meet the target of four thousand hydroelectric schemes by 2023” (Gibbons and Moore 2011).<sup>5</sup>

Besides destroying the country’s river ecosystems and natural habitats,<sup>6</sup> private HEPPs also dispossess countless riverside communities that, for all intents and purposes, lose access to their rivers when they are diverted from their streambeds for a number of kilometers.<sup>7</sup> These communities began to organize themselves, mostly in the rural parts of Anatolia, as the effects of the first wave of plants became clear, especially around 2008 and 2009. A large and heterogeneous movement appeared in the villages and valleys of the country, which slowly led to regional and national networks (Hamsici 2010; Aksu, Erensü, and Evren 2016). The anti-HEPP movement in Turkey is a facet of a broader resistance to extractivism, the private enclosure of environmental commons, and the increasing exposure of natural entities and environments to the growth-and/or profit-oriented instrumental rationalities of states and markets.<sup>8</sup>

The transgressive, intersectional character of contemporary grassroots environmentalisms—as they cut across issues of ecology, economy, culture, and politics—was my starting point in researching local community movements against HEPPs in Turkey. The project’s focus, however, changed drastically during the research process. The empirical focus and the conceptual framework evolved in a recursive relationship to each



*Map 1.* The provinces of Turkey that are mentioned in the book: Ordu, Giresun, Trabzon, Rize, and Artvin in the East Black Sea Region (EBR); Kastamonu in the West Black Sea Region (WBR); Amasya in the Central Black Sea Region (CBR); Muğla, Antalya, and Mersin in the Mediterranean Region (MR); Erzurum and Dersim in the East Anatolia Region (EAR); and Diyarbakır in the Southeast Anatolia Region. See the appendix for detailed geographical information. Map by Serhat Karakayali.

other, in close dialogue, with the empirical taking more of the lead in shaping the conceptual. Hence this book is the result of a methodological and intellectual journey in which the empirical (data) was given the space to “speak” and, ultimately, to lead the research process toward novel, and often unexpected, conceptual engagements.

It all started with extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted from mid-2013 to late 2015 in three regions of Turkey where hydropower development is concentrated—the East Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and East and Southeast Anatolia (the latter being Turkey’s predominantly Kurdish region). To develop a comparative perspective, I visited and stayed in several provinces in each region, and multiple districts, villages, and valleys within each province. In designing my fieldwork, I used crite-

ria such as media coverage, public visibility, and availability of local contacts to select places where there was or had been strong community resistance to HEPPs. What shifted both the focus of the study and my conceptual framework entirely, however, was the voices of the villagers themselves. I did indeed interview local, regional, and national activists,<sup>9</sup> as well as lawyers and academics who work on the HEPP issue and/or are engaged in the struggle, in several locations: Ankara and Istanbul; Trabzon, Antalya, and Diyarbakır (Kurdish: Amed) (the main cities of the three regions I studied); and in various district centers. I did not, however, limit my interviews to activists and intellectuals, which is the underlying reason for the “elite bias” (Benford 1997) in social movement studies. The data set I relied on most heavily is composed of ethnographic interviews (Skinner 2012) and recorded conversations with more than one hundred villagers, slightly more women than men, as well as my own observations gathered through immersive fieldwork in the various locations.

I have thus combined the qualitative methods of social movement research (Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002; della Porta 2014)—in-depth interviews with activists and participants, documentary analysis of the visual and written texts produced by the movement and of media accounts of the movement<sup>10</sup>—with ethnographic research methods such as fieldwork, participant observation, recorded field notes, and ethnographic interviews. I prioritized talking to villagers who live under the immediate threat of HEPP projects in order to differentiate their discourses, narratives, and political agencies, along with the processes, experiences, and relations that shape them, from the motivations of the movement activists.<sup>11</sup> Still, I cannot claim that the empirical data I have collected are fully void of “elite bias,” as my entrée to many villages was through local activists. To balance the (in my case inescapable) bias that comes with being introduced in the field by well-known figures, in addition to triangulating multiple methods (Snow and Trom 2002) as detailed above, I talked to as many villagers as I could, when and wherever it was possible, in more formal interview settings as well as in less formal contexts (coffee houses, terraces, doorways, etc.).

This was also a strategy that allowed women’s voices to be audible and to come to the fore. I knew that women were very present and active on the ground, publicly visible at demonstrations and protests in their

traditional clothes, giving the whole movement a face and a voice. I also knew that women were behind the radicalism of the movement. As manifested in the words of Selime above, they were the ones who framed the struggle as an issue of life and death; they were the ones, especially if they were middle-aged or older, who talked openly about beating, killing, and being killed for the cause, whereas men used a more cautious language. Despite all that, women were severely underrepresented in the movement organizations, including local ones, as is the case in many other grassroots environmental and/or justice movements (see, e.g., Di Chiro 1992; Brown and Ferguson 1995; Kurtz 2007; Buckingham and Kulcur 2009).<sup>12</sup> Hence, the need to talk to at least as many women as men was clear to me, not because I went into the research with a consistent feminist methodology, but because I sensed that my research would otherwise misrepresent the movement.

Including women's voices proved to be a challenge, though, as men were more willing to talk and accustomed to taking charge,<sup>13</sup> while many women, despite being very confident, bold, and committed to action, tended to look to men when it came to responding to questions and giving interviews. Luckily, my insistence encouraged them, and being a woman made it possible for me to talk to them in their homes, on their doorsteps, and in the fields, during the routine flow of their daily lives, either alone or among their female peers. As a young (-looking) woman who did not fit their image of an academic (*hoca*, as we say in Turkish, a gender-neutral term that literally means "teacher/preacher" and is used for imams, school teachers, and university staff), I had the opportunity to be perceived as less "official."<sup>14</sup> People often asked me in the villages, "What kind of a *hoca* are you? You look like a student. You should be wearing something proper, like a *döpiyes*," a word that comes from the French *deux-pièces* ("two-piece suit") and refers to a famous style concept strictly associated with female civil servants. My less than official appearance, I believe, helped me to keep interviews informal and conversational. I also kept the conversation two-sided, which meant that I shared my own motives for researching their anti-HEPP activism if I was asked to. I tried to talk about myself as openly as I could, especially as I was asking them to share their experiences, motivations, and stories with me. This informal and conversational

mode relieved the pressure of being interviewed and made it easier for women to talk openly.

As I talked to women, it became immediately clear that the discourses, narratives, and forms of action they employed to communicate their resistance against HEPPs differed substantially from those of men (Yaka 2019a). For example, during my very first field trip in the summer of 2013, after spending two and a half hours in a village coffee house in Arılı (EBR) listening to men's theories on global warming, global struggles over fresh water, imperialist plans of the United States, Israel's efforts to grab "our" waters, and the close affinity between the War of Independence and the anti-HEPP movement (protecting the country—protecting the water),<sup>15</sup> I talked to women in the same village and heard a completely different story. Women told me about their childhood memories of rivers,<sup>16</sup> their identification with the places that they feel are defined by the river's course, and more often than not, their bodily (sensory and affective) connections with the rivers' waters. They talked about growing up by the river, waking up to the sight of the river every day, and falling asleep to the sound of it every night. They talked about the sensations and bodily affects, about the joy, rejuvenation, and relaxation they felt when they were immersed in river waters after working in the fields. They talked about the memories of their parents by the river and the sight of their children and grandchildren playing in the same waters they once played in.

The centrality of memories, past and present sensations, affective responses, and the emotions generated through the corporeal connection between bodies of women and bodies of water infiltrated their narratives of the anti-HEPP movement. Those narratives reveal the interconnectedness of female bodies with river waters as the main source of women's radical opposition to hydropower. It was those narratives of women and their everyday, corporeal experiences of river waters that led me to investigate the feminist literature on body, experience, and agency. As a result, corporeal feminism (see Grosz 1994) became my entry point to the long journey of establishing my own framework. In the coming sections I will unfold, step by step, the development of this conceptual framework and the arguments that have emerged through my rigorous empirical engagement and the multidisciplinary dialogues this engagement led me into.

THE BODY-SUBJECT: CRITICAL AND FEMINIST  
PHENOMENOLOGY IN THE ANALYSIS OF THE GENDER-  
BODY-AGENCY RELATIONSHIP

Diana Coole (2005, 131), a leading feminist scholar of phenomenology and new materialism, states that phenomenologists “might begin by explaining how problems that motivate political agents originate in somatic experience.” At the beginning of my research, I was not a phenomenologist, nor did I follow Coole’s suggestion. It was the empirical, ethnographic data I have collected, especially my conversations with women, that forced me to search for a conceptual language that could connect their somatic experiences with their political agency. It became immediately clear to me that the Foucauldian post-structuralist literature, which treats the body as a surface on which power and discourse act and are inscribed, as a sort of object that can be observed, shaped, monitored, disciplined, utilized and deployed, is of little use to me. My work rather called for an understanding of the body not only as formed, but also as simultaneously formative (see Coole and Frost 2010). I became interested in the body not only as an object and tool of subjection, but as a vehicle of subjectivization. In the case of the anti-HEPP struggles, my interest lies in how the corporeal connection, established with river waters through routine, habitual interactions within a more-than-human lifeworld, conditions women’s resistance to HEPPs. This requires attending to the body’s perceptive and affective capacities through which we inhabit, experience, and act upon the world we live in.

In his recent book *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, Hartmut Rosa states that the body not only oscillates between two poles—“the body as self” and “the body as world”—it is “the constitutive basis of both” (Rosa 2019, 84–85).<sup>17</sup> It is this constitutive character—of perception, experience, knowledge, consciousness, subjectivity, and political agency, as well as of our connectivity with others and with the more-than-human world we inhabit—that makes the body central for the purposes of this book. Attending to the body both as self and as world, as “the constitutive basis of both,” requires understanding its perceptive and agential capacities as immersed in the power-laden materiality of the world. Developing this particular understanding of the body, I followed in



the footsteps of feminist scholars—corporeal feminists, as Grosz (1994) would call them—who were inspired by or engaged in either Spinozan/Deleuzian or phenomenological traditions and presaged contemporary new materialist and posthumanist feminisms in many different ways.<sup>18</sup> My sympathies for the Spinozan/Deleuzian tradition aside, the particular advantage of phenomenology, especially the work of Merleau-Ponty, is that it provides conceptual tools for exploring women's concrete, lived experiences and embodied subjectivities as shaped within a more-than-human world, in the context of their environmental activism. As an empirical parenthesis here I would like to point out that while *Fighting for the River* draws mostly on women's experiences and narratives in building its main arguments, it does not exclude men's.<sup>19</sup> The need to include both women's and men's experiences and perspectives is based on an understanding of gender as inherently relational, and this of necessity includes the relation between sexes (Scott 1986, 2010). Men's experiences and narratives are not just used to reveal gender differences; they are also used to complement women's, as those differences are not essential but shaped by "the social positionings of lived bodies" (Young 2002, 422) along the lines of power hierarchies, cultural norms, and spatial structures.

What makes Merleau-Ponty's work particularly useful for the purposes of this study is his differentiation between the lived/phenomenal body and the physical/biological body. The body-subject is firmly based on the former, as "historical, social, cultural weavings" of materiality (Grosz 1994, 12). The concept of the body-subject analytically helps to maintain the subject as embodied and situated, while underpinning the analysis of experience and agency as emergent within a world of bodily encounters. Body-subject is situated, embodied, and enmeshed in a world of power-laden materialities, but still experiences the world from a particular location (of a particular body; see Rich 1984), and acts as a part of it. Merleau-Ponty located the body-subject within a relational ontological framework, especially in his later works, but he never dissolved it altogether. This makes his phenomenological approach particularly useful for a critical feminist analysis that recognizes that not only our physical bodies, but also our social beings and agential potentialities emerge within a more-than-human world of encounters, but that could not afford to give up on the notions of political agency and subjectivity altogether.

It is the task of critical feminist studies to flesh out the body-subject as differently sexed, raced, aged, as spatially and historically located, and as embedded within specific social, cultural, and sexual relations of power. The task is to attend to “embodied, situated and often more affective forms” (Simonsen and Koefoed 2020, 9) of first-person experience, as situated in an intersubjective, intercorporeal, and more-than-human interworld.<sup>20</sup> This book demonstrates a certain way of fulfilling this task by diving deep into empirical work and coming to the surface with a conceptual framework. It shows, on the empirical level, how to operationalize the body-subject, how our lived bodies connect us to our human and non-human environments, how we weave a bodily web of human and nonhuman beings through our routine, everyday interactions with them, and how this human-nonhuman web of relations defines our lifeworld, sociality, and agency. It illustrates how the physical, perceptive, and affective capacities of the lived body, as shaped by the socio-spatial organization of everyday practices, and historically specific constellations of social, cultural, and sexual relations, function as vehicles of agency, subjectivity, and relationality.

Framing bodily senses and affects as media of embodied subjectivity and human–nonhuman relationality (see below), in this book I transmit the lived (phenomenal) body from its familiar terrain of practice, experience, and identity to unexpected territories of political agency, memory, place, relational ontology, and more-than-human justice. I not only develop a novel, body-centered approach to studying grassroots environmentalism and the relationship among gender, environment, and activism, advancing the existing frameworks in related fields such as political ecology, human geography, social movement studies, and environmental justice; my arguments also contribute to phenomenological theory, especially to its feminist, critical, and post- currents, by discussing, modifying, and redeveloping concepts such as phenomenological reduction (bracketing), the anonymous body, the phantom limb, the *écart*, *Einfühlung*, *Ineinander*, and, of course, the lived body and the flesh, using the formative potentials of empirical work. In this book I go beyond merely “employing” the concepts to analyze the empirical; I put them in a close, mutually constructive, and transformative dialogue with one another.