

Herstory of the Periphery: Approaching Placemaking through Feminist Autoethnography

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September 2023

Volume:20

Issue:55

DOI: [10.26466/opusjsr.1347503](https://doi.org/10.26466/opusjsr.1347503)

Citation:

Bektaş Ata, L. & Coşar, S. (2023).

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Autoethnography

OPUS– Journal of Society

Research, 20(55), 649-656.

Abstract

This article elaborated on the possibilities of feminist interference to the reading of informal settlements. In so doing, we focused on a squatter settlement (Limontepe) in a metropolitan municipality (İzmir Metropolitan Municipality) in Turkey, and tried to interrogate the institutional, official history, based on city registers, parliamentary decisions and state and municipality archives. We argue that the way peripheral populations and/or marginalized groups are treated in official histories of nation-states leads to partial knowledge of the place. We propose that the knowledge collected, accumulated and exchanged through everyday lives of the inhabitants, past and present might be a viable option to check the official history writing and fill in the blanks therein. The article is an attempt to walk through feminist (auto)ethnography to tie the knowledge of the past to today's placemaking practices. As feminist researchers we consider engaging in the everyday life practices of inhabitants as a way to participate in the dynamic knowledge production processes of the place.

Keywords: *Informal settlements, ethnography, autoethnography, placemaking, everyday life, positionality.*

Öz

Bu makalede enformel yerleşim bölgeleri hakkında feminist okumanın sunduğu imkânlarla baktık. Bunu yaparken Türkiye'deki bir büyükşehir belediyesi (İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi) sınırlarında yer alan bir gecekondulu mahallesine (Limontepe) odaklandık ve belediye kayıtlarında, meclis kararlarında, devlet ve belediye arşivlerinde toparlandığı haliyle kurumsal resmî tarihin sınırlarını soruşturduk. Metnin arka plânındaki temel argümana göre, çeperlerdeki nüfusun ve/ya da marjinalleştirilmiş grupların resmî tarih kapsamında okunması mekân hakkında kısmî bilgi üretiyor. Böyle bir kısmiliğin farklı, eşitlikçi ve katılımcı önceliklerle şekillendirilen bilgi üretim süreçlerine uygun metotlarla dengelenebileceğini düşündük. Buna bağlı olarak enformel yerleşimlerde yaşayanların gündelik yaşamlarından doğru toplanan, biriken ve paylaşılan bilginin resmî tarihin kısmiliğinin denetlenmesi ve boşlukları doldurmak açısından işler bir seçenek olduğunu düşünüyoruz. Bu makalede, geçmişin bilgisini bugünün mekân kurulum pratiklerine bağlamakta feminist (oto)etnografiye dayandık. Feminist araştırmacılar olarak mahalle sâkinlerinin gündelik yaşam pratikleriyle ilişkilennmeyi mekâna dair durağan olmayan bilgi üretim süreçlerine katılmanın yolu olarak gördük ve metinde bununla ilgili dayanaklarımızı paylaştık. Makale, feminist bilgi üretim süreçlerine farklı pozisyonlardan katılımın yatay ilişkilennmeyle gerçekleştirilmesine bir örnek olarak tasarlandı

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Enformel yerleşimler, etnografi, otoetnografi, mekân kurulumu, gündelik hayat, konumsallık.*

Introduction

Limontepe is one of the informal settlements, constructed at the beginning of the 1970s by rural migrants from different regions of Turkey.¹ In November 2016, Leyla Bektaş Ata was walking around the neighborhood which was on the edge of urban transformation. Then, in January 2017, she officially stepped into her childhood neighborhood as a researcher. In the summer of the same year, she spent almost every day on the field. Towards the end of the year, she completed most of her field work. During the field process, while trying to access the official records of the region, she also listened to the life stories of the locals. Since she has living experience in the region, she included autoethnography in her theoretical work in understanding her knowledge-based encounters in the neighborhood. By using ethnography, she tried to make the daily life dynamics visible. In this process, every step she took at the institutional level resulted in disappointment.

Simten Coşar's involvement in the research process has been as mentor/corresponding author/first reader. She has been in constant contact with Bektaş Ata, reading her journal notes, discussing the points that might result in impasse in the field, in the communication with the research participants, in the way ethnographic and autoethnographic dynamics are balanced. The generational differences between the two authors are also helpful in exchanging intergenerational feedback on fieldwork. Additionally, Coşar's involvement in feminist politics and theory contribute to the feminist autoethnographic tendencies of both authors in reading and writing the field.

In this article, to better discuss the possibilities and limitations of accessing the memory of informal spaces in urban history, we pursue the following topics: 1. What are the implications of feminist autoethnography for informal histories? 2. How can one tie the everyday lives of informal habitants in urban life to placemaking? 3. What are

the basics of making one's own history as marginals in urban places? The article is composed of three main parts. In the first part, we offer a brief account of why and how we look at Limontepe as the field that speaks to feminist methodological concerns, and vice-a-versa. In so doing, we also relate to feminist history writing as a form of looking at the neighborhood. In the second part, we focus on our positionality in the field, in writing the field, and in the constitution of the knowledge of the field. Here, we approach feminist autoethnography as a means to relate the past with the present of a place. In the third and concluding part, we discuss the implications of everyday life narrations for placemaking.

Background to the field - how to read marginalized histories?

In July 2017, Bektaş Ata started her research on the implications of urban transformations in neoliberal times for squatter settlements. Side by side with the fieldwork she approached the municipality registers. As she visited the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality archives, she was directed to Karabağlar Municipality - Limontepe was located within the borders of this municipality during her field study. She could not collect working information there and she was directed to the Konak Municipality - Limontepe had been located within the borders of this municipality before it was merged into the Karabağlar Municipality. Here, Bektaş Ata faced the informalities of formal structures: Limontepe had gained neighborhood status before Konak was registered as a district. Next, Bektaş Ata tried her chance at the Ahmet Piriştina City Archive and Museum; there she could find the records of municipality decisions - alas, not classified, textualized, making it impossible to conduct a viable search - unless you are working imperial historiography. Bektaş Ata continued on the basis of the information that the headman of Limontepe gave to her - she scanned the decisions that were taken in 1979. Still, no working data. She tried local newspapers, other

especially in the 2000s, the majority of the households started to have more livable structures, and the neighborhood was regulated and physically upgraded.

¹ When the migrants came to Limontepe, the place did not have essential services, a proper infrastructure system and transportation. The migrants built incremental houses and

units of the municipalities to no avail. As we all encounter in different stages of fieldwork as women researchers, Bektaş Ata, too, had to endure mansplaining in her trials to collect data in different municipal bodies. As she approached official registers and communicated with the related authorities, all of whom are male, about her research she had to endure their rather uneducated and vulgar interventions about how research should be pursued. Similar experiences can be observed in different fields where one has to encounter non-feminist and non-egalitarian researchers and/or *authorities*: Ignorance of feminist epistemologies is inherent in masculinist knowledge production processes. This ignorance feeds male arrogance the claim the only truth - in knowledge, methods, and related political and social extensions.

The written and oral correspondence she pursued, her archival research has not led her to any working information and/or knowledge. Thus, her relation to the neighborhood as a researcher started from the point of almost no prior institutional information. She relied on the memories from her childhood when she lived in the neighborhood, her parents' acquaintances in the neighborhood to make preliminary contacts. She decided to extend the interviews into conversations that involved group meetings, individual encounters inside the houses, and outside, while walking up and down in the neighborhood, her observations about the neighborhood are organized and re-organized. In this respect, oral history turns out to be an invaluable means to access the accounts of the inhabitants about their everyday experiences. Steven High (2011, p. 226) emphasizes that oral history "allows us to shift from learning about these places from a safe distance to learning with those who live there—to understanding what happened and why in conversation" - it is also valuable in terms of feminist knowledge production. This method allows one to document the micro-history of the squatter. Also, in line with Eduardo Ascensão's (2016, p. 953) arguments, oral history helps one to voice the presence of the Limontepe inhabitants, who have been almost disappeared in the urban registries, from the urban spaces and whose *herstories* are excluded from the

history of the urban placemaking. As someone who lived in the neighborhood for many years, Bektaş Ata also took the opportunity to be *present* in the field not only as an outsider/researcher, but as someone who researches her own experiences in cooperation with those of the other inhabitants. Eventually, she has not refrained from being *present* in the text, too: relating her experiences to the life stories of the inhabitants, and making their experiences audible in her own life story (Daniels, 2002, p. 56).

This has led us to consider autoethnography as one major conduit to write the present of the neighborhood, in accordance with feminist epistemological priorities. Feminist autoethnography helps us in gathering everyday knowledge of Limontepe people, as well as the history of the place. We think that doing so conforms with feminist epistemology in three respects: 1. knowledge of the present involves also talking about the past (Burton, 1992); 2. knowledge-production through personal and collective accounts of those who live in and make the place involves their encounters with institutional, official and chronological histories of the place; 3. autoethnography helps us to have our own narrations about the way we are present in the field, how we relate to it and to knowledge that is produced there as well as that we produce by our presence in the field. Thus, it helps us to be present in the placemaking.

Autoethnography relies on the knowledge derived from researchers' personal experiences to develop a critical approach to the established cultural beliefs and practices. Researchers' relationship with other actors in the field is deemed important in knowledge production. The method questions the distinctions between "I and society", "partial and general", "personal and political" (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis 2015, pp. 1-2). It tries to show how people live, what they do, the meaning of their struggles, to establish a balance between the intellectual and the methodological. As a form of feminist methodology that opposes the idea of *hygienic research* (Kelly et. al. 1994, p. 46), autoethnography is closely related to the subjectivity of the researcher. Bektaş Ata takes this one step further and defines autoethnography as the

transformation of the researcher into the field. Here we shall clarify what field means to us: We define the field as a plane that somehow starts with the researcher/s but is not limited to them, extends to different settings and then returns to the researcher/s. Hence, we consider field as space that extends from shaping the research idea to contacting the relevant region as part of knowledge production processes.

Before the research in Limontepe started, we certainly had knowledge of feminist criticism of history writing. In parallel, our positioning in the field has long been shaped in accordance with feminist priorities. Thus, we have been keen on minimizing the distinction between the researchers' relations to the field and that of the other participants. Approaching the process mainly as one of knowledge-production, realized in collaboration with all that happen to be in the field helped us in this to a great extent. The same approach eventually led us to consider the way to access background knowledge about the field. Feminist criticisms of history writing have paved the way for two basic research fields: writing herstories (Scott, 1986), finding the women ignored in the histories, and, writing and rewriting feminist histories (Grosz, 2000), not only of the North but also those of the Souths. In all these studies, the institutional, chronological, official histories have proved to marginalize women, and all the other subjects that deviate from the idealized male identities. The fact that Bektaş Ata could not access any systematic, registered historical input about the constitution, consolidation of and the current developments in Limontepe as part of the urban space is directly related to such marginalization:

The scans of the decisions in the City Archive are not in PDF format. It is not possible to perform word-based search via visuals. The fact that each decision spans hundreds of pages makes it impossible to read and follow the decisions. On the basis of the information, I obtained from the personal records of the neighborhood's former headman about its foundation in July 1979, I decided to examine a few months of that year. However, the documents for February to October 1979 are not in the archive. I also couldn't find what I was

looking for in the local newspapers (August 2017, Bektaş Ata's field notes).

Municipal authorities in their offices, archives of all places, museums are constructs and artefacts that seem to serve human purpose to control time and stabilize the spatial fluidity of human life. They help us to get glimpses of what happens when and where; yet we might argue that it is not possible to rely solely on them to elaborate on the history of the present, the relationality of our everyday lives as it emerges in our individual and collective existence. The unfolding of history, the movement of urban spaces in historical accounts lack human existence in its totality when one considers merely the institutionalized, chronological and mostly male historical data. In other words, we lack our everyday experiences in the making of history when we draw our understanding of the place only from the registries -state branches, municipality archives, conventional museums and libraries, which generalizes the officially recognized moments of importance to the whole population, thus fixing the place in *a* moment of time.

In the neglected areas of Turkish cities for decades, where archiving was given minimal importance, and where basic services were accessed through individual (interest-based) relationships, the path to obtain information about these places inevitably lies not in institutions but in the individual archives/memories. Building the knowledge of the place may require painstakingly weaving it together from the memories of its residents (Bektaş Ata, 2021, p. 35).

Urban ethnographers refer to different styles of experiencing the urban space to capture the fluidity of space in time as it shifts between the past and the present in the narrations of people (See for example, Pink, 2008; Lee & Ingold, 2006; Önen, 2016; Bektaş Ata, 2022; Iared & de Oliveira, 2017). Walking ethnography offers the grounds to find the stories that crosscut our memories of and presence in the spaces as we move across them (Jane Ricketts Hein cited in High, 2011, p. 217). Bektaş Ata considers the integration of a mobile aspect to our autoethnographic inquiries about the making of Limontepe as an urban space to be fruitful since it helps us to observe the implications of the subjects' relations with nature and

constructed environments, as well as the implications of mobility for narrating personal and collective experiences. Added to the general habitat of sitting and interviewing, sitting and conversing, sitting and writing, walking and conversing, riding on the bus or in the taxi and conversing sheds additional light on the way the everyday rhythms of the everyday life in the neighborhood and the routine of the inhabitants, as well as those who experience the larger urban space through passing by. Jane Ricketts Hein (2011, p. 218) states "Walking, like telling stories, is the movement between places." Bektaş Ata started research in her childhood neighborhood *to move between spaces of knowledge in the everyday life* of a community that goes through rapid transformation. Her walking, and especially walking together corresponds to the way Lee and Ingold (2006, p. 67) underline in elaborating on participation: "[to] participate is not to walk into but to walk with – where 'with' implies not a face-to-face confrontation, but heading the same way, sharing the same vistas, and perhaps retreating from the same threats behind."

The walks Bektaş Ata took in the neighborhood together with the inhabitants of the place helped her to understand the priorities of the place, as well as the way these priorities talk to her research. Thus, she could "harness the power of place in [the] methodology" as Jon Anderson reminds (cited in High, 2011). The walk she took in her first visit allowed her and her childhood friends to muse over their childhood games, neighborly relations, their longings, what they lost and what they wanted to achieve. The methodology came out of everyday life and encouraged her approach the place as a research field to better understand everyday life and the story of the place. The place allowed her to listen to its own story while she oscillated between the past and the future - a text that can never be fixed, and that can never be written just by the researcher.

Ethnography for historical insights - Past and present in everyday accounts

Coşar's involvement in Bektaş Ata's research can be considered in relation to writing as walking together: asking questions, reading together, and

actually writing on the same page at the same time. Asking questions through the visuals that Bektaş Ata brings into Coşar's world of meanings, reading the visuals, literature and field notes together. Searching for possible answers separately and together. Coşar relates to Bektaş Ata's research within the scope of feminist interventions to academic knowledge production. Before, during and after Bektaş Ata's research in Limontepe the two researchers have always been actively engaged in discussion on feminist knowledge production. For about a decade their intergenerational scholarly relation has unfolded through feminist friendship. In the case of research in Limontepe Coşar positioned mostly as a physical outsider, looking at the stories, getting to know the place by means of the stories; accompanying and monitoring Bektaş Ata's writing process; sharing experience in knowledge production; stepping in when Bektaş Ata encounters impasse in the place; and finally calling back from the place-as-the-field back to the writing desk. Coşar has been well-versed in maleist narrations of history: looking at interstate relations through leaders, classifying eras according to heroic acts, looking at states as actors in themselves, treating daily encounters of people as details, spoiling the explanatory power of *history* writing. Her relation to feminist knowledge production process has unfolded from add and stir formulas to valuing partial accounts of everyday politics as significant assets for understanding the past and the present in social science. In our collaborative reading, learning, discussing and writing experiences both Coşar and Bektaş Ata, thus, rely on feminist history and the women's history that is disappeared in the maleist histories. Bektaş Ata's research experience in and her research about an informal setting are telling in this respect. It offers us the space to consider the knowledge of the place with feminist historical priorities.

Although this space materializes with Bektaş Ata's stepping into the Limontepe, we started our experience sharing and discussions on our approach to field research almost a decade ago. We start with how we feel about the field, the place, the people we talk to, about the way they approach us. Sharing feelings at first hand helps us to

acknowledge the subjective aspects in our readings of the knowledge at hand, get a glimpse of our academic biases, smoothens the prejudgments that we have due to our symbolic capital, and come to terms with the pros and cons of our intergenerational collegiality and feminist friendship. Although we do not use the term "kitchen table reflexivity" (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2014), we are not far from using "our separate stories... to introduce 'everyday talk' as a methodological tool qualitative researchers can use to interrogate their positionalities through formal and informal conversations" (p. 2). In a nutshell, we engaged in critical discursive practices on academic knowledge production with a view to feminist priorities.

Autoethnography is a major part not only in Bektaş Ata's research field but also in our feminist collegial exchanges on academic knowledge production. In this work where we offer an intergenerational account of feminist knowledge production in different fields it contributes to reveal our experiences, expectations, and the hurdles and barriers we have encountered as well as the tactics we have developed. In Bektaş Ata's intergenerational research in Limontepe it has parallel contributions. The meanings of getting an education on the periphery of the city and growing up as an urban poor in the first quarter of the 2000s, were collected from personal narratives and played an important role in understanding the social structure.

Bektaş Ata's relation to her field helped her to evade the problems, caused by the disappearance of the history of the neighborhood in the institutional history. As she notes field adds its own methods and tactics into the researcher's agenda. Thus, she starts with the individual narratives to reach to a collective past narrative. She also adds her own life story as a past resident of Limontepe, during until she graduated from the high school. Thus, life story, ethnography and autoethnography works in her case to have critical look at the everyday life practices in the neighborhood and the use of the place by the inhabitants. Here history of the place unfolds through the first-generation inhabitants in their accounts of placemaking - actual, physical construction of the settlement as a neighborhood.

The second generation talk through a different past but mostly about the present - compared to the first generation they tend to use the place in order to break with it, thus to *unmake* it.

Coşar's involvement in Bektaş Ata's field was indirect to a great extent: she could have brief information about the field from Bektaş Ata's field notes, their planned meetings to discuss the stage of the research, the dynamics of the field, Bektaş Ata's positive and negative experiences on the field, as well as occasional audio, e-mail and video communication when they felt they - the research - asked for it. She could reflect on the problems that Bektaş Ata encountered with a view to her own autoethnographic research on academic knowledge production processes. Bektaş Ata's experiences on the field would help Coşar during self-indulgent moments, quite probable in contemporary academic settings. In parallel, as the academic history has its own well-entrenched male discourse, pushing feminist knowledge to peripheral positions, if not ignoring it she tended to invite the academics to narrate the history of the present. Bektaş Ata's experiences with the personal narrations of people offered feedback to Coşar, in this respect, too, while also confirming that every field calls for its own tactics in listening, conversing, and telling.

We acknowledge that memories differ in personal and group settings, and depending on time and the place they are recalled. They work on particulars, and thus are dubious in social science settings (Chang, 2016, p. 72). Coşar's field in this sense is less risky, since academics themselves are mostly silent in memories about which they are not clear. This creates problems as in some cases they disremember the instances which do not make sense to them. As Bektaş Ata admits people may create, rewrite their lives, and, in a sense, "clear" something while telling (Aleksiyevich, 2016, p. 14). However, we both value the knowledge that unfolds from remembering, telling, keeping silent, retelling the past of everyday lives in different settings - especially when that past is disappeared from the institutional registers.

Conclusion: Placemaking as everyday practices

Bektaş Ata's research gives us a picture about the problems in urban policies, in the example of İzmir Metropolitan Municipality. Neoliberal times invite people to speed in everyday engagements, to self-indulgence in the present at the expense of the past and the future of communities and collectivities. Urban policies that do not prioritize city memory fit into such devaluation, mostly resulting in the lack of accessible city archives and neglect of the local knowledge. Added to the conventional history writing that mostly considers high politics - relations at macro levels, national and/or federal decision-making processes the research in the periphery, with the marginalized, about the poor asks for counter-methodologies - methodologies that counter maleist priorities in knowledge production. Bektaş Ata's resort to the notes that locals keep, their re-membering of the past, and their narration that connect the past and the present helps us to get the local knowledge that otherwise disappears. The intervention of the local knowledge to the placemaking in an informal setting thus reveals the parts of urban life that are mostly excluded from research processes and from the city memory, as registered in the state eye.

As ethnography uses the knowledge of the past in accessing the contemporary dynamics of informal settings it helps us to see the placemaking through bodily and imaginary practices of the people who actually live in the public and private spheres of the place (Pink, 2008). For example, ethnographic look enables us to see the way inhabitants relate to the neighborhood while expecting urban transformation: living with the possibility of total constructional change or learning about similar experiences prevents the inhabitants to make changes on and in their houses. The idea of urban transformation pushes them to postpone their interventions to placemaking practices. As "Places also gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts" (cited in Pink, 2008, p. 178). This state of affairs is also fed by contemporary dynamics; as the neoliberal economies sink into crisis everyday life becomes more vulnerable to uncertainty, and fear takes a major role in people's relation to their environment - public and private.

While ethnographic look brings the researchers into the informal, registering its knowledge in the academic knowledge production processes feminist (auto)ethnographies bring in counter-dispositions, as Özcan and Coşar (2023 forthcoming) note, "engaging in autoethnography, we take risks—a popular term in neoliberal times. We risk limiting our accounts to partiality, subjectivity, cultural boundedness, which, in effect, define our narrative" (p. 184). Feminist discussions in and around the research help us explore ways and means to challenge the patriarchal intrusions that await knowledge production. As informal settlements are not designed to be available for walking with - and mostly just for walking towards, walking away, walking from, or walking in - they do not have the opportunity to experience the anonymity of urban publicity. Privacy keeps circulating and pervading the common areas. Feminist autoethnography enables us to see the private in the public of the informal settlements, and the public in the privacy of the houses. It "enables writing that reveals the hidden inequalities in the supposedly balanced meritocracy of academic knowledge production" (Özcan & Coşar, 2023 forthcoming, p. 194). Engaging in knowledge production with such priorities in urban studies gives us the hints to evade exploitative relations with the knowledge of the others. Feminist autoethnography and collaborative knowledge production promise opportunities for more participatory and horizontal relationships in the fields where places are actually created, as well as in the writing processes.

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