

## Critical Edges

### Episode 1.3.

#### Dynamics of Margins in the Antakya Borderlands

KATHERINE HALL

Welcome to the “Critical Edges” podcast. In this podcast we explore critical edges that may seem distant and marginal at first glance, but which are in fact very much connected to, and even interdependent with our global society and politics. In our podcast we discuss with different scholars who have, one way or the other, addressed critical edges critically.

KATHERINE HALL

Bell Hooks argued that margins can become a “site of resistance, a location of radical openness and possibility”. But what are the dynamics that can create change in critical edges, and how could these dynamics create radical futures? In this episode, I'm talking to Doctor Şule Can, a sociocultural anthropologist at Binghamton University's Center for Middle East and North Africa studies.

Şule's research investigates displacement, borders, ethnoreligious boundaries, disaster and cultural heritage, urban politics and anthropology of the Middle East. Much of her work has focused on her hometown, Antakya, a border city in Turkey's Hatay region with its rich history and current complex dynamics. Şule's various research projects have explored gender and the politics of solidarity work and oral histories and memory in this border area.

So it comes as no surprise that Şule's research considers several critical edges - social, political, and geographical - in a very dynamic space. Şule describes herself as an activist researcher and is deeply engaged in Antakya's lively multicultural community. Since February 6th 2023, when devastating earthquakes hit southern Turkey and northwest Syria, killing at least 60,000 people and destroying much of Antakya, Şule's research has focused on grassroots activism movements that sprung up around the reconstruction, efforts and which seek to ensure those efforts are inclusive, just and preserve Antakya's unique, vibrant social and cultural fabric. So without further ado. This is Katherine in the studio, and I warmly welcome Şule to this podcast episode to explore the dynamics of margins.

Şule, thank you so much for being here with me today, and it's really a pleasure to have you with us. So, in many ways, your personal and academic journeys have been quite interlinked. Can you tell us about how you came to research? Can you describe your journey for us?

ŞULE CAN

Thank you so much. Yes, of course, I would be happy to. First of all, thank you, Katie, for hosting me at this podcast. And it's quite exciting to join. And it's always a pleasure to talk about my own research and how I came to this level, to this particular research topic. So, as you also described a little bit, I started this journey more as an activist, because I was always interested in, you know, politics, especially in Turkey. Mostly interested in human rights of the people who are more marginalized in Turkey, and, from different ethnoreligious backgrounds. This was partly because of my background, of course, because I come from an ethnoreligious community that is less known in Turkey, but also, you know, I think in the world in general. My academic research also starts, you know, thinking about the questions revolving around assimilation, community building, and it was more about, you know, ethnic and linguistic identities. So these questions kind of led me to study more kind of social, cultural construction of communities in many ways. And also I was always interested in advocacy work. So I was always active in different civil society groups in many ways.

And then I found room in anthropology, I would say, where I could actually do a kind of public face of anthropological and ethnography work. And then, I could also kind of engage theoretically in these academic spaces. When I started my PhD in the US, Binghamton University, State University of New York, I was thrilled to find that advisor who thinks about borders, writes about borders and boundaries in many ways.

And then actually that kind of dissertation work helped me study thoroughly in an ethnographic context migration and displacement. And that coincides with 2011 where, you know, Syrian crisis broke out and I started working with Syrian refugees. And that was another kind of crisis point for Antakya, as it is right now too unfortunately.

But I kind of started thinking about borders and boundaries and displacements more and more. And then, that was my dissertation work, and that continued afterwards. So Antakya had a lot in... It is my hometown, but it had a lot to do, actually, with my academic journey.

KATHERINE HALL

So, Antakya is a very dynamic place. I mean, everything that is happening there is quite dynamic and dramatic. What are the dynamics actually taking place in Antakya at the moment, and can you tell us a bit about what has shaped them?

ŞULE CAN

I will definitely start with, I mean, Antakya as an ancient town. At the same time we can talk about many different layers of histories, right? Many different aspects of identity culture in many ways. And I do think that, you know, Antakya is a very

interesting place, a microcosm of this cultural, geographical factors, aspects in many ways. It's a border city, first of all, but at the same time, for the sake of understanding more kind of modern construction of this urban margin, is probably the post Ottoman context.

I would, you know, definitely start how after the First World War, how Antakya's history has been shaped. So, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Antakya was actually Sanjak. It was known as *Liwa' Al-Iskandarūna* in arabic, which is Sanjak of İskenderun. And it was actually under the French mandate. So it was part of the French Mandate of Syria until 1939. So when Turkey was first established this province was not part of Turkey. So, there was also a lot of claims over this territory, different communities having different positions in terms of, you know, supporting Turkey or Syria or the French.

So it was never very linear. And I mean, history is never linear in that sense, but at the same time, that moment in history created certain circumstances where, you know, there were multiplicity of identities and different ideologies kind of competing with each other. And that's also part of the story of, you know, erasure of certain histories, certain communities in many ways. Because in 1939, when the province was annexed by Turkey. Turkey claimed that the region is Turk and Turkish and claimed, you know, that Turkish speaking population was already there and dominating and that kind of understanding of nation state in many ways is like "if there are Turkish speaking communities, then it needs to be part of Turkey". Kind of claims.

And also, of course, there were a lot of, you know, agreements with the French colonial forces. And in fact, what happened was that Turkey kind of designed the province in many ways. And 1939 was the start of erasure of Arabic language and Arab heritage of Antakya.

KATHERINE HALL

So, was 1939, the time when Antakya and the Hatay region actually became a contested space? Or was it contested before that as well?

ŞULE CAN

I do think that it is, it was to some extent a contested space, yes. But after 1939 Syria blamed Turkey, kind of, for annexing this territory. So Syria had claims. Syria was under the French mandate until 1946. So 1939 is important because that's the time when the province joined Turkey. It became part of Turkey with the people in there. So, suddenly it was like "oh, we were part of another country, and now we're a part of Turkey". So of course they were all given citizenship and people continued as kind of Turkish citizens, right? But then, a lot of, you know, for a lot of communities, it was a milestone because, now what?

How were they going to really exist and how were they going to continue? So it was interesting. And that's why there was a lot of migration as well.

So a lot of people left Antakya, when Turkey annexed, because some of them were, you know, such as Armenians, some of them were concerned about their safety or about if they were going to be welcomed or not. It was an issue. If there was going to be any kind of violence towards, you know, for example, Christian minorities. So it has become, I would say, more contested because multiple states had claims on the territory, but also, secondly, it has become contested because now there was the question of living together. How, you know, these different identities, communities, and also under the shadow of this persecution processes, what kind of, you know, space was it going to be? That was what made it more contested than ever, I would say.

KATHERINE HALL

And so thinking about what is happening in Antakya today, can you describe the dynamics that are happening there at the moment? I mean, we have fast forwarded several decades, almost a century since the annexation. We've had several significant and dramatic events. What's actually happening in Antakya right now?

ŞULE CAN

Yes. I think there have been a lot of moments that changed the dynamics, and most of the times were quite challenging, actually, for Antakya people. Obviously, you know, people have been accommodated in Turkey and also Antakya has become a very kind of special place, where different, ethnoreligious communities live together. And there is also kind of like unique, urban culture there, where it is more inclusive than other places, I would say. Especially, you know, in Turkey, besides the metropolitan areas, you know, at the peripheries, this is not something that you see, but also we know that border areas are always, you know, mixed and vivid and very...kind of the transition is always there and very dynamic within itself. And Antakya is such a place too. But also in 2011, for example, when the Syrian crisis broke out, it was an important moment because Syrian refugees mostly preferred, or needed to stay in borderlands. And Antakya was one of the destinations for a lot of Syrian refugees. So, after 2011, gradually, there were hundreds of thousands refugees in Antakya.

Today we're not sure about the numbers, but right before the earthquake we know that it was almost 400,000. And the province itself had, you know, 1.6 million population. So we're really talking about a big community joining in Antakya. And some of them, for example, in my studies I observe that some of them actually wanted to stay in Antakya because of its Arab heritage, because of it's, you know, kind of similarity to Damascus or Aleppo in Syria.

And some people stayed there because, you know, they always hoped that they would go back to Syria. And for some of them it is the case today. But these dynamics kind of influence how people engage with the city as well. Right? So, and it showed once again that it is a border city that is always changing in its landscape and demographics and whatnot.

For Antakya people it was an interesting moment because, you know, there was a lot of questions about refugee populations and, you know, Turkey's Syria policy. So from time to time, there have been tensions, but still, again I think Antakya showed its uniqueness in that sense. Even though, you know, I cannot say everybody was welcoming to refugees at all, but there weren't any major tensions.

So today there is still, you know, a significant refugee population, Syrian population in Antakya. And more recently, in 2023, the earthquake, kind of now is the main issue. And in the post-disaster context, the main question is what's going to happen, right? Because the city has been destroyed in many parts. And also as a result of that there has been a lot of displacement and dispossession.

KATHERINE HALL

So what are the different groups that might be hoping to influence the city's future?

ŞULE CAN

So there are many solidarity groups and grassroots organizations in Antakya. And, of course, in post-disaster context there have been a period where there was a relief, and, you know, kind of humanitarian work mostly. And we saw a lot of national and international NGOs going to the area. But now, you know, last week marked the second anniversary of the earthquake, on February 6th, and after two years right now there is mostly local groups who actually work really hard to maintain a social, cultural life, but also with the recovery.

I've been also part of these efforts. We are trying to build community centers, we're trying to also kind of voice to the problems, the issues that exist in Antakya. From human rights violations to, kind of, seeking for justice, for the people who died. And we are also working hard to influence urban reconstruction processes in many ways because it is very centralized, and, you know, the kind of the decisions that are made are not involving in communities. So we are kind of voicing our... All the efforts themselves are for community led planning and community led reconstruction in many ways.

But also recovery itself has been very long because the conditions under which people live right now in Antakya are horrific, literally. And it's been two years and we still see little progress in kind of providing any relief or any kind of nice, humane spaces for people to live in.

There in the camps, you know, almost 250,000 people are in this "container cities". They call them container cities. They are literally camps, right? Including refugees and locals all over.

And there is also like a very fast construction of these physical buildings. And a lot of people, grassroots organizations and movement talk about social and cultural heritage, and how to kind of recover people themselves. And on the government side or on the reconstruction of the physical buildings nobody actually cares about, you know, they are just like trying to mass produce these apartment buildings and just to accommodate people. But there is no holistic approach towards, like, how to make this urban Antakya come to life again.

KATHERINE HALL

And so what are these grassroots solidarity movements actually doing to try and bring back that cultural fabric of Antakya?

ŞULE CAN

So there are different groups. For example one of them is Deprem Dayanışması. I worked with them really closely, the earthquake solidarity. So what they do is they actually have multiple areas of work. They work with women, for example, to respond to their needs. And, you know, they work with children and they also come up with a lot of projects in terms of memory and heritage. There is also a group, for example, that I'm part of as a writer, I contribute, as well.

There is a platform called Nehna.. *Nehna* is an Arabic word for saying *us*. So Nehna is, for example, doing a lot of memory work, right? Focusing on cities, memory spaces, for example. And how people remember certain social and cultural spaces. There are many grassroots aorganizations that I cannot really list all of them. They are really working hard to preserve somehow the, I mean, the ancient town is almost completely destroyed, right? What they are trying to preserve is they're trying to kind of rebuild it to avoid the touristification and to have that local soul and aspects and spirit to it.

KATHERINE HALL

That's quite a risk, actually in Turkey, we've seen in other cities around Turkey that very important historical and cultural sites and cities actually become open to mass tourism.

ŞULE CAN

Yes. We've seen this example, also, I think, elsewhere too. Even in Western contexts and even, you know, what we call *disneylandification*, at the same time. Where actually a lot of these places in Diyarbakir, in Sur, for example, which is in Turkey too, another major city affected by the conflict in Turkey.

And in a lot of them what we see is that the rebuilding and reconstruction is based on a touristic gaze, instead of understanding local's needs and actually aspects of heritage. Right?

So in that sense, you know, kind of preservation of cultural heritage has become a very redundant and very kind of straightforward thing where they're like, "oh, we're going to just rebuild as it is". But for whom? And you're displacing whom, dispossessing whom? Who's going to own it?

So these kind of questions are quite important because we as anthropologists ask them a lot more. I don't know if we can influence any policies or if we are, you know, really helping in any way. But I'm hoping that at least kind of raising these questions are creating some kind of, you know, resistance to this kind of imposition. And, we've seen that in gentrification all the time. Right? Urban anthropologists know them very well. So it is an issue in many ways.

Recently I have been working with ASF-UK, Architecture Sans Frontières, based in the UK, Architecture Without Borders. And we also collaborate with kind of local groups and communities and grassroots organizations. Our motto is "what makes Antakya is the people".

So it is more, kind of, we are inviting everybody to think about people and their heritage. You know, in an intangible form or other forms, rather than just understanding physical structures as the point of reconstruction. So that's why I think a lot of grassroots organizations and artists and art groups, you know, they also work hard for the recovery. They're trying to understand how artistic production and reproductions can help, with children, for example. And there are different union groups working, you know, hard to improve the conditions in education and in health.

And, you know, there are ecology groups working for this environmental disaster too. Because earthquake happened, and what is happening right now it is an ecological disaster. I mean, the whole city is literally under the kind of cloud of dust. And there are really, you know, emerging health problems there. So what I'm trying to say is that all these movements merge under the kind of contributing to or helping the city heal better. And also to resist any reconstruction policies that are centralized that ignore Antakya's uniqueness, I would say.

KATHERINE HALL

Would be interesting to consider if these grassroots movements are actually able to have any influence and impact on the so-called centers. You've mentioned many different groups from artists, environmentalists. All of these people and movements come from quite marginal areas, I mean not only geographically in this context as well. Is there the potential for these grassroots movements coming from these very critical edge to have any influence on the centers? So on national policies?

ŞULE CAN

That's a hard question to answer. It's because it's hard to understand the impacts immediately. Right? But I do think that there is a lot of merit in what they are doing. And first of all I think the resilience is just in itself an amazing example of how, you know, people can fight to decide the fate of their own cities and kind of resist in many ways after such a devastating disaster.

But the second thing is that at the policy level I think it is really difficult to influence the policies in Turkey because most of the time these decisions are just implemented.

And in many ways, you know, they kind of ignore, as I said, the local authorities in many ways whether they are municipalities or civil society groups. It doesn't matter, they're usually dismissed in these efforts. But, that being said, I think, there are many examples where people demonstrated and really came against certain decisions and they were withdrawn. So there was, you know, a lot of cases where people won actually. And, you know, so it does work in many ways, the work that we have done. But at the same time, I think the impact on policy is less of a concern for some grassroots organizations because recovery becomes a priority here. The state itself is not going to initiate these kind of efforts for communities and for community healing. So that's what these are organizations mostly do. And, I would say quite successfully in many ways.

KATHERINE HALL

Can you tell us about your research into the reconstruction efforts happening in Antakya at the moment and into these grassroots movements?

ŞULE CAN

It's hard to summarize because I have two lines of work that I involve right now. So one is something that I do here at Binghamton, which is "mapping February 16th in Antakya". It's a digital memorial.

And the second one is the work that we started with a group of scholars, including anthropologists, historians and artists, to build a digital archive of Antakya based on social, cultural and historical memory of the city.

The first one. I will talk about that a little bit because that's something that I hope to kind of launch and announce in May 2025. And we have been really working diligently with a project team here at Binghamton right now. We came up with this idea when we were discussing with a friend of mine, based in New York City, Pinar Yeşiloğlu, she's from Antakya as well, and we were talking about the statistics, the numbers of people who died in the earthquake.



As you also announced in the introduction, the official numbers that was uttered by the state officials, state agents were 53,000. And in Antakya a lot of people and disaster survivors, including myself, we all claim that this number doesn't represent the truth. It's it's way more than 53 000.

We're not talking about Hatay only, the province of Hatay or Antakya only. They are talking about 53 000 in 11 cities. And people in Antakya believe that it is over 50,000 in Antakya alone. Right.

KATHERINE HALL

Oh my god...

ŞULE CAN

Yes. People claim that. There are a lot of claims here and there, but there are also a lot of...there's a kind of lack of, you know, information in terms of how we can conclude the numbers.

So that was part of the conversation. The reason why I'm talking about this is because it will make more sense when I talk about what we are doing actually with math on February 6th. And the second thing is that we always wanted a kind of a digital platform where people could share their memories of the people. So there are actually different platforms like Nehna, for example, started this platform about sharing memories of the city. Right. It's through crowdsourcing. So people actually contribute to these memories and it's kind of interactive website. And that's wonderful. But we were talking about how about people that we lost in the earthquake. If there was a platform where.. an intimate space, but digital, where people just like share whatever they want to share about people they lost in the earthquake.

So we kind of combined this conversation into one digital space. And now we're building a website where there will be mapping of the buildings that collapsed in February 6th, and showing how many people approximately (we cannot know for sure) but approximately the number of people who died in those buildings. And, if possible, if you can't get the information, the list of people who died in those buildings. So we are pinpointing the buildings by showing also how many people died in those buildings.

But also we wanted to create this digital memorial within the same website, if possible, for people to be able to share their memories about the lost, loved ones. It is going to be based on, of course, people's willingness to share, if they want to only. But it is a good opportunity for us to think about kind of digital humanities and understanding actually the work that we do in a critical perspective. But where also we can contribute to recovery and healing in many ways. Right.

So in that sense I have collected some data. And whenever I am in Antakya, there are people who I know, who died, including friends, relatives and here and their neighbours. So in that sense it is emotionally heavy. And it is a challenging one. Absolutely. But, I think now, I mean, two years after this disaster I felt like, "okay, we need to make it happen". I think it was just there as an idea, but I couldn't start doing it. B now we're at a place where we can actually understand how mourning and remembering, commemorating those we lost is part of that recovery.

KATHERINE HALL

I'm so sorry again for everyone that you lost. And just for this horrible, horrible tragedy. You're in a very unique position. You're doing research on this topic, on this community, but you're also an active part of the research. You're also an active participant of the research, too. It's something that you actually described in your earlier work before the earthquake. But can you talk a little bit about what it is like to be in this active researcher position?

ŞULE CAN

Yeah, absolutely. And thank you for asking this because that's an important part of understanding what, you know, anthropology does. And at the same time we can see these edges that we describe ourselves too.

So as a researcher we always ask the question: who is the researcher and who is the research? Right. Who are we really talking to? What are we really looking at? What is our position? And that kind of reflexivity has always been part of anthropology specifically, but also I think more recently in social sciences. We keep talking about these different methodologies, different locations of ourself as researchers.

And, for me it has always been part of the conversation because I am a native anthropologist. I'm from Antakya. I grew up there and I chose to study the border area and the Turkish-Syrian border, and, you know, history of it and the displacement more recently. So for me it is also delving into my own very existence. It is also about my city, my people, and in a place where I advocate for those voicing concerns. So it's bring some kind of, you know, alienation at times and it brings a level of familiarity and intimacy that nobody else has.

You know, very famous now, anthropologist Ghassan Hage calls this ethnographic vacillation. So you are always constantly negotiating and oscillating between two forms of beings. You are, as a native self, and, you know, politically involved researcher. You were at one place at times and then in another you are just like looking from outside as a stranger to a very familiar space. And you will always be this different dilemmas and conflicts.

Once you embrace that I think then you are okay with making progress, and whatever that might mean. But I think in a lot of studies, we ignored for so many decades, in social sciences, we ignored this kind of a perspective where the researcher herself is part of that methodology. And it doesn't have to be only autoethnography. That's not what I'm doing at all. For example, I never wrote a monograph on autoethnography. But the history of the city is a history the self, as well. So what do you say in that kind of aspect, right? How do you understand that? Or when you look at the history of the border itself, how do you actually theorize, in many ways, your self as kind of this complex product of the borders or boundaries or identities.

So in many ways it is really a blend of many ideas that were introduced by the border scholars more in the last decade.

KATHERINE HALL

In these very politicized environments, I mean, can a researcher enter this environment as someone neutral anyway?

ŞULE CAN

I think as an anthropologist, it's kind of, the answer is within the question itself. Because I don't know what we can say about neutrality in this context, for example, that I work in. Because when you're trying to advocate for people, for the dispossessed, for the displaced, you are taking a side in this line of activist research.

And this has been the case in many contexts, right? I mean, how are you not going to take a side when you are working with Native Americans in the U.S, in North America, let's say? Or if you are working, I don't know, any border area, any contested space. So in that sense I think what we are sometimes confusing neutrality with is the reliability of the data that we have. Right. And also, kind of taking sides in terms of your interlocutors or the research that you are putting out. These are not mutually exclusive. I mean, your data can be very reliable and you can objectively, you can try to kind of objectively put that out there. But at the same time it doesn't... Your positionality and your political involvement and your voicing, opinions for the people who are marginalized, doesn't negate the value of your research. So in that way I think the way we understand social scientific research, but more importantly, ethnographic research is beyond this discussion of neutrality per se.

KATHERINE HALL

So, to a certain extent your research is very much focused on the future, like the future of Antakya. What can it become? And your research is very much interlinked with the reconstruction efforts as well. So how do you see research as having the ability to contribute to the reconstruction of Antakya?

ŞULE CAN

I think there are multiple layers of contribution here through all kinds of research that's been going on. It's not only my work, obviously, that's been going on in Antakya. So one is definitely documenting this historical moment of destruction and the efforts for preservation and understanding also the kind of both symbolic and civilian ordinary heritage that we have. Whether it is architecture or architectural, or whether it is social, cultural and, more importantly, political memory of Antakya.

The second line of work that I have mentioned before is, a big part of it is kind of history of this political memory. That's been erased mostly because of the earthquake and then the post-disaster reconstruction. So that's why the research that we do has a lot of potential to understand the history and this kind of urban structure and heritage before the earthquake. So in that sense I think it has already contributed a lot to the future generations. But at the same time, I think the future is about, you know, all these actors who stay behind and fight for the future of the city.

So in that sense I think for Antakya people "belonging" is a very important part of their urban identity. And it's kind of signified with this motto right now, with the slogan of "ma rehna nehna hown" which is an Arabic word saying that "we didn't go anywhere, we are still here".

And that's that special, yes, in many ways. And I think as long as in our research we realize that we can always think about ways of helping Antakya people and helping them also voice their concerns, not only about current living conditions, but also future. So it's a very dynamic space just like all contested spaces.

But some things my advisor, my dissertation advisor would always say and wrote about this many times. Some things only happen in these border areas, in this border cities. So yes, some things happened only there. And we need to see also unique responses to that.

KATHERINE HALL

So what do you think is the future of these very unique border areas, these contested spaces, not only Antakya, Hatay, but around the world?

ŞULE CAN

I think we see today globally that it's becoming more and more difficult to voice our opinions critical edges. And we are under the pressure the changing borders and, you know, kind of forced migration in many ways. So there are a lot of examples today that we look at. And those contested spaces continue to be contested, from Lebanon to Israel-Palestine, to Syria, to Turkish Syrian border, borderlands in general, and to Antakya.

So, in many ways I think there is still an issue of historical events or aspects, impacts today the present conditions, and then, I suspect that it will be part of the future as well.

Especially in this context we talk about many places in the Middle East. They are still, unfortunately, under the pressure of forced displacement and annexation and in one way or another, even colonization. So in that sense it's kind of the forms are changing, but the questions regarding sovereignty, regarding freedom of movement, are still there, and it will be there in the future.

So feature of critical edges will always come back to issues of displacement because of the global order today. Because of the kind of capitalist nation state order that we live in. So I don't want to sound too dark about what future holds for critical edges, but at the same time it is to some extent, unfortunately, a kind of repetition of this historical violence.

However, as we all know, human agency is there, that's very dynamic, and that can actually intervene into this kind of darkness, and this kind of determination, I guess. Solidarity is the key part where we see emerging more and more in these critical edges, right? What happens, for example, in the context of Palestine, what happens in the context of Antakya is that they are still standing because of the solidarity movements, because they don't give up, right? And in many ways I think that is going to be the case in the U.S as we will see in the next four years how this is going to unfold.

But, in many ways, I think people now know that there is no easy way out. And if we want to envision a future together where we can actually build peace somehow, then it is on us and people need to resist and fight and there is no other way.

HANNA LAAKO

Really, really interesting to hear your thoughts and about your research and all these many critical edges and margins that your research addresses and you have been engaged in. So that's been really enlightening and fruitful for us to also think and to rethink.

Thank you for listening to the Critical Edges -podcast. We are Hanna Laako, Vadim Romashov, Eleonoora Karttunen and Katherine Hall - researchers at the University of Eastern Finland, who explore and inhabit many critical Edges.

VADIM ROMASHOV

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