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“It Used to Be Forbidden”

Kurdish Women and the Limits of Gaining Voice



MARLENE SCHÄFERS

ABSTRACT Women’s rights and human rights projects in Turkey and elsewhere routinely construe and celebrate subaltern voice as an index of individual and collective empowerment. Through an ethnographic study of Kurdish women singers’ (*dengbêjs*) efforts to engage in their storytelling art in Turkey, this article questions the equation between “raising one’s voice” and having agency. It investigates two concrete instances in 2012, in Istanbul and Van, where Kurdish women publicly raised their voices. It shows that public audibility does not necessarily translate into agency, because these spaces, like most, discipline voices ideologically and sonically. Audibility is not a neutral achievement but an ideologically structured terrain that shapes voices and regulates whether and how they are heard and recognized. Voices routinely have ambiguous and even contradictory effects once they become audible in public. It is not simply a matter of “having voice” or “being silenced.”

KEYWORDS voice, *dengbêjs*, Kurdish women in Turkey, women’s rights, audibility

“We have broken the chains of society to come [to Istanbul],” read the words of Fadime in one of Turkey’s leading liberal newspapers on March 8, 2012 (Karakaş 2012).¹ An energetic and resolute woman in her late fifties, Fadime had traveled from the town of Van in Kurdish-inhabited eastern Turkey together with three other Kurdish women. In their capacity as *dengbêjs* — Kurdish bardic singers who narrate nonfictional stories in a chantlike, recitative style — the group had been invited to mark the occasion of International Women’s Day with a number of concerts. The group’s presence in Turkey’s cultural capital generated a good deal of interest in liberal and feminist circles, arguably not just because of its musical performance but also because the women framed their presence as a struggle for voice they were waging against patriarchal customs and norms. As Fadime

explained in an interview (Tahaoglu 2012): “It used to be forbidden for [Kurdish] women to sing. But we have broken the proscription.”

This article examines the women’s struggles for public voice. Lacking or being deprived of voice is readily framed as a sign of oppression in contemporary Turkey, while raising one’s voice signals empowerment and agency. The voice in this way comes to stand for the individual self and its interiority. This figurative understanding of voice is nourished by readily available human and women’s rights discourses and partly animates Kurdish women’s desires to make their voices audible in public. As I show, however, once publicly audible the women’s voices become inscribed into dynamics that refuse full recognition and mishear or silence voices as ideologically necessary. One reason for such misrecognition, I contend, is that prevailing ideologies of voice interpret the literal voice primarily as a sign for individual agency and self. Because they treat voices as metaphors pointing to something behind or beyond the audible voice itself, such ideologies fail to account for the sonic and affective qualities of voices as well as the spaces in which they are expressed. Within this framework, individuals can only either “have voice” or “be silenced.” But voices routinely have ambiguous and even contradictory effects once they become audible. Such effects are difficult to account for through a dichotomy of voice versus silence, which translates into agency versus suppression.

This article attends to concrete scenes of audibility in order to challenge an understanding of voice as necessarily evidence of empowerment and to move beyond simple notions of agency and suppression. My investigation relies on ethnographic research in 2011 and 2012 with Kurdish women, many of them *dengbêjs* in and near Van, a major Kurdish town in eastern Turkey. To investigate how their voices were (mis)heard, I consider the legacies and ideological frameworks that have shaped Kurdish women’s voices and analyze two events where Kurdish women singers raised their voices in public. By attending to the sonic qualities of actual voices and the regimes of affective resonance they sustain, I seek to underline what might be amiss in rights discourse that celebrates the coming to voice of subaltern subjects.

As part of efforts to challenge prevailing stereotypes of the silent, passive, and suppressed Muslim woman in the Middle East, feminist scholarship has usefully questioned the idea that inaudibility necessarily indicates a lack of agency. I build on this insight but also note that such scholarship has largely left unattended how women’s voices contribute to structured regimes of audibility as a result of their ideological framing and sonic qualities. While literature on gender in the Middle East has paid considerable attention to how the gaze is less a neutral sense operation than an ideological, gendered act with powerful effects (e.g., Göle 2002 and Sehliskoğlu 2015 for Turkey), there is a striking relative lack of scholarly attention to audibility and the sonic voice. This article seeks to address this gap by examining the terrain of audibility for Kurdish women’s voices.

Voice as a Sound Object: Ideology, Contingency, and Materiality

Anthropological scholarship questions commonsense Euro-American assumptions about voice, demonstrating that the meanings we attribute to voices are culturally constructed and historically contingent and that there is no inherent or fixed relation between voice and identity. Judith T. Irvine's study of Wolof speech registers in Senegal provides one example when she demonstrates that Wolof speakers have at their disposal two "registers" or styles of speaking whose use is closely linked to the speaker's social status. The speech of noble and upper-caste Wolof is marked by a lack of affect manifested by linguistic features including simple or even "wrong" syntax, slow tempo, low volume, and a breathy voice. Lower-caste Wolof and griots (bards) employ an opposing high-affect register expressed through a high-pitched voice, fast and fluent speaking, and the use of complex syntax and morphology. As Irvine (1990, 130–32) highlights, these registers or "voices" are not inherent properties of individual speakers but are available to be appropriated by anyone, depending on the context of a particular interaction. Voice is here not necessarily a vehicle of self-expression. Noble Wolof, for example, regularly hire griots to speak in their stead. Griots thus act as "expressive vehicles" (135) who use their voices to express another's ideas, feelings, and emotions, while those in power largely remain silent. The decoupling of voice from a speaker's authority and identity that Irvine describes provides an important starting point for questioning assumptions about the voice as a privileged vehicle of agency and self.

Miyako Inoue's research on "Japanese women's language," a feminine speech style associated with urban middle-class women, draws further attention to the contingency of the link between voice and identity. Inoue (2006, 25–27) demonstrates that this speech style is not a Japanese tradition of ancient origin, as commonly assumed, but a cultural construct linked to capitalist modernity. She reconstructs how male Japanese intellectuals invented this style at the turn of the twentieth century based on the overheard speech of Japanese schoolgirls. Over time, this so-called schoolgirl speech became idealized as refined rather than vulgar and was reconceptualized as a speech style befitting ideal middle-class femininity. Inoue's study highlights how speech forms, even if invented, become invested with meaning and create inhabited subject positions.

Voice is thus more than an instrument that neutrally transmits semantic content. Culturally constructed ideas about the voice — what Amanda Weidman (2006, 14, 10) calls "ideologies of voice" — "determine what voices come to be heard and how" and "how and where we locate agency and subjectivity." Ideologies of voice impact not only how voices are understood but also how they are produced and made to sound. These ideas are illustrated in Nicholas Harkness's ethnography of voice in South Korea, where Western classical music is closely associated with evangelical Christianity. Harkness documents the enormous efforts of many Koreans engaged in European-style singing to cultivate their voices to get rid of rough and

husky qualities associated with a past of backwardness and suffering and acquire a “clean” and “pure” voice indicative of progress and Christian achievement. Insisting that “the practical social action of the voice cannot be divorced from its ongoing cultural conceptualization,” Harkness (2013, 15, 21) demonstrates how the consciously tuned sonic voice is a medium that allows Koreans to embody a particular historical narrative and identity.

The literature on voice in anthropology, ethnomusicology, and sound studies hinges on the methodological imperative to study literal and figurative voice in tandem in order to gain insight into how notions of subjectivity, personhood, and intimacy are sonically and vocally constituted. In contexts of modernity, the voice typically stands as an index of interiority, agency, and self. This metaphorization of the voice relies on effacing its sonic qualities and approaching it as a necessary yet inconsequential channel for meaningful communication (Weidman 2007, 131). As Adriana Cavarero (2005, 13–14) shows, Western philosophy since Plato has tended to approach the voice in this way, thereby contributing to a folk understanding of voice as a transparent vehicle that gives immediate expression to a person’s inner life. Understood as such, voice is fundamental to modern political imaginaries, which often frame political representation as a question of “having voice” (Slotka 2015, 133–34). At the same time, the voice is routinely construed as a central medium for conveying intimate feelings and producing intimate publics (Kunreuther 2014, 25–28).

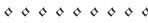
Yet cross-disciplinary scholarship on the sonic aspects of the voice has also made clear that voices regularly escape the limitations and discipline imposed by dominant ideologies. As Ana María Ochoa Gautier (2014, 210) notes, while the voice is “poised to be used as a disciplining force,” it “simultaneously easily reveals the limits of such a process.” With its lilts and sways, pitches and cracks, the voice asserts a presence of its own that is not exhausted by economies of signification (Nancy 2007, 22; Schlichter 2011, 39), rendering it a force “in excess of speech and meaning” (Dolar 2006, 10). This is not to reify the acoustic voice as a sound object beyond intelligibility, however, because even “the physical grain of the voice has a fundamentally social life” (Feld et al. 2004, 341).

This article approaches this social life of the voice by investigating concrete instances in which a group of voices became audible. Focusing on scenes of audibility allows me to go beyond clichéd notions of voice as representation and empowerment. Such scenes illustrate how ideological frameworks attempt to discipline voices and how actual voices accord with or resist such disciplining allowing me to investigate how voices *have* agency instead of merely standing *for* agency (Weidman 2007, 148). Specifically, I suggest that vocal agency can be located in (but is not limited to) the emotions and affects that voices routinely solicit. A burgeoning literature has drawn attention to the ways in which nonhuman “things” may exert agency through the affects they call forth (e.g., Bennett 2010, xii–xiii). Idioms referring to voices as capable of “touching” their listeners or, in the Kurdish

context, of “burning” their listeners’ hearts attest to how voices have effects that are not limited to their referential content. I suggest that these effects are best described with the vocabulary of affect, understood as intensities that impact bodies in ways that are not always conscious and are often ambivalent and difficult to capture. Focusing on how different actors seek to employ, steer, or delimit the affective cadences of Kurdish women’s voices, this article contributes to scholarship that has shown the management of affect to be a critical arena of political struggle (e.g., Gould 2009, 40–41; Navaro-Yashin 2012, 17–33).

My intervention challenges uncritical academic approaches that understand the voice simply as a means of empowerment and source of authentic knowledge. Anthropology and other ethnographic fields, for example, rely on face-to-face conversations during fieldwork as the ground of knowledge production and a standard of empirical authenticity. Equating voice with human agency and interiority is tempting on political grounds as well. As academics, “we are keen to recover and restore the subaltern voice deeply buried in historical documents” (Inoue 2003, 180). Postcolonial theorists, however, problematize liberal attempts to “give voice” to the subordinated. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) famously argues that such undertakings risk replicating existing hierarchies by constructing a fixed subaltern subjectivity. Spivak’s critique mainly focuses on deconstructing the alleged homogeneity and transparent authenticity of the subaltern subject. In doing so, she nevertheless employs voice largely metaphorically and remains within a dichotomous framework of speech versus silence.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship on the Middle East attempts to counter persistent Orientalist tropes about the allegedly passive, suppressed, and silent Muslim woman. Such work argues that silence of or about Muslim women does not necessarily signify a lack of agency, since silence itself may be eloquent (Lazreg 1994, 18–19). A robust body of scholarship seeks to uncover how women take on active roles in social and communal life in ways that frequently remain hegemonically inaudible or invisible (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1999; Ahmed 2006; Seremetakis 1991). In a similar vein, Cihan Ahmetbeyzade (2007, 167–78) has studied the narratives of Kurdish women who live as forced migrants in Istanbul, interpreting their voices and strategic silences as forms of resistance against familial and state patriarchy. As much as such scholarship addresses how women practically and strategically employ their voices, the focus is largely on the narrated content, leaving unaddressed the sound and materiality of voices. Yet treating the voice as a mere vehicle for delivery of ideas and interiority is precisely what allows the ready equation between voice and empowered agency. It does not account for the complex and often ambiguous effects that voices have once they become audible (Weidman 2007, 131–32). As Susan Gal (1989, 4) notes, only by attending to the actualities of speech can we move beyond a dichotomy of being silenced versus having voice, exposing “not so much a clear, autonomous and heretofore neglected ‘woman’s voice,’ or separate culture, but more ambiguous, often contradictory linguistic practices.”



This article focuses on concrete instances of audibility as a means of analyzing how certain vocal practices sustain or challenge particular ideas about the voice and its functioning. I ask how a specific ideology of voice has been created in Turkish Kurdistan and how this incites Kurdish women to raise their voices in public. I critically examine audibility as an ideological site that frames voices, produces subjects, and assigns meanings.

Celebrating the Kurdish Woman's Voice in Istanbul

On March 8, 2012, Fadime and her three singer friends — Gazin, Münevver, and Aslı — were scheduled to give a concert at one of Istanbul's major public universities to mark International Women's Day. A photography exhibition about the women *dengbêjs* and their lifeworlds in the city of Van accompanied the concert. Van had suffered a heavy earthquake several months earlier. Alongside photographs of the ruined cityscape, the exhibition featured a large photograph of each singer with a short narrative of her life story culled by organizers from interviews I had conducted with the women ahead of the concert. In their life-story narratives, all four women emphasized their upbringing in rural settings as crucial for nurturing their desires to engage in the art of *dengbêjî*. Construed as a site of authenticity largely untouched by repressive state policies and corruptive popular culture, the village emerged from their narratives as the paradigmatic location of Kurdish oral tradition. That none of the women had received musical education, and three had never attended school, underscored the portrayal of their singing talents as a natural and immediate outcome of Kurdish village life.

The women also depicted the village as the site of repressive patriarchal customs. All except Aslı recounted how fathers, uncles, or husbands sought — on the grounds that women's voices were shameful (*şerm, eyb*) — to prevent them from engaging in the oral traditions they had listened to while growing up.² Not coincidentally, Fadime was able to participate in public performances only since her husband had passed away. Similarly, Münevver was able to publicly sing “thanks” to her husband's being bedridden, while Gazin had for years struggled to convince her father-in-law to allow her to sing.

The narratives at the exhibition largely left unaddressed the question of what motivated the women to withstand patriarchal restrictions on their voices, implying that their determination to sing reflected a natural and innate desire for self-expression. In my fieldwork, however, women *dengbêjs* explicitly linked their determination to sing to personal histories of suffering and hardship. They viewed such suffering as the direct outcome of state, community-based, and intimate violence they experienced as Kurdish women in Turkey. They told me that they felt compelled to sing about their experiences to bear witness and avoid “going mad.” These politically inflected dimensions of Kurdish female suffering were largely unarticulated on March 8. Instead, Istanbul's liberal and cosmopolitan public was

captivated by the pristine, almost exotic authenticity displayed by the exhibition and promised concert. The turnout for the events exceeded expectations. Journalists from various media outlets courted the Kurdish “village” women, with their broken Turkish and colorful “traditional” dresses, who nevertheless were so vocal in their support for women’s rights.

Given the “sensitive” nature of the occasion — this was the first time a Kurdish music concert took place as an official university-endorsed event at a Turkish state university — the administration was focused on avoiding political controversy. Several times in the weeks before the concert, organizers urged me to “make sure they won’t sing anything political!” I spent those weeks in Van working with the women on their repertoires and searching for songs that would fit the occasion of International Women’s Day as conceived by the university administration. In its understanding, the event should feature songs about “women’s,” not “political,” issues. Without it being made explicit, we all understood that “political” in this context referred to Turkey’s so-called Kurdish issue and the long-standing history of state violence, repression, denial, and forced assimilation.

To the relief of the administration, everyone stuck to the script during the concert. Gazin and Ashi, the two singers who addressed the audience, stressed the importance of women’s rights and expressed gratefulness for the opportunity to display their culture in Istanbul. The audience enthusiastically clapped and at times sang along. By the end of the concert the hall was a teeming dance floor with large rounds of line dances that picked up the rhythm of upbeat folk and wedding songs. In press statements, Gazin framed the event using a liberal discourse of progress and freedom: “In the past many things were forbidden for women. There were traditions. They did not let women sing songs. But now something is going in the right direction or we would not be in Istanbul right now” (Tahaoglu 2012). The women’s rights framing of the event encouraged participants to understand the Kurdish singing as a feminist response to gendered violence, including the “honor” killings often associated with “backward” Kurdish communities living in the Southeast (Kogacioglu 2004, 130). For example, asked for her “message to the public” for International Women’s Day, Gazin responded: “We don’t want any more women killed, we don’t want women to cry. We are against when they kill women in the name of custom, honor [*namûs*] or other things. . . . We want freedom for women” (Tahaoglu 2012).

Notions of female emancipation and freedom were central to the staging of Kurdish womanhood during the concert and accompanying art exhibit, ensuring that the event remained within the bounds of speakability set by the Turkish state. State tolerance operates within tight limits and regularly sanctions any critical public intervention that can be construed to threaten the country’s “territorial integrity,” a malleable accusation that is often directed at Kurdish individuals and institutions (Karaca 2011, 178). As a form of governing difference, pluralism in Turkey also relies on a conceptual separation of culture from politics and incites the

folklorization of cultural display (Tambar 2010, 663). In this case, the “liberated” women performers offered a spectacle of innocuous cultural heritage that effectively erased the legacy of state violence and the possibility of antagonistic politics.

My use of the concept of erasure draws on the work of Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal (2000, 38–39), who identify it as one of three semiotic processes through which language ideologies operate: “Erasure is the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away.” During the Istanbul performance erasure occurred not only through the university’s redaction of politically sensitive content. It also operated through the way in which the singers employed and calibrated the sonic qualities of their voices. Recognizing the limits of the pluralistic space offered to them in Istanbul, they were careful to perform at least as many danceable folk songs as sorrowful *kilams* (recitative ballads). They feared that the nonmetrical ballads without steady rhythm or fixed melodic lines might alienate or simply bore the majority-Turkish audience, whose members were unlikely to understand the lyrics and, unfamiliar with the genre, might not be receptive to its affective charge. They also reduced the length of the *kilams* they did perform to a “manageable” three minutes and opted to accompany them with musical instruments to mitigate the intensity of the a cappella voice, because they worried that their unrestrained voices might strain the ears of Istanbuli listeners.

The Women’s Rights Conundrum

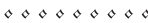
The language to which Gazin, Fadime, and their friends had recourse when they were at the center of attention during their trip to Istanbul resonates with transnationally circulating women’s rights discourse. Lila Abu-Lughod (2013, 57) alludes to this discourse as a “new common sense” that has rendered the advancement of women’s rights a cause of astonishingly broad consensus across the globe. The crucial conditions under which this common sense takes shape, however, require that women’s rights and well-being be separated from the sphere of “the political,” as the vignette discussed above makes clear. Dominant women’s rights discourse, moreover, considers desire for individual autonomy and self-expression to be natural and universal and oppression, similarly, an obvious fact. This view neglects that aspirations for liberation are produced by specific historical formations and therefore are in principle malleable (Mahmood 2001, 206–8). Oppression, too, must first be named and assembled as an identifiable field before it can become an object of debate, revolt, and intervention (Moore 2013, 38). Yet if a desire for liberation from oppression is not naturally given, how could it appear so commonsensical to the Kurdish women with whom I worked? Answering this question requires a brief genealogy of these concepts in Turkish Kurdistan.

To explain existing limitations on the audibility of Kurdish women’s voices my interlocutors often used the language of customs and traditions, mobilizing

familiar modernist discourse that constructs a watershed divide between tradition and modernity. As feminist scholars have pointed out, this discourse typically renders women's bodies and conduct the prime symbolic and material ground for determining a postcolonial society's progress on a linear axis toward "civilization" (Deeb 2009, 115), as well as its degree of cultural authenticity (Kandiyoti 1992, 246). Modernity's emancipatory discourse depends, in the words of Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005, 151), "on the *silenced/voiceless*, segregated, and oppressed woman for delineating its own temporality" (my emphasis). In Turkey this discursive terrain traces back to the late Ottoman period and was one of the central ideological pillars of the Kemalist Turkish Republic. Women's bodies, public and private attire, and comportment were key sites for determining the republic's distance from its "reactionary" Ottoman past, marking its equal standing to European modernity while "preserving" (in fact, constituting) Turkish "national" culture. Turkish claims to modernity hence centrally hinged on the state's efforts to liberate its female subjects. Yet, while state policies and legal reforms sought to encourage women's participation in public, professional, and political life, they "did not alter the patriarchal norms of morality and in fact maintained the basic cultural conservatism about male/female relations" (Durakbaşı 1998, 140).

While the ruling Justice and Development Party has departed from Kemalist ideology in many respects (for example, by allowing women to wear a headscarf in universities, civil service jobs, and public office), there are important continuities in how state apparatuses operate through forms of patriarchal domination that render women's status and sexuality crucial grounds of political power (Korkman 2016, 120). Kurdish women's standing in their communities, for example, continues to be routinely mobilized as "evidence" for these communities' alleged social and cultural backwardness (Kogacioglu 2004, 130). The Turkish women's movement, in turn, has long failed to question such ethnocentric assumptions (Arat-Koç 2007, 50–51; Yüksel 2006). Turkish feminists have largely ignored Kurdish women's specific plight, and cooperation around gender-based violence has remained limited, though attitudes appear to be changing among a recent generation of feminists (Al-Ali and Tas 2017).

Apart from Turkish public discourse, the Kurdish movement has played an equally momentous role in cultivating Kurdish women as political-gendered subjects intimately acquainted with discourses of liberation. For over three decades the movement has firmly argued for the need to liberate Kurdish women from colonial and patriarchal structures of oppression, at least partly because it links women's emancipation with national emancipation (Çağlayan 2012, 11–12). In this reading, the national struggle requires reforming Kurdish feudal and patriarchal social structures, as these hinder national unity and revolutionary action. Such accounts posit the emancipation of Kurdish women as both a sign and catalyst of broader social transformation. The liberation of the Kurdish nation becomes both coterminous with and conditional on the liberation of Kurdish women from patriarchal



suppression and the restrictive Islamic customs that are seen as supporting and legitimizing it. This understanding is undergirded by a historical account of a Kurdish “golden age” of matriarchy and political autonomy in ancient Mesopotamia, which equates the end of matriarchy with the beginning of centuries of foreign rule over the Kurdish people and the onset of an age of social regression fueled by the colluding forces of patriarchy, feudalism, and Islam (Açık 2013, 117–19).

As part of its struggle for cultural and political rights, the Kurdish movement has encouraged the transformation of gender relations, perhaps most prominently by integrating many women into political resistance. Not only do women actively participate in demonstrations and grassroots initiatives, but they also occupy numerous posts in political organizations, are elected to offices ranging from mayor to member of parliament, and represent a large contingent of the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) guerrilla forces. This incorporation and inclusion reflects ambivalence and does not resolve all gender-related structural and cultural tensions, an issue I revisit below. For the moment, I underline that women's rights and liberation discourse is readily available and ideologically valued in Kurdish contexts as a result of Turkish state policies, Kurdish initiatives, and, not least, the interests of an expanding landscape of nongovernmental women's organizations funded by international donors (Clark 2015).

The Vagaries of “Public” Voice

This section investigates how the multiple discourses that herald Kurdish women's liberation carve out a certain position for the voice by charting a specific emancipatory temporality. Even if ideologically diverging, what unites these modernist discourses is that they firmly anchor female oppression in a backward past while figuring emancipation squarely in a progressive future. The female voice functions as a central mediating element within this temporal order, I contend, because of how modern ideologies of voice render it a mechanism of individual subjectivity and agency. Consider how Melike, a *dengbêj* from Van, discusses the struggles she and other women waged to make their singing voices public:

In the past, women were suppressed, suppressed, suppressed [*bindest*]. In the past, that is, women used to do all the work. In the evening they would come home and yet again would be beaten by their husband, scolded, or mistreated. . . . This is how it was. . . . Our voices were forbidden. They did not let us sit in the company of men [*civat*], they didn't let us do *dengbêjî*. They say *dengbêjî* belongs to men. . . . You, men, you go outside with the *dengbêjî* you have appropriated. No matter which wedding you go to, which concert, you go there [to sing]. The men go and the women are left behind. Why? Then the Women Dengbêjs Association was founded. So slowly, slowly, slowly women have come to stand on their feet and insisted on their voices [*jin rabûne ser lingê xwe, ser dengê xwe*].

In Melike's account, the patriarchal order, which she firmly situates in the past, suppresses women's voices in both literal and figurative terms. Melike locates such suppression in the figure of the tyrannical husband and a generic "they" who prevent women from raising their voices at public events, including weddings, concerts, and often all-male gatherings (Kurdish *civat*), where men chat, talk politics, or make decisions regarding communal life. For Melike, this circumscription of women's literal voices clearly equates with a deprivation of agency and autonomy, and thus women must insist on their public audibility in order to "stand on their feet." Melike's narrative, moreover, points to women reclaiming the tradition of *dengbêjî* as equally important for asserting their voices. My interlocutors regularly insisted that originally it was women who practiced this tradition of oral history telling. But when patriarchy came to dominate Kurdish society in collusion with Islam in the distant past, they told me, men declared women's voices to be shameful — often using religious arguments to justify their illegitimate encroachment — and appropriated the prestigious art of *dengbêjî* for themselves. Reclaiming this tradition and performing it in public was hence a crucial element of women's empowerment. Melike's account points to the importance of collective efforts in this endeavor when she refers to the work of the Van Women Dengbêjs Association. Founded by Gazin in 2010, this association seeks to provide a platform for women *dengbêjs* to meet and support each other and is the first of its kind in Turkish Kurdistan.

Instead of assessing the historical accuracy of Melike's account, I want to draw attention to its temporal functioning. It casts as decisively past practices we both knew continued in the present — even if under changing circumstances — including certain limitations on women's comportment and the common condemning of women's public singing as shameful. Her account is therefore anachronistic in the sense elaborated by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 238) whereby "something that is contemporaneous with us [is seen] as a relic of another time and place." Characteristic of modern historicist consciousness, anachronism casts certain practices as illegitimate remnants of a past that ought to be overcome in the name of progress. Importantly, in the case at hand, the "traditional" oppression of women that Melike identified as a past relic is less a blanket silencing of women's voices than a prohibition of their speaking/singing in gender-mixed publics, such as political gatherings, weddings, and concerts, and their confinement to all-female spaces. In her account, women's liberation consequently becomes equated with the circulation of women's voices in mixed-gender space, relying on what Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005, 150) calls the "heteronormalizing work" of modernity. Casting homosociality as a backward practice of gendered confinement, it establishes heterosociality as a standard to be achieved in the name of progress. Only against this reading of homosocial spaces as repressive does participation in heterosocial publics represent a form of liberation for previously silenced subjects. This interpretation



masks, however, how heterosocial publics equally discipline, if not silence, female voices, albeit in different ways.

One of Gazin's songs, which she shared with me toward the end of my fieldwork, provides some insight into such forms of discipline as well as the fears and anxieties they engender:

<i>Ez Gazîn im, ez dengbêj im</i>	I am Gazin, I am a <i>dengbêj</i> ,
<i>Ez ne ker im, ez ne gêj im</i>	I am neither deaf, nor am I mad
<i>Hestîrên çawên min dirijin</i>	My eyes are shedding tears
<i>Derdê dilê xwe dibêjim</i>	I tell the sorrows of my heart
<i>Kesek dengê min nabihîze</i>	Nobody hears my voice
<i>Derdê dilê xwe dibêjim</i>	I tell the sorrows of my heart
<i>Kesek dengê min nabihîze</i>	Nobody hears my voice
<i>Ez Gazîna dilbirîn im</i>	I am the heartbroken Gazin
<i>Dil û hinav tijî xwîn in</i>	My insides are full of blood
<i>Weke Xecê, weke Zîn im</i>	I am like Xecê, like Zîn
<i>Li ber zulma van dijminan</i>	In the face of the enemies' tyranny
<i>Erdek nemaye ez biçim</i>	There remains no place for me to go
<i>Li ber zulma van dijminan</i>	In the face of the enemies' tyranny
<i>Berê xwe da tekoşînê</i>	I have turned toward the struggle

The song's force centrally relies on the ambiguous double meaning of Gazin. It is a personal stage name derived from the Kurdish noun *gazî*, denoting a cry, call, or call for help. But it also evokes the verb *gazin*, meaning to bemoan or complain. Rendering Gazin, the person, equivalent with her crying and lamenting voice, the song enacts the tight association between voice and self-assertion that modern ideologies of voice posit. Yet both voice and subject remain unheard in this case, not only on the level of the text but also literally, since Gazin had shared the song with few but me. This renders Gazin, who clearly longs for her voice to be recognized, heartbroken. The song underlines the vulnerability that ensues when subject and voice stand for each other, since in this case the refusal to hear or grant full recognition to the voice throws into jeopardy the subject itself (Butler 1997, 136). Gazin, moreover, makes clear that being misrecognized is less a matter of intelligibility—after all, she is neither “deaf” nor “mad”—than of political fault lines that render certain minoritarian voices inaudible. It is this act of “tyranny” to which Gazin responds by turning to “the struggle” (*têkoşîn*), a clear reference to the political struggle for Kurdish self-determination. In the spirit of such struggle, Gazin likens herself to the epic figures of Xecê and Zîn, two heroes in classic Kurdish literature. Xecê follows her lover, Sîyabend, into death when he falls off a cliff after they have finally been united following an odyssey of obstacles embodied by evil landlords and resentful kin. Zîn, on the other hand, dies mourning her lover, Mem, who was killed in a

destructive conspiracy. These two tragic figures' refusal to bow before the forces of society, I suggest, makes them figures of identification for Gazin. Yet unlike Xecê and Zin, she is less exposed to the vagaries of bad fortune and fateful love than to a public that does not necessarily affirm or validate let alone fully hear her voice.

(Mis)hearing the Suffering Woman's Voice in Van

During the March 8 event in Istanbul, the public affirmed the women's voices only insofar as they represented both authentic Kurdish culture and the overcoming of this culture's patriarchal customs. This ideological framing required the women performers to modulate their voices and censor content considered politically controversial by the regime of neoliberal multiculturalism that prevails in many public spaces in Turkey. This section addresses another public performance by the Kurdish women singers, this one marking the globally institutionalized International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 25, 2012. To observe the occasion, the Kurdish women's movement organized a rally in Van which, in contrast to the March 8 performance, explicitly linked the struggle for gender equality with the Kurdish political struggle. Nevertheless, this event also entailed a disciplining of the women's voices. I draw attention to how raising their voices in public rendered the women vulnerable to silencing and misrecognition and also suggest how voices actively contribute to the making of ideologically structured terrains of audibility.

On this day Gazin addressed a large crowd of women who had assembled in a small park along Van's main thoroughfare. "Let me extend a big welcome to all of you for your participation in the Day against the Killing of Women!" She continued:

We don't want only women but also men to understand this issue well. All of this is because of suppression and violence. We always say "it's the men," but all this is happening to us because of lack of education. They marry girls by force. We don't like this. May nobody get married against their will [*bê dilê xwe*] anymore. May our small girls not be married to old men of seventy, eighty years anymore! We will now sing *kilams* for you that have been sung from the past until today about women, young girls, who are married to men of seventy, eighty years.

Gazin sat on a flight of steps that served as an improvised stage for her and five other singers as she addressed the restless women in the audience. The Revolutionary Free Women's Movement (DÖKH),³ an organization closely aligned with the Kurdish political movement, had invited Gazin and other female *dengbêjs* to participate in the rally. Over a hundred women attended despite the November cold. Women of all ages filled the little park, many wearing the colorful dresses they wore to weddings and Newroz⁴ celebrations. Adorned with bands and scarves in the Kurdish colors of green, red, and yellow, they whistled, danced, and waved posters

with slogans reading, “Woman, Life, Freedom,” “My body, my decision,” “Stop women’s killings, stop solitary confinement,”⁵ “Freedom for female [political] detainees,” and “Freedom for Öcalan.” The rally began with a minute of silence for the martyrs of the Kurdish struggle. Then several women politicians affiliated with the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (today called the Peoples’ Democratic Party) took to the microphone. Their speeches were unanimous in calling for an end to domestic violence and honor killings. They also hailed the strength and courage of Kurdish women in the face of decades of state-sponsored violence and did not fail to demand freedom for Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned head of the PKK.

When, after more than an hour of speeches, it was finally the women *dengbêjs*’ turn, Gazin repeated her condemnation of violence against women before she began to sing “Xalê Cemîl” (“Uncle Cemîl”), a well-known song that recounts the story of a young girl of fourteen who is married to a maternal uncle three times her age. The song takes the perspective of the bride, who bemoans the bad fortune that has befallen her, mourns her lost childhood, and anticipates a life of emotional solitude. “Xalê Cemîl” falls within a bardic genre called *kilam* in Kurdish, which *dengbêjs*’ master. This genre typically recounts nonfictional tragic stories and is commonly understood by Kurds in Turkey today as a form of oral history telling. As much as listeners celebrate *kilams* for the historical “truths” they are considered to convey, their impact centrally relies on the sonic qualities of a performance. Described by Estelle Amy de la Bretèque (2012, 137–43) as a form of “melodized speech,” *kilams* alternate sections recited in rapid *parlando* with sections that feature long-drawn-out melismas at the end of semantic units. Elongated sections are often interspersed with emotive expressions indicative of pain, such as *ax* or *wey*, and include what Greg Urban (1988, 389) terms “icons of crying,” referring to modulations of the voice that make it resemble the sounds of weeping. These sections position the *kilam* in close proximity to the genre of funeral lamentations, firmly associating it with sorrow, pain, and loss.

Kilams typically employ many conventional poetic and lyrical motifs expressing pain and affliction that would be familiar to audiences from other *kilams* and neighboring genres. The repeated use of these motifs and images across a wide repertoire of *kilams* and subgenres means that they hold immense connotative potential for listeners (Allison 2001, 186, 197). Alongside the sonic qualities of *dengbêjs*’ voices, this poetic structure of citation and iteration contributes to firmly situating the *kilam* within an affective field of loss and sorrow. As such, it functions as what Lila Ellen Gray (2013, 8, 17) calls, with reference to Portuguese *fado*, a “structure for feeling” that constitutes “a ground upon which affect and memory accrue and are figured, one performance stacked upon another, one listening overlapping with a previous listening.”

With this in mind, we might say that by singing “Xalê Cemîl” Gazin expressed women’s suffering in patriarchal homes not just through narrative content but also



Figure 1. Women *dengbêjs* performing at DÖKH-organized women's rights rally on November 25, 2012, in Van

through particular poetic and vocal forms capable of soliciting specific affects in her audience. After her, the other singers similarly chanted *kilams* that, like “Xalê Cemîl,” offered highly emotional accounts of women’s suffering. The *kilams* focused on the loneliness of newlywed women separated from their natal families after marriage, conflicts with their marital kin, or the burdens of domestic and



agricultural work. Ahead of the rally the women had reasoned that such songs would raise awareness of Kurdish women's predicaments. As they performed on stage, however, the audience did not ponder or indicate a newfound awareness. Rather, women whistled and applauded enthusiastically after each performance, communicating the exuberant nationalist spirit of triumphant struggle that had pervaded the rally so far and almost threatened to engulf the women's sorrowful lamenting voices.

After the rally, to warm up and discuss the event, I returned with the six women singers and a few other friends to a café near the Women Dengbêjs Association. A palpable sense of disappointment reigned among the singers. They felt that they had not been given a prominent enough place during the program — their performance was scheduled at the very end — and the organizers had not allowed them to perform all the songs they had prepared. In fact, one woman did not sing at all because the organizers decided to shorten the *dengbêjs*' performance, given the time taken by politicians' speeches. When the women did not comply with the demand to cut short their singing, the organizers turned off the microphone and turned on high-volume Kurdish pop music to signal the end of the rally, just as Gazin was about to sing a new song. As we drank tea, the women bitterly complained about what they perceived as a serious lack of respect. Gazin vented: "They asked us to participate as singers, but instead of letting us sing they played recorded music all throughout! Why would you do that if you had live music sitting right there?!" Münevver, too, was upset with how the DÖKH handled the rally, but raised a different point: "If this was about violence against women, it should not have been a joyful event as if it were Newroz or a wedding. This should have been a time for mournful songs." The other women agreed that the rally had been too celebratory for its solemn occasion. The high-spirited upbeat sounds of Kurdish resistance pop and the fiery voices of women politicians had prevailed over the sorrowful *kilams* the performers had carefully chosen for the occasion. Now they were deeply disappointed that the organizers had neither recognized nor acknowledged their efforts.

The women's disillusionment highlights the paradox of a political movement that regards its mission as "giving voice" to Kurdish women while literally stifling the voices of part of its constituency. What might this paradox tell us about the dilemmas of public audibility? Audibility is not an ideologically neutral state but comes to be realized within disciplinary boundaries that affect the referential content of voices as much as their aesthetic form. On November 25 the women *dengbêjs* sought to attain audibility in order to raise awareness about gendered suffering. They wanted to make such suffering affectively palpable through the specific qualities of their voices. Yet this attempt largely failed, I suggest, because it challenged some of the conventions implicitly framing the event.

First, the women's voices faced an ideological challenge regarding the nature and sources of female suffering. The Kurdish movement understands women to be

defined at once by their “nature,” which allegedly renders them nurturing, peace-loving, antihierarchical, and empathetic. But it also understands them to be defined by sociopolitical forces, such as decades of colonial domination and armed warfare, which are understood to sustain patriarchal exploitation and male dominance (Özgür Kadın Akademisi 2015). Overcoming masculinist rule is seen as integral to the movement’s wider struggle for cultural and political rights, in this way tightly linking women’s and national emancipation. Contrary to what feminists have observed regarding other nationalist movements, questions of gender inequality and violence are not merely epiphenomenal to the Kurdish national struggle but stand at its very core. As Necla Açıık (2013, 120) notes, this understanding places a heavy burden on Kurdish women: “They can emancipate themselves only inasmuch as the liberation of the nation benefits from their emancipation. Their interests are defined and gain importance only through the interests of the nation.” The gendered, emotional, and sexual suffering that the women narrated on November 25 does not readily fit into such a national-interest framework. They recounted stories of pain produced *within* and *by* Kurdish households through forced marriage, polygamy, and exploitive kinship relationships, including *among* women. Giving voice to these issues put them at odds with a rally that sought to mobilize militant fervor and ethnonational sentiments.

Second, the performance highlights fundamentally different approaches to the voice as a form of intervention in public and political spheres. For the organizers of the rally, the women *dengbêjs*’ concert was primarily meant to stage cultural authenticity and women’s emancipation. The visibility of the women on a public stage and the audibility of their voices were supposed to signify the Kurdish movement’s success in overcoming patriarchal social constraints. Cultural authenticity, on the other hand, was signaled by women’s voices pronouncing the *kilam* — hailed as the most pristine expression of Kurdish “culture” — as they wore “traditional” ethnic dresses. In this way, the performance was to symbolize the compatibility of Kurdish traditional culture with modernity as signified by women’s public visibility and audibility. Within this structured scene of ritual enactment, women’s voices always function as symbols for something else: emancipation and freedom, custom and tradition. The women *dengbêjs*, however, regarded their voices less as symbols for abstract ideals than as a means to make an affective intervention in their community’s public sphere. Performing the genre of the *kilam*, they sought to make female suffering palpable by employing the specific sonic and poetic qualities of their voices.

The women *dengbêjs* understood the public sphere fundamentally differently from how it was understood by the rally’s organizers. The latter approached the public sphere primarily as a venue to communicate political ideas through semantic content and ritualistically enacted metaphors of national struggle and success. The women *dengbêjs*, in contrast, envisioned a sphere in which the affective resonances of their voices were a means to communicate existing gender problems and reshape

opinions and practices in public and private Kurdish settings. That organizers simply shut off the women's microphone once they deemed their time over poignantly illustrates the entirely symbolic position that their voices and public audibility occupied during the performance. Here the voice is either "on" or "off," audible or not, and specific vocal qualities and intentions matter little. It is precisely those ambiguous qualities of voice, however, that the singers hoped to use to interpellate and "touch" their listeners.

Conclusion

Kabir Tambar (2014, 12) argues that contemporary forms of pluralism, in Turkey and elsewhere, manage social difference by inciting its public display while simultaneously "disciplin[ing] the boundaries within which social difference is permitted to authenticate itself." This places minoritarian subjects in an extraordinary bind as the institutional powers that make self-representation possible render subjects vulnerable the moment they publicly display the difference that marks them (23). This occurred on March 8 in Istanbul, when conditions of pluralism offered a platform for the celebration of Kurdish culture yet demanded that the singers rein in their voices in sonic and semantic terms lest they violate the boundaries of speakability set forth by transnational women's rights discourses and the folklorization of Kurdish culture. Even though the event on November 25 represented a very different approach to women's rights and emancipation — one that closely linked "women's" and "political" issues — it, too, foreclosed affective resonance and embodied reception. On both occasions, then, disciplinary boundaries rendered the women's voices a symbol for abstract ideals and curtailed their potencies. Voice, I therefore suggest, needs to be recognized as a crucial site of governance not only in its communicative speech capacity but also as an affectively potent sound object.

These examples offer a starting point for moving beyond the dichotomy of having voice or being silenced and its use as a shorthand for empowerment and suppression. As Gal (1989) points out, between speech and silence lies a vast space of different forms of audibility, not all of which can simply be equated with an abstract notion of agency. On both occasions I discuss, the voices of Kurdish women were decisively audible but not necessarily agentive in a conventional sense (cf. Weidman 2007, 147). On November 25 their agency lay less in referential content or representational gestures than in the affects the *dengbêjs'* voices could solicit from an audience familiar with the resonances of the specific genre of the *kilam*. This agency remained but a potential, however, as literal silencing abruptly foreclosed it. In Istanbul on March 8, on the other hand, the women's voices rendered sonically present a long-denied minoritarian identity at the heart of Turkey's cultural world. This public presence, however, was subject to stringent disciplinary framing aimed at rendering this identity governable by means of folklorization.

Interpreting such disciplining as simply another form of silencing risks fetishizing an abstract notion of "true" agency ostensibly free from any discipline.

Instead, I consider the women's voices agentic insofar as they contribute to the creation of particularly shaped vocal and aural realms, participating in what Jacques Rancière (2010, 36–38) calls “the distribution of the sensible.” In Istanbul the women sensed the contours of an existing realm of speakability and calibrated their voices according to the demands of depoliticized culture and liberal rights discourses, thereby contributing to making an ambiguous (and from today's perspective, short-lived) Turkish experience of pluralism. In Van, on the other hand, the affective intensities of their voices questioned a notion of public intervention that primarily relies on the communication of referential content and symbolic ritual. From this perspective, then, we may locate the agency of voice in the ways it sustains, expands, or challenges a particular partitioning of the sensible through its sonic qualities and thereby gives audible shape to a particular hegemonic or counter-hegemonic formation. This differs from reducing voice or silence to abstract notions of agency or repression *per se*.

Modern ideologies of voice construe the voice as the prime means for the expression of “authentic” aspirations, feelings, and opinions and render the public audibility of voice, particularly women's voices, the benchmark of liberal modernity and an indicator of freedom. As such, they powerfully animate contemporary struggles for public voice, including the ones waged by the Kurdish women I discuss here. As I show, however, modern ideologies of voice inevitably inscribe subjects into tense and often fraught relationships with the various publics where voices resound or attempt to be heard. As voices become audible in public, they become subject to ideological and sonic disciplining. Audibility is in this sense not a neutral achievement but an ideologically structured terrain that regulates whether and how voices are heard and recognized.

The modernist equation of voice with agency relies on an understanding of voice as but a secondary channel for the transmission of referential content and frames it in a dichotomy of speech and silence. This misses how voices play an active role in the construction of terrains of audibility. Recuperating that agentic quality of voice requires that we interrogate the voice as both a sonic and figurative force. Doing so allows us to bring into view nonconventional forms of agency that do not necessarily accord with liberal models that celebrate the public speech of the self-possessed individual. As this article illustrates, “gaining voice” entails ambiguities that challenge the rationale of contemporary human rights and women's rights discourses to empower the marginalized by giving them voice. This insight raises important questions beyond Turkish Kurdistan. Is public audibility necessarily the most important dimension of political recognition and social inclusion? Is it possible for minoritized subjects to be rendered less vulnerable to the disciplining forces that permeate contemporary sites of public audibility, including those sponsored by women's rights and human rights projects? What would regimes of listening that do not routinely reduce the voice to a symbolic status require?

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Notes

1. I anonymized all names of interlocutors except where individuals are publicly known under their own names. All translations are mine.
2. All original terms I cite are of the Kurmanji variety of Kurdish.
3. In February 2015 the DÖKH was dissolved and replaced with the Free Women's Congress (Kongreya Jinên Azad).
4. Newroz is a New Year festival celebrated on March 21 by Kurds as well as other Persianate populations in Anatolia and central Asia.
5. Solitary confinement refers to the conditions of detention of Abdullah Öcalan.

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