

# Archived Voices, Acoustic Traces, and the Reverberations of Kurdish History in Modern Turkey

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“*Eva dîroka me ye!*” “This is our history!” Rummaging through a shoebox filled with cassette tapes, many housed in scratched or broken cases and bearing faded covers and peeled off labels, this is how Perihan, a Kurdish woman in her early fifties from the Eastern Anatolian town of Van, explained to me the object of our common interest. Her comment rendered our exploration of her shoebox an act of delving into history, a history that had acquired material presence in the cassette tapes we were handling together and in the voices these tapes contained and sheltered. These were in large part the voices of *dengbêjs*, Kurdish singer-poets who orally transmit nonfictional, usually tragic historical episodes ranging from tribal feuds and natural disasters, to failed romantic love, to state violence and forced migration. *Dengbêjs* are today often hailed as the historians of the Kurdish people and it therefore seemed only fitting that Perihan proudly referred to her tape collection, which spilled over into her bedside table, dowry chest, and other boxes stowed in wardrobes and cupboards, as an archive (*arşîv*). Herself proficient in the art of *dengbêjî*, Perihan was adamant that the voices that had found shelter in her archive told the history of her people and were therefore of

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prime value, given that this knowledge had for decades been repressed, denied, and obliterated. Capturing and conserving it was a pressing task to which she hoped her archive would make an important, if modest, contribution.

As humble as her tape collection might appear, by referring to these collections as “archives” and their contents as “history” Perihan stepped onto a terrain that had high stakes attached. These stakes follow from the structurally marginal position to the centers of hegemonic, patriarchal, state power occupied by both Perihan herself, as a Kurdish woman of rural origin and modest means, and her collection of Kurdish voices, long denied and prohibited in Turkey. Thus, the way in which she mobilized the voices collected in her shoebox for historiographical ends had the potential to unsettle some of the most enduring hierarchies marking modern Turkey.

In this undertaking of historical critique Perihan was not alone. Over the last two decades official historical narratives have come under increasing critical scrutiny in Turkey, as hitherto denied pasts and silenced memories have become the topic of lively public debate (Altınay 2007; Çetin and Altınay 2009; Neyzi 2010; Neyzi and Darıcı 2013; Özyürek 2007). Within these debates, sweeping accounts of political history have often attracted less popular interest than have family histories, personal memories, and local experiences. From documentary films and theatre plays to novels and memoirs, panel discussions, and conferences, history has come to animate the country’s public imagination, as a popular pastime as much as a means to claim justice and seek redress. While this has contributed to drawing historical experience into a realm of commodified and often privatized nostalgia (see Özyürek 2006), the ensuing discussions have nevertheless been immensely important for prying open and reckoning with the ambivalences of political belonging in contemporary Turkey, a country where belonging remains closely tied to ethno-religious affiliation (notably Sunni-Turkish) and loyalty to official narratives of history and becoming, and is continuously defended and policed through various forms of violence and exclusion.

Accounts of the history of Turkey’s Kurdish community throughout the twentieth century, in particular, have assumed a prominent place in public debates that have challenged the foundations of Turkish official historiography. Personal memories as well as elaborate historical accounts that circulate in Kurdish communities mainly in oral form do not only testify to the history of systematic state violence that the Republic has meted out against its Kurdish citizens; they have also conserved knowledge of the former Armenian presence in Eastern Anatolia and the genocide that erased it. Thus, by revealing the exclusions that are inscribed in the very foundation of the nation, Kurdish historical consciousness finds itself directly at odds with Turkey’s official narratives of national history, to which the denial of the genocide and the concealment of state violence remain central. Kurdish oral traditions appear to be important repositories of alternative historical knowledge that hold the

potential to challenge authoritarian state narratives and hegemonic historiography (Çelik and Dinç 2015; Çelik and Öpengin 2016; Çelik 2017).

The prominence with which Kurdish historical experience features as a key challenge towards authoritarian state narratives in public debates confirms Kabir Tambar's observation that, in today's Turkey, history "has emerged as a central discourse for democratic critique" (2013: 122). Tambar further argues, though, that employing historical discourse to critique official state narratives means resorting to a genre that—with its specific narrative forms, material manifestations, and epistemological underpinnings—has been empowered by state authority itself. It therefore operates within specific limits of speakability and elicits a specific type of political voice, one that, even if uttering critique, "must in some measure operate within, or with reference to, the available terms of political address and abide by the existing conditions of political vocality" (ibid.: 121). As a result, while choosing history as a genre of critique might be efficacious, it comes at the price of risking complicity with the powers under scrutiny: to be intelligible, critique must adhere to existing patterns of reasoning, lines of argumentation, and narrative tropes.

Tambar's important intervention points to the risks that subaltern and marginalized groups run when trying to make their voices heard through genres that derive their efficacy from their proximity to power and authority. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, too, indicates this predicament in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), in which she suggests that for the subaltern to take up speech marks the end of subaltern subjectivity, for it indicates the subaltern's entry into a realm of dominant, authoritative discourse. Following this line of analysis, Perihan's penchant for the archive as a way to gather long-repressed Kurdish histories to bring this knowledge to bear on official historiography is ripe with potential complicity with the powers in place.

While I agree with Tambar's analysis of the risks that pertain to mobilizing history as a genre of critique, I also note that his notion of vocality remains, similarly to Spivak's understanding of subaltern speech, largely metaphorical. For both, voice stands most importantly as a sign or metaphor for political representation and agency. Yet conceiving of voice predominantly in metaphorical terms and glossing over its sonic qualities can lead us to overlook how the mobilization of historical discourse and archival practices by marginalized communities can entail forms of engaging the past other than discursive critique. Practices that seek to archive oral history, I will argue here, need to be understood not only as a means of bringing buried knowledge to bear on the canon, but also as an engagement with sonically reverberating and affectively charged voices.

Making this point, I want to bring a body of literature on the sonic voice that has emerged at the intersections of (ethno)musicology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis to bear on debates regarding the politics of history, memory,

and the archive. Doing so allows refining our understanding of political voice in a way that parallels how political subjectivity has been rethought within anthropology and related disciplines. Owing much to the work of Foucault, over the last two decades and more anthropologists have sought to re-conceptualize the category of the subject beyond relatively limited notions of personal or social identity. This lets us approach subjects as emerging from complex processes of subjectivation that tie intimate sensibilities, desires, and aspirations to broader patterns of government and the differential distribution of power (e.g., Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007; Das et al. 2000; Foucault 1990). Such rethinking has opened up a vast conceptual space to consider the human subject less as an expression of a particular culture, identity, or personality type than as arising out of “a particular constellation that connects cultural representations and political economy with collective experience and the individual’s subjectivity” (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007: 3). Political voice, on the other hand, even though it is arguably central to the making and marking of subjectivity, has escaped similarly sustained conceptual rethinking. Outside the confines of a vibrant yet delimited academic conversation, it continues to be thought of mostly as a relatively straightforward index for individual presence, political representation, and participation. One of my aims here is to challenge this conception and demonstrate how attention to the sonic and material qualities of political voice can benefit critical studies of the politics of history and memory by rendering more complex the key notion of “silencing” marginal voices, as well as that of “giving voice” as a way to redress such silencing. Rather than accepting that “gaining voice” represents an inherently empowering emergence from oppressive silence, I will show how voices are circumscribed in the very moment they become audible as sound. This dialectic resembles Foucauldian accounts of the subject as a capacity for action that arises from processes of subjection (see Butler 1997a).

In pursuit of this aim, in what follows I examine the discourses, practices, and affects that unfolded around collections of audio recordings kept by Kurdish female singer-poets with whom I worked during seventeen months in and around the Eastern Anatolian town of Van in 2011 and 2012. I explore how mobilizing these archives in a project of historical critique was not an unproblematic act of subaltern Kurdish subjects asserting their voices in an act of resistance against hegemonic frameworks, because it imposed a specific conditionality upon the voices these archives contained. The conditionality of historical critique, I argue, is not limited to delineating a specific realm of speakability—a realm of *what* can be said—but also delineates *how* voices ought to sound if they are to become intelligible. If subaltern voices are “heard” in frameworks of historical critique primarily as metaphors for something else, such as agency, empowerment, or resistance, then their sonic qualities and the political subjectivities associated with them can be obscured. As I show in a final section, being attentive to the voice as a sound object is important

because it lets us appreciate the archive beyond the logics of historiographic rationality and the politics of representation alone. Investigating these women's archival collections as sites of sonic and affective reverberation as much as historical evidence, I highlight their role in the shaping of public identities and private selves. This approach illuminates the multiple social lives that these archives lead. Such a perspective, in turn, encourages thinking about subaltern attempts at history writing beyond narrow frameworks of resistance, critique, and complicity. It thus carries significance for contexts other than those discussed here.

To make my argument, I first need to outline how the performers of a specific genre of Kurdish oral tradition have been elevated to the status of national historians. This has allowed the women I worked with to tap into hitherto inaccessible circuits of authority, while at the same time they have seen their archived voices subjected to new forms of discipline and regulation.

#### VALORIZING KURDISH HISTORY

Fadime, like Perihan a passionate archivist and an amateur singer, housed her collection of several dozen audiocassettes in her dowry chest. There was no particular order to this medley of store-bought, bootlegged, and self-recorded tapes with their faded covers, scratched cases, and creased inlays. The recordings had clearly been listened to over and over again, their covers inspected and perhaps mulled over, their labels patted and retraced with fingertips. Most were of Kurdish voices, some being well-known *dengbêjs* and musicians, others local artists or, in the case of self-recorded tapes, neighbors and relatives proficient in the arts of singing and storytelling. Turkish voices, too, made an occasional appearance, not least through artists of Kurdish origin singing in Turkish, such as Ahmet Kaya. Quite a few tapes were recordings that Fadime had made of herself singing, and she occasionally listened to those to remind herself of a particular song she had composed or used to sing.

Fadime spoke of her collection, which she often referred to as “her archive” (*arşîva min*), with a sense of pride. Her tapes, she told me more than once, were historical documents (*belge*) chronicling Kurdish history, language, and culture that had withstood rigorous Turkish state policies seeking to erase them. Throughout most of the twentieth century the Kurdish language was banned in Turkey. Kurdish existence was denied, and many who spoke or published in Kurdish were arrested, tortured, and imprisoned. Kurdish music, too, has been a major target of Turkish state policies; the sale or even possession of Kurdish music recordings was criminalized and performers faced heavy prison sentences.<sup>1</sup> The so-called “language ban” was lifted in 1991, but authorities continued to confiscate and destroy Kurdish music

<sup>1</sup> Reigle (2013) gives a useful and detailed overview of the history of Kurdish music production in Turkey against the backdrop of repression and denial.



IMAGE 1. A part of Perihan's archive of Kurdish cassette tapes. Photo by Franz von Bodelschwingh, 2012.

recordings throughout the 1990s, the most intensive years of the war against the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK). Owning such recordings or other Kurdish-language material was often a reason for police harassment, abuse, and torture. Many Kurdish households responded by destroying the "compromising" books, magazines, and cassettes they owned, while others buried them in their backyards in the hope of one day recovering them (see Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015: 13–14).

It is against this history of state repression that we must understand the significance of Fadime's tape collection as an important site of historical documentation. In a land of buried archives, muffled voices, and burnt paper, her collection represented a feat of persisting against the odds. Hers was an archive of voices that had survived the onslaught of silencing, of traces resurfacing despite denial and repression. The historiographical significance of Fadime's archive was augmented by the fact that the bulk of the voices it contained were those of *dengbêjs*: Kurdish singer-poets whose melodized accounts of historical events have earned them great social esteem as the transmitters and guardians of Kurdish historical knowledge. Many of the pieces *dengbêjs* perform—known locally as *kilams* (from the Arabic *kalām* meaning speech, word, or utterance)<sup>2</sup>—have been transmitted orally over generations and

<sup>2</sup> The term *kilam* pertains mainly to the region of Serhed, the mountainous areas north of the Diyarbakır plain. In other Kurdish regions different terms designate very similar oral traditions. Kurdish-speaking Yezidi communities in Northern Iraq, for instance, employ the term *stran*, while in adjacent areas in southeastern Turkey and northern Syria this kind of oral tradition would more likely be known as *lawje* or *lawik*.

typically recount events dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Common themes include disputes between local Kurdish power holders, the exploits of feuding tribes, and the course of Kurdish-led uprisings against Ottoman and Turkish state authorities. Other *kilams* recount the trials of lovers whose romance is doomed in the face of insurmountable status, class, or ethno-religious differences (such as between Armenians and Kurds). These long-standing oral traditions tend to depict local events rather than overarching national history. They testify to a social world before the onset of nationalist modernity, in which close kinship networks dominated the flow of everyday life while imperial states and other transregional actors remained distant, though powerful, external actors (Hamelink 2016: 60–65). *Dengbêjs* do not only recite long-transmitted *kilams*, however, but also compose new ones that bear witness to and comment upon current events and personal experiences. Both Perihan and Fadime, for instance, had made songs about a variety of events, including the burning of Kurdish villages at the hands of Turkish armed forces in the 1990s, the 2011 Van earthquake, and the Roboskî massacre that same year.<sup>3</sup> These songs entered their archives as recordings made on audiocassettes or cell phones.

A distinctly nonfictional genre, *kilams* are typically framed as personal testimony and recount historical occurrences from the perspective of one or multiple witnesses. Their narratives foreground personal experience and emotional impact, and often present events from a variety of personal perspectives, producing fragmented accounts rather than straightforward storylines.<sup>4</sup> It is a genre, moreover, that is distinctly associated with sentiments related to the tragic, to suffering, and to pain. With their moving lyrical images, poetic metaphors, and unique vocal intonation, *kilams* create “a poetic space of sadness” for their listeners (Amy de la Bretèque 2012: 138; see also Yüksel 2010: 105–7). This distinct affective charge also makes the *kilam* a gendered genre that taps into the close cultural association between suffering and women. Many *kilams*, for instance, reverberate with female voices: mourning mothers or distressed lovers from whose perspective we learn about a tribal feud or forced marriage. Yet, most publicly performing *dengbêjs* in Turkey are men, which means that these female voices are routinely ventriloquized by male singers. For women, in fact, it has often been considered immodest to

<sup>3</sup> The Roboskî massacre took place during the night of 28 December 2011 near the village of Roboskî, close to the Turkish-Iraqi border, when the Turkish air forces bombed a group of forty local Kurdish villagers whom they allegedly mistook as PKK militants. Thirty-four were killed, of which twenty-eight belonged to the same family. The incident led to mass protests in many Turkish cities and caused a major public controversy.

<sup>4</sup> Argun Çakır (2017) argues that most *kilams* do not provide coherent historical narratives, but rather present fragmented, non-linear accounts of historical events that require listeners to have considerable background knowledge about the event or episode in question if they are to make sense of the account.

perform publicly or in other mixed-gender contexts. As a consequence, many of the women who have insisted on singing in public despite social conventions, including many of the women I came to know, have met with considerable opposition from their kin and wider social networks. In severe cases the women have suffered physical violence and been ostracized from family networks.

As a poetic genre that testifies to local life worlds through highly lyrical, emotionally charged language, *kilams* have not always featured as centrally to Kurdish projects of history writing as they do today. While the early Kurdish nationalist elites of the first half of the twentieth century were drawn to *dengbêjs*' oral repertoires mainly as wellsprings of the nation's linguistic and literary heritage (Strohmeier 2003: 151–54), later in the century the socialist national movement led by the PKK shunned *dengbêjs* as representatives of a social structure they sought to overcome. Not only did their *kilams* depict a rural society structured by stark hierarchies between peasants and their landlords and tribal allegiances rather than national loyalty, but *dengbêjs* themselves had in the past often performed under the patronage of tribal leaders or feudal lords. They therefore embodied social hierarchies which the socialist freedom fighters thought were direct impediments to national liberation. However, since the movement's turn away from classical Marxist-Leninism following the arrest of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the ensuing embrace of a politics focused on attaining cultural and linguistic rights, and a general shift in Turkish politics toward a benevolent, if ambiguous, multiculturalism during the initial years of AKP rule (Tambar 2014), *dengbêjs* have found themselves revalorized as the central transmitters of Kurdish linguistic and cultural heritage as well as historical knowledge.

This revalorization must also be seen in the context of a general surge in public interest in history writing in Turkey, which has brought hitherto silenced memories and denied pasts to the forefront of public debate. While Kurdish historiography was initially a domain of specialist debate within Kurdish nationalist and intellectual circles (Hirschler 2001), over the last decade it has become a topic of growing popular interest that animates its own lively public sphere. Book stores in most major Turkish cities now offer many historiographical publications and newspapers regularly devote entire pages to the discussion of Kurdish historical events. A popular history magazine, appropriately named “Kurdish history” (*Kürt Tarihi*), has appeared quarterly since 2012, and until it was recently shuttered, the liberal television channel IMC TV ran a weekly hour-long program called *Dîrok* (Kurdish for “history”).<sup>5</sup> The entry of the pro-Kurdish party into the municipalities of the southeast following successful local elections in 2004, 2009, and 2014 further boosted related initiatives, since it advanced the Kurdish movement to a position

<sup>5</sup> IMC TV was shut down by emergency statutory decree in the aftermath of the failed coup d'état of 15 July 2016, along with eleven other television stations.



from which it could use public funds to sponsor historiographical publications, conferences, and related events.

Within this flurry of historiographical interest, *dengbêjs* have come to attract attention as the carriers of precious oral histories that many see to be gravely endangered. By the time of my fieldwork in 2011 and 2012, numerous initiatives had been launched to lastingly document *dengbêjs*' repertoires through print and recordings. Such projects ranged from private undertakings to document the repertoires of individual *dengbêjs* (e.g., Kevirbirî 2004) to broader surveys with a thematic or regional focus and financially supported by Kurdish-ruled municipalities, European Union funding schemes, or other European NGOs (e.g., Düzgün et al. 2007; Karasu et al. 2007). Similar concerns motivated Perihan, Fadime, and several other women I worked with to enlist my help in committing their oral repertoires to writing (Schäfers 2017). In addition, Kurdish-run municipalities and cultural centers have opened a number of so-called "*dengbêj* houses" (*Malên Dengbêjan*) (Scalbert-Yücel 2009) meant to revitalize and preserve the art. Such initiatives and institutions tend to frame *dengbêjs* as living embodiments of a precious Kurdish heritage, which becomes a readily consumable commodity when *dengbêjs* are put on display on television shows, festival stages, or in concert halls. The heritage (*miras*) that *dengbêjs* now stand for in these contexts tends to merge notions of history, language, and culture to produce a generic notion of pastness, which *dengbêjs* make available for consumption, study, and contemplation.

#### WALKING A FINE LINE

This comparatively recent preoccupation with the documentation and valorization of Kurdish cultural heritage and historiographical tradition through the figure of the *dengbêj* crucially animated my interlocutors' archival endeavors. It provided the context for women like Perihan and Fadime to confidently and legitimately frame their tape collections as archives and to take pride in the historiographical value they represented. It fueled their hopes that perhaps one day these collections would find more widespread acclaim, be translated into book form, or be integrated into official archival holdings. And, not least, it allowed them to claim a stake in the ongoing project of writing Kurdish national history as women, thereby embracing not only the Kurdish movement's politics of culture but also its agenda of female empowerment.

One way of reading these Kurdish women's archival efforts would be to conceive of them as a form of resistance. This would highlight the archives of Perihan and Fadime as sites of counter-memory that play an important role in opposing both the Turkish state's regime of ethnic oppression and local conventions of patriarchy that circumscribe the ambit of women's voices. From this perspective, these carefully assembled and protected archives are significant principally as acts of claiming voice in defiance of political and

patriarchal regimes of silencing. While such a reading does capture the political significance that efforts to assemble Kurdish archives and write Kurdish history carry in contemporary Turkey, it risks brushing over the complexities and contradictions that “gaining a voice” and “breaking silence” entail. For, to acquire a voice that will carry—a voice, that is, which can be heard and understood as a claim to political representation and agency—subjects need to mold their voices according to reigning frames of intelligibility (see Butler 1997b). In contemporary Turkey, I suggest, history and the archive provide such frames: being able to legitimately claim historiographical significance accords voices a share in public attention and esteem. That allows them to be heard and listened to as voices that have a legitimate say in the public affairs of the nation. Taking this conditionality into account helps us to grasp subaltern acts of claiming voice as complex, delicate, and potentially risky endeavors, which uneasily oscillate between the obligation of having to rely on reigning frames of intelligibility and the simultaneous desire to unsettle these frames and the epistemological hierarchies they sustain.

In what follows, I will point to some of the complexities that Kurdish women’s archival endeavors struggled with as a result. Let me be clear that my highlighting these is not meant to detract from the political significance of these women’s engagement with historiographical discourse and practice. My aim is to add depth and nuance to accounts that all too easily celebrate the subaltern voice as an unfettered assertion of agency and identity. Following Tambar’s lead, I begin by identifying how historical critiques often draw upon discursive tropes from the hegemonic frameworks they set out to counter, given that these promise intelligibility, and bestow legitimacy.

Dominant notions of historical truth and documentation constitute one important node where hegemonic and subaltern practices of historiography become linked in complex ways. When talking about the historical significance of *dengbêjs* and their *kilams*, for instance, many of the women I encountered used language that reverberated with the vocabulary of official historiography. For example, they routinely described *kilams* and other musical recordings as “documents” (*belge*), emphasizing that they accurately chronicled the long-denied truths of Kurdish history. Both male and female *dengbêjs* routinely encouraged me to record the *kilams* they knew, since these constituted valuable “sources” (*kaynak*) from which I stood to learn a great deal about what had really happened in the past. At the same time, many believed that, ultimately, writing constituted the superior technology for documenting the truths that their repertoires contained. Most of the women I worked with had never attended school and lacked literacy skills, and some decided to make use of my presence to transform their repertoires into alphabetic script. I worked with several to transcribe more than two dozen *kilams* over the course of my fieldwork and we generated a thick folder of filed printouts. This became an object of great pride as the physical materialization, in print and paper, of what the women

often referred to as the great historical “treasure” (*hazine*) that their repertoires represented, even though the folder could not fulfill their dreams of a professionally prepared publication.

While my presence as a foreign researcher equipped with pen, notebook, and computer certainly shaped such aspirations toward scientific documentation, these desires and ambitions transcended my presence and personality. Perihan, for instance, persevered in pursuing her transcription project after I left and enlisted several others to help over the course of several years. When she recently passed away, she had managed to transcribe 190 songs from her repertoire with the help of a local teacher and had high hopes to publish these as a book. Notions of historiographic value, factual truth, and faithful documentation also informed the way in which the women spoke about *dengbêjs* and their art in various public settings, such as when they were interviewed by Kurdish or Turkish media or appeared on festival stages or television screens. These notions inspired their dreams and aspirations to publish books, record CDs, and carry out research projects. The language of historical facts and truths regularly used by Kurdish women thus reflected the broader trajectories of Kurdish public debate, and the predominance of historiographic frameworks that have shaped how *dengbêjs* and oral traditions more broadly are perceived and discussed in contemporary Turkey. These frameworks promise that voices can acquire authority by expressing themselves in the language of historical facts and truths, and that memory can make legitimate interventions in public debates if it is backed up by tangible documents and printed pages.

If subaltern voices, to be heard as “history” with a legitimate claim to authority, must rely on the very hegemonic forms, genres, and discourses they set out to challenge, this means that subaltern projects of historical critique walk a fine line between critique and complicity. The fact that Anatolia’s Armenian past is foundational to the Turkish state’s narrative of national becoming, and as such is central to projects of historical revisionism, allows us to explore some of the dilemmas that arise as a result. With the recent rise of public history in Turkey, acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide and discussion of its historical unfolding have become key benchmarks for evaluating both personal and collective qualities of democratic tolerance. While the Turkish state remains mired in a politics of denialism, the Kurdish movement has distinguished itself from this stance by openly acknowledging Kurdish involvement in the genocidal massacres of 1915 and assuming at least partial responsibility for them. This has found expression in symbolic political actions that range from leading Kurdish politicians making statements of apology to the renovation of churches and the erection of plaques and street signs in Armenian. The approach has earned the Kurdish community liberal-democratic credentials both in and outside of the country (see Bieberstein 2017).

Perihan's historiographical ambitions strongly resonated with these broader configurations. She often talked about her wish to carry out a research project to collect oral traditions that would shed light on the Armenian presence in Van before the genocide. She hoped she might acquire funding to do so from one of the numerous international donors that sustained a vibrant Kurdish civil society during the time of my fieldwork. Eventually, Perihan managed to enlist the help of a local activist familiar with the intricacies of international funding schemes who wrote up her ideas as a project proposal. The project spelled out its aims as "compiling the products of oral culture shared by Kurdish and Armenian cultures" and collecting accounts of the genocide, euphemistically described as "the tragic events of 1915–1918." While the proposal did not explicitly refer to archiving, its language brimmed with positivist confidence in the scientific craft of history writing. Activity no. 3, for instance, envisaged "recording (*kayıt altına almak*) the accounts obtained from source individuals (*kaynak kişi*)," while no. 4 called for the "classification and organization of the recorded accounts with a methodological approach (*metodolojik bir yaklaşım*)." The collected "products of oral literature" would become the material for a book and the recorded "ethnic music products" would be released as an album. In addition, they would produce a short film based on locally circulating stories about the struggle and resistance of Armenian women during "the tragic events experienced in the past."

Formulated in highly formal, bureaucratic Turkish, the proposal's language clearly was not Perihan's own but that of her activist friend, who had put her ideas in a linguistic form that he thought would appeal to funding bodies. Still, it was a language that Perihan was familiar with, and which captured some of her aspirations to conduct "proper" historical research. At the same time, it illustrates the risks that historical critique inevitably shoulders as it operates through discursive frames beyond its own making. By euphemistically framing the Armenian genocide as a series of "tragic events" without locatable agency or responsibility, Perihan's friend effectively replicated the terms of Turkey's denialist state discourse, even though neither Perihan nor he—a prominent activist in the Kurdish political movement—pursued a denialist agenda. To the contrary, like most Kurds of her generation in Turkey, Perihan not only readily acknowledged the genocide but also possessed intricate knowledge of the rich communal memory of the former Armenian presence in the region (Çelik 2017).

While I do not claim that this single project outline is representative of Kurdish engagements with historiography in general, it does usefully highlight the dilemma that I argue plagues many such engagements, if perhaps less visibly or straightforwardly than in this specific case. The outline's language and framing underscores how choosing history as the genre through which to push forward a critical agenda binds the critic to that genre's conventions, forcing her to speak its language and to advance her claims through the

discursive terms the genre recognizes.<sup>6</sup> The predicament facing the subaltern critic, then, lies in the fact that for critique to be effective—for the subaltern voice to be heard—it is forced to adhere to discursive and aesthetic terms that are beyond its own making, to “conditions that it neither determines nor controls but inherits from the very political milieu it aims to disrupt” (Tambar 2013: 121).

#### DISCIPLINING THE VOICE

We can see here that political vocality is less the inevitable outcome of subjects simply raising their voices in acts of public self-assertion than a highly complex subject position that crucially depends on how voices are framed in an effort to become audible. So far, I have focused on how hegemonic frames of intelligibility determine the conditions under which critical voices may be heard. Yet the conditioning of political vocality does not work only on the level of discursive content; it also determines how voices actually sound. This section follows this insight to investigate how the women’s archival projects required them to regulate sonic voices in specific ways so that they would speak as voices carrying historiographical weight. “Gaining a voice” crucially relies on disciplining literal voices for them to become intelligible as “political voices” in a figurative sense.

In making this argument, I draw on anthropological studies of voice that have questioned the seemingly natural association of voice with political agency, representation, and authority. Idioms that speak of marginalized groups “lacking voice” and equate achievements of political representation with “gaining a voice,” or those that suggest we should “have a voice” in matters of our concern and “give voice” to our feelings, attest to how self-evident this association is taken to be in many European and North American contexts. Yet anthropological studies have shown not only that the links between voice, self, and agency may be tied very differently—for instance when Wolof griots in Senegal use their voices to give expression to the ideas and opinions of their nobles (Irvine 1990), or when spirit mediums give voice to messages they are not themselves the authors of (Keane 1997)—but also that the intimate lacing of voice, self, and agency is peculiar to modern understandings of subjectivity (Weidman 2014a: 39–40). At the same time, anthropologists’ attempts to denaturalize the ways in which literal voices relate to key representational tropes such as power, agency, and identity have revealed how the voice is a crucial site of discipline, government, and self-

<sup>6</sup> In their critical analysis of the documentary film *5 No.lu Cezaevi*, which documents the state violence meted out against Kurdish inmates in the Diyarbakır prison after the 1980 military coup, Louise Spence and Aslı Kotaman Avcı (2013) similarly show how the format of the conventional talking-witness documentary risks imposing what they describe as a “conservative politics of truth” on the revisionist project of instituting a Kurdish counter-memory.

making (Feld and Fox 1994; Feld et al. 2004). Sonic voices have, for example, proved to be crucial in the construction of racial difference (such as when Afro-American opera singers are taught to calibrate their voices to sound “black” [Eidsheim 2008]) and gendered subjectivity (as when Japanese women take on a specific type of speech marked as female [Inoue 2006]), and in the making of divisions between nature and culture (as when indigenous voices become equated with the alleged untamed wilderness of nature [Ochoa Gautier 2014]), or between tradition and modernity (such as when Koreans seek to acquire the “clean” voice of European classical singing in order to embrace Western modernity and progress [Harkness 2013]).

Here I draw on these findings to highlight how acquiring a voice that will be understood as an index of political agency and empowerment requires intense work on the sound of actual voices and the bodies that emit them. I do so by analyzing an ambitious archival project that Perihan undertook to videotape *dengbêjs*. This project was in many ways animated by the same spirit of salvaging a soon-to-be-lost history as was the rest of her archival collecting. Convinced that elderly *dengbêjs* held invaluable knowledge that would disappear upon their death, Perihan invited individual male and female singer-poets to share their knowledge of historical events, customs, and traditions with the camera. Video technology promised to provide a full audiovisual record of the elicited knowledge, functioning like an external storage for knowledge otherwise contained in perishable bodies. “We do this so that people won’t forget you and people like you,” Perihan told one of the invited *dengbêjs*, giving voice to the promise of permanence held out by technologies of mechanical reproduction.

The turn to video recording considerably raised the technological stakes involved. Like most of the women I worked with, Perihan possessed an old tape recorder, which not only allowed her to regularly listen to her many cassette tapes but was also—at least until the advent of sound-recording mobile phones—her major recording device, which she had used to fill countless tapes with her own and other’s voices that were now part of her archive. Choosing video to record sound and image, on the other hand, left Perihan dependent on the know-how and resources, schedules and agendas of others. She had to convince her husband to pay for hiring a cameraman and equipment, had to find a cameraman willing to engage in the project, and to ensure that her elderly guests would adhere to the times and places she arranged for the recordings.

Perihan managed to complete eight sessions in this way, inviting to each one *dengbêj* who she felt possessed knowledge that was particularly valuable and mandated permanent documentation. The sessions were clearly modeled after television shows, each approximately one-hour long, with Perihan acting as a host who interviewed her guests in front of the camera. She inquired about their personal histories, asked them to sing specific *kilams* and explain

their historical contexts, and solicited anecdotes about rural customs and traditions. The videos were shot at the Women Dengbêjs' Association, which Perihan was running, where she had "authentically" decorated one room with a *diwan*, old carpets, and village objects like a mill stone and old copper jugs. Both she and her guests had obviously put effort into dressing up in "traditional" Kurdish dress, the women wearing colorful and heavily embroidered dresses (*fistan*) while the men appeared in baggy pants with wide belt and vest (*şal û şepik*). In doing so, they were citing the aesthetics of cultural display familiar from Kurdish television and cultural institutions, where the material objects of preindustrial village life are regularly mobilized as the symbols of tradition and heritage.

Perihan's vision of eliciting and documenting valuable historical knowledge through the format of the television show highlights how the archive has, in this context, become entangled with the politics of publicly representing reified notions of culture and heritage. Yet the bodies that were so elaborately put on stage here, the voices they uttered and the knowledge they harbored, did not easily conform to the conventions of the genre that framed their presence in front of the camera. Perihan's elderly guests, for example, had difficulties presenting concise biographical information when Perihan asked them to introduce themselves at the beginning of each session. Instead, they would give long accounts of the tribal associations and marriage patterns of their families that were clearly not the type of answer Perihan had envisioned. Mostly a generation older than her, these men and women were not familiar with the script that the modern notion of "a biography" entails, as a linear presentation of an individual life framed by a person's birth and death and structured around the institutional imprints of modern governance such as military conscription, education, and professional life.

There were other ways in which Perihan's guests unknowingly violated the script they had been called upon to perform. Several began singing without waiting for Perihan to prompt them to do so, leading to scenes in which a distressed Perihan tried to politely stop them from launching into lengthy, passionate recitations. In one of the group sessions, Fadime can be seen animatedly answering a phone call and eventually wandering off the camera frame. In another, an elderly woman begins to make herself comfortable by propping up one of her legs onto the sitting bench, prompting a hushed but resolute intervention by Perihan to restore the etiquette of public performance. These difficulties in making the ostensive bearers of history and culture comport themselves and speak from within the boundaries of the framework that a politics of representation requires highlight the centrality of genre and register for the valorization of historiographical knowledge and, consequently, the assertion of political voice. To make sense to the modern historiographical imagination, subjects have to calibrate their voices and comport their bodies in accordance with reigning registers of intelligibility, even if the intent is one of

disturbing hegemonic narratives of historical belonging. Only then can actual voices and the bodies emitting them become legible as utterances of figurative voice; as symbols, in other words, for political empowerment and historical critique.

It is no surprise, then, that in the end this archival project came to have its effects less through the actual sounds of the voices that Perihan had spent so much effort capturing than as a signifier for Kurdish historical knowledge and its critical potential, as well as Perihan's efforts at preserving it. Neither Perihan nor anyone else, it turned out, had ever watched or listened to the recordings since their completion, and when I asked if I could have a look at the tapes to gain a sense of what they contained, it took Perihan some time to find their shoebox in the depths of her wardrobe. The video archive acquired value not in audiovisual but in discursive terms, for instance when she told me and others about the project, expressing pride in having accomplished this important feat of documenting voices that would otherwise soon be irrevocably lost, while simultaneously lamenting the lack of funds that had forced her to stop the sessions. One reason the recordings had never been watched was simply that Perihan lacked the means to do so. The cameraman had left her with small DV videocassettes that she would have had to convert into a different videocassette or DVD format to watch them on the family's video player or computer, an operation beyond her financial means and technological know-how. That said, even after I had converted the videotapes into DVDs, I never saw Perihan or anyone else consult them. After cursorily going through some of them with me on my computer, she duly added the DVD copies to the shoebox with the original tapes and neatly stowed it in her wardrobe.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the historiographical significance she ascribed to the tapes, then, Perihan did not make use of them as source material in the manner characteristic of the historiographic profession, which would approach such archival documents as vital clues in the endeavor to produce knowledge about the past (see Ginzburg 1989). Instead, the tapes gained a social life largely through Perihan mentioning them proudly in conversations, where they became signifiers for her commitment to collect and document crucial knowledge about Kurdish pasts that had hitherto been silenced, denied, and repressed. The details of this knowledge mattered surprisingly little for the project of historical critique it was supposed to sustain. What did matter for these archives to become intelligible as sites in the larger project of Kurdish historical

<sup>7</sup> Kelda Jamison's account of Kurdish print in Turkey (2016) offers a striking parallel. She points out that many of the Kurdish-medium newspapers, books, and posters that enjoy great popularity amongst Kurdish urban middle classes are never actually read, but rather function—in large part thanks to their specific material properties—as signs indexing the status of Kurdish as a standard(ized) language on a par with Turkish.



revisionism seemed to be that the voices they contained functioned as indexical signs for a position of structural marginality coupled with critical potential. This suggests that part of the conditionality that determines how subaltern voices are heard in contemporary publics entails a framing of voice as an index or metaphor for something else: previously denied political representation, or a morally valued positionality of critique.

The notion of the fetish might help us think about the transformation of vocal sound and semantic content into generic signifiers of oppositional “Kurdish history” that takes place here. Michael Taussig has described the fetish as that which “absorbs into itself that which it represents, erasing all traces of the represented” (1992: 138). Archives, indeed, contain traces, which can be mustered as evidence for making conjectures about past occurrences. Perihan’s collection of videotapes, however, curiously effaced the historical reality that the traces she had gathered represented. That is, the accumulated traces in her archive mattered less for what they revealed about historical realities than for how, collectively, they came to represent a generic pastness, one that merged language, culture, folklore, and tradition so as to make the general claim of representing “Kurdish history.” Just like *dengbêjs* had by the 2010s come to stand for a generic cultural heritage, so did the archives containing their voices absorb into themselves these voices’ sonic particularities and historiographic content to produce a broader vocality that could make a claim on official narratives that had always systematically eschewed them.

#### BEYOND EVIDENCE

So far, I have contended that mobilizing subaltern voices in projects of historical critique risks not only complicity with hegemonic frameworks of intelligibility, but also transforming sonic voices into generic, “fetishized” indexes of subaltern critique that tend to efface the vocal specificities of sonic form and semantic content. My analysis has focused on the way in which subaltern voices become publicly intelligible, on the frames that attribute meaning to these voices and thereby allow them to make certain kinds of claims on established hierarchies and regimes of knowledge. As much as these frames powerfully shape the public life of subaltern voices, however, they do not exhaust their social life.

In her work on the archives of the Dutch colonial state, Ann Laura Stoler (2010) has urged us to conceive of archives less as rational implements of governmental rule and more as sites where “the senses and the affective course through the seeming abstractions of political rationalities” (ibid.: 33). Historians have similarly written about the archive as a space of emotional intensity, where documents take on lives of their own that routinely defy carefully calculated research agendas. Archives emerge from such accounts as spaces of allure and desire, of intoxication and even fever (Derrida 1998; Farge 2013; Steedman

2002; Tortorici 2015). In this last section I take up these interventions to turn our attention to the ways in which subaltern archives may acquire social lives that transcend both historiographical functionality and the metaphorical mobilization of the subaltern voice as an index of historical critique. Doing this is important because it allows us to think about subaltern archives outside of a simplistic binary framework of resistance and domination, critique and complicity.

This approach requires a readiness to carefully listen to the actual sounds of archived voices, to what Nancy Rose Hunt (2008) has termed the “acoustic register” of archival traces. The lamenting voices of well-known and lesser-known *dengbêjs*, the hisses and cracks produced by bootlegged cassette tapes, the faint voices captured on worn magnetic tape: such acoustics draw the archive into realms of the social where the politics of representation and the logics of historical critique are pushed into the background by sensual, intimate, and embodied engagements with voices and their reverberations. They compel us to explore political vocality as a sonic and affective question as much as a representational one and indicate that archives function not only as endeavors of historical exploration and critique, but also fashion subjects and socialities.

In her ethnography of amateur historiography in Greece, Penelope Papailias observes that the “process of domesticating the archival origin and bringing it home [...] constitute[s] a deeply moving, sensual experience for practitioners” (2005: 87). While the hobby archivists and historians she worked with were strongly motivated by a reverence for primary sources and their truth value, Papailias shows how engaging with archival collections in the space of the home fostered a poetic, sensual engagement with the material that went beyond positivist frameworks. In the case at hand, it was similarly in the domestic and intimate spaces of the home that my interlocutors’ archives emerged most noticeably from figuring mainly as fetishized symbols or indexes of something else—national history, Kurdish self-assertion, and female empowerment—to engendering their very own “timbral socialities,” to borrow a term coined by Feld, Fox, Porcello, and Samuels (2004: 341).

The women typically kept their collections in wardrobes or bedside tables, in shoeboxes or dowry chests. As much as this situation directly speaks to the conditionality that shapes Kurdish political vocality in the Turkish Republic—indicating the marginal spaces from which these voices arise and the difficulty with which they are able to make a claim on official knowledge regimes—it also opens up the overdetermined signifier of the archive to productive interactions of a different kind. Take the case of Fadime. After an earthquake hit Van in the fall of 2011 and severely damaged her simple adobe house in one of the city’s poorer neighborhoods, her tapes were among the most essential objects that she selected to move from her house into a tiny tent pitched in her front garden, where she spent most of the following winter together with her adult



IMAGE 2. Fadime listening to tapes from her collection inside the container to which she was relocated after the 2011 Van earthquake. Author's photo, April 2012.

son before being moved into a state-run container camp in early spring. During this time, Fadime left inside the house most of her furniture, clothes, and kitchen utensils, and several photographs that adorned her living room walls, exposing them to the risk of destruction if the house were to collapse from an aftershock, but a selection of her most cherished tapes from her dowry chest, as well as her old tape recorder, accompanied her into the minimal space of her tent, and later to a small container assigned to her in the camp. As she explained to me, she wanted these tapes to be close at hand, especially now, with the city regularly shaken by aftershocks, the cold nights pierced by the barking of abandoned dogs and occasional gunshots of the self-formed neighborhood guards, and a bleak future on the horizon. In this context, Fadime told me, the sorrowful voices of *dengbêjs* in her archive helped her feel at ease and promised a measure of comfort and solace.

Many of the middle-aged to elderly women I encountered similarly told me about how they sought out the lamenting voices of *dengbêjs* in moments of hardship, worry, and grief because they provided them with a measure of relief. They spoke of how these voices made their breath expand (*bêhna min fireh dibe*) and put them at ease (*rahat*), but also said they made their hearts (*dil*) or livers (*ceger*) “burn,” reigniting the residues of pain lodged in their bodies. This appreciation is linked to specific sonic and melodic qualities of

the *kilam*, which for listeners closely associate the genre with sentiments of suffering and pain. Unlike upbeat, rhythmic songs that invite audiences to dance, *kilams* combine rapid recitation with long, drawn out, melismatic notes at the ends of lines, often interspersed with onomatopoeic expressions that indicate pain and bereavement, like “*ax*,” “*lo*,” or “*wey*.” These features resemble the melodic wailing heard in funeral lamentations, with which the *kilam* also shares much poetic imagery and many metaphors. Such relations of citation and iteration with neighboring genres render the *kilam* akin to an affectively charged melodic mold, in which aesthetic form merges with sentiment, and sound with affect. For those familiar with the intricacies of this form of vocal expression, *kilams* provide a culturally recognized genre through which to recount personal experiences of hardship and pain, while simultaneously allowing listeners to project their own sentiments and experiences onto what is uttered (Amy de la Bretèque 2012: 137–45). The *kilam* thus becomes an avenue for both voicing painful experience and making it available to others. It sets pain into motion, allowing it to travel and pervade a variety of contexts. Sound recording technologies thrive upon this capacity of the *kilam* and further augment it, as they widely circulate these sound objects that can draw listeners into a shared sphere of pain and suffering.

We have seen how the *kilam* has become heralded in public debates in Turkey as a key genre for the oral transmission of Kurdish history. Paying attention to its sounds and reverberations lets us appreciate how the genre gains social relevance not just as a form of historical evidence, but also as a culturally sanctioned and aesthetically elaborated means of engaging with pain and injury. Archival collections of *kilams* appear from this perspective not just as storehouses of historiographically rich documents, but also as sites that make available to listeners sound objects dense with affect and emotion. Once captured on cassette and videotapes and assembled in shoeboxes, dowry chests, or bedside tables, the lamenting voices of *dengbêjs* become available for consultation and consumption, ready to be indulged in and enjoyed, and turned to for consolation and solace.

As such, these collections came to play essential roles in the lives of some of the women I worked with. Asya, for instance, another woman with a passion for archiving music tapes, told me that she felt she would die if she were not able to regularly listen to *dengbêjs*' voices. They were a crucial way for her to come to terms with her own hardships as a young widow with three children to take care of, hailing from a family the security forces had evicted from their village, and now forced to earn her living as a seasonal worker on Adana's orange fields. Perihan similarly told me repeatedly that *dengbêjs* and their voices saved her sanity. Perihan's extended family were close to the Kurdish movement and during the 1990s, at the height of the “dirty war,” this profoundly impacted their lives: house raids, arrests, and torture became features of everyday life, with reverberations well beyond the events themselves.

Perihan, too, was taken into custody several times and tortured. Scars on her upper arms and torso from cigarette butts extinguished on her skin silently testified to the brutality meted out by state authorities. When her now-adult daughters were visiting for the summer they confided to me the fears and anxieties of those years, one stifling night as we drank tea on the porch. Their mother, they told me, nearly went mad over the police brutality she experienced, regularly passing out and hardly finding sleep. Perihan herself told me several times, “If it hadn’t been for the *dengbêjs* I would have gone mad (*dîn*). *Dengbêjs* saved me.” It was during this time that she began to listen to *dengbêjs* almost as if obsessed, particularly at night when she could not sleep, plagued by her memories and dreams. Still today, her tape recorder always sits on her bedside table when she goes to sleep. Staying with her and her family during my fieldwork, I heard her more than once take her recorder and tapes to the living room in the early morning hours to listen to *kilams*.

These examples illustrate how sonic objects that my interlocutors often described as historically valuable “documents” took on roles and functions quite apart from historiographical research, as they reverberated in the more intimate spaces of the home. Some such “documents,” we see here, also bore therapeutic potential since their sounds allowed these women to engage with histories of state violence and the scars it had left on their lives. While it may not have provided a source of healing in the sense of overcoming pain, the archival material at stake here did provide women with a way of acknowledging these painful experiences and, at the same time, made them seep into the lives of others. As the plaintive sounds of sorrowful *kilams* were brought to life by tape recorders and CD players, listened to collectively or in nocturnal solitude, histories of pain and injury found a home in domestic life, descending into the everyday lives of families and kin relations (see Das 2007).

By highlighting these affective-acoustic lives of archived voices, I do not mean to portray evidentiary modes of approaching history and affective engagements with its vocal residues as mutually exclusive. Archives constitute dense nodes of knowledge and affect that lead *multiple* social lives, whose trajectories tend to intersect and entwine. This also means that evidentiary and affective modes of engaging history do not map neatly onto public versus private engagements. Instead, the affective lives of history shape public identities as much as intimate selves. Put differently, listening to the lamenting voices of *dengbêjs* was not only a way to privately come to terms with personal experiences of pain and hardship, but also contributed to forging a gendered and political sense of self. By tying Kurdish history to an affectively, highly charged vocal genre, these women’s archival collections powerfully reinforced broader notions of Kurdish suffering, which have been crucial to Kurdish self-understanding and political identity in Turkey. An elaborate aesthetic of suffering—ranging from traditional Kurdish poetry, *kilams* and epics, contemporary (pop) music, literature and film, to party pamphlets and political

speech—continuously interpellates Kurds in Turkey as members of a collective marked by a history of extraordinary hardship and repression. While this self-understanding gravitating around forms of victimhood is certainly not exhaustive of Kurdish identity, it does constitute the ground from which political claims for recognition and inclusion are frequently advanced in contemporary Turkey and through which they gather legitimacy. As such, notions of victimhood centrally determine the contours of Kurdish political vocality in the country.

This vocality is, moreover, thoroughly gendered. The association of female subjectivity with suffering being a well-established cultural trope, it crucially informs the way in which women are included into political discourse and practice. As much as the Kurdish movement has expanded the range of subject positions available to women—most notably by elevating the female guerrilla to a celebrated national symbol—the figure of the mourning mother, sister, or wife who is lamenting a loved one lost to state violence remains a common trope in the movement’s political vocabulary. As such, it constitutes an important register through which particularly middle-aged to elderly Kurdish women are able to express their grievances in public, simultaneously according voice and regulating it (see Schäfers 2018). The archival collections of the women I worked with reinforced these gendered associations, tying women’s political vocality—their ability to make a public claim on knowledge regimes—to the historicity of Kurdish experiences of pain and injury and the affective charge of these experiences.

Political and affective voice, public sentiment and intimate engagements with history thus intersect here, shaping both subjects and social collectives. As such, the archives at stake contribute to the contours of the Turkish nation as an affectively experienced and intimately sensed construct. Martin Stokes has proposed that we think of the significance of popular music in Turkey as being tied to the ways in which it shapes “an intimate, as opposed to official, idea of the nation” (2010: 16). He argues that Turkish pop singers with their voices forge an acoustic space of cultural intimacy that renders the contours of the nation affectively and emotionally meaningful to its citizens. Based on what I have argued here, we can see the lamenting voices of *dengbêjs*, as they reverberate from within the bounds of these archives, as participating in the making of this sphere of cultural intimacy. Yet they do so in ways that point to the exclusions that intimate articulations of nationhood depend on in Turkey. They highlight the violence and injustice that its institutions have inflicted and voice the anxieties of those living on the margins of the Turkish “republic of love” that Stokes describes.

#### TO CONCLUDE

Spivak’s interrogation of the possibilities of subaltern speech continues to provoke reflection and debate. It remains topical at a moment when

(neo)liberal ideologies routinely hail the voices of the marginalized as indicators of their participation and empowerment and celebrate their coming to voice as a major step toward redressing historical injustice (Kunreuther 2014; Weidman 2014b). In this article I have cautioned against taking subaltern voice as a simple index of liberation and empowerment vis-à-vis reigning epistemological and political hierarchies. Raising one's voice is a fragile endeavor not only because it implies subjecting the voice to specific frames of speakability that dictate what can be said, but also because it submits subaltern voices to forms of discipline that determine how they ought to sound to be intelligible. As I have shown, this means that Kurdish voices, as they seek entry into the historiographical profession, risk becoming complicit with hegemonic frameworks of knowledge production. Such complicity is closely tied to the ways in which reigning ideologies of voice can "hear" subaltern voices only as an index or metaphor for something else. The voices the Kurdish women gathered in their archives consequently become intelligible as generic signifiers of "Kurdish history," which is read as an assertion of agency by a long-denied ethnic minority, or as proof of Kurdish women's empowerment. What is obscured is the acoustic and affective life that the voice possesses as a sound object.

Bringing into view the voice as an object of sound and affect has allowed me to rethink the subaltern archive as more than a generic signifier of counter-memory and historiographic resistance. By turning attention to the voice as an embodied medium of sound and affect, I have sought to document some of the contours of the social lives that subaltern archives may take on beyond the logics of historical critique and historiographical argumentation. These archives are more than simply containers of the source material on which the historiographical profession relies; they make available an elaborate corpus of cultural forms through which to engage history and the injuries it inflicts. As such, they play a role in forging Kurdish selves and socialities not only due to their documentary value, but also as nodes where a rich aesthetic of shared suffering materializes. The archive's descent into the domestic sphere—sheltered next to one's bed or kept amongst existential belongings in a post-disaster container space—appeared crucial for this social life to unfold. An assemblage firmly associated with official authority and state power, the archive was in this way drawn into the intimacy of the home and the intensities of sentiment and sensuality, and became available for the construction of subjective as much as collective experience.

Critical studies of the politics of history and memory, this study makes clear, stand to benefit from complexifying notions of voice and vocality that remain central to accounts of subaltern subjects "being silenced" and "gaining voice." Reducing voice to chiefly a figure for empowerment and agency is an expression of a particular ideology of voice with its own forms of discipline and regulation. If we instead approach voice as a sonically and

emotionally reverberating force, we uncover how voice may not only stand *for* agency but can also *have* agency (Weidman 2007: 148). Attending to what voices do—to the trajectories they forge, the subjects they shape, and the socialities they create—is one way to work around facile notions of subaltern resistance and historical critique. It opens up a field of investigation that has to reckon with the complex and even contradictory social lives that such powerful sites and signifiers as “history” and “the archive” engender.

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**Abstract:** This article investigates how middle-aged to elderly Kurdish women in Turkey engage with large collections of Kurdish music recordings in their possession. Framing them as archives, women mobilize these collections as central elements in a larger, ongoing Kurdish project of historical critique, which seeks to resist hegemonic state narratives that have long denied and marginalized Kurdish voices. While recognizing the critical intervention such archives make, the article contends that, to be heard as “history” with a legitimate claim to authority, subaltern voices often have to rely on the very hegemonic forms, genres, and discourses they set out to challenge. This means that subaltern projects of historical critique walk a fine line between critique and complicity, an insight that nuances narratives that would approach subaltern voices predominantly from a perspective of resistance. At the same time, this article argues that a more complete picture of subaltern archives requires us to attend to the voices they contain not just as metaphors for resistance or political representation but also as acoustic objects that have social effects because of the way they sound. By outlining the affective qualities that voice recordings held for the Kurdish women who archived them, the article shows how their collections participated in carving out specific, gendered subject positions as well as forging a broader Kurdish sociality. Paying attention to history’s “acoustic register” (Hunt 2008), this suggests, promises to open up perspectives on subaltern historiography that go beyond binary frameworks of resistance and domination, critique and complicity.

**Key words:** archive, voice, silence, Kurds, Turkey, subaltern, historical critique, acoustics, affect