Vocal Anguish, Disinformation, and the Politics of Eurovision 2016

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Abstract

Eurovision—that televisual song pageant where pop, camp, and geopolitics annually collide—started last week. This year's competition is hosted in Tel Aviv, and continues a recent trend in the competition in which geopolitical controversy threatens to overshadow pop spectacle. Activists accuse the Israeli government of exploiting Eurovision as part of a longstanding government PR strategy of

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Eurovision—that televisual song pageant where pop, camp, and geopolitics annually collide—started last week. This year's competition is hosted in Tel Aviv, and continues a recent trend in the competition in which geopolitical controversy threatens to overshadow pop spectacle. Activists accuse the Israeli government of exploiting Eurovision as part of a longstanding government PR strategy of "pinkwashing": championing Israel as a bastion of LGBT+ tolerance in order to muddle perceptions of its violent and dehumanizing policies towards Palestinians. The BDS movement mobilized a campaign to boycott Eurovision. Reigning Eurovision champion Netta Barzilai, echoing many pro-Israel voices (as well as celebrities concerned about "subverting the spirit of the contest"), referred to the boycott efforts as "spreading darkness."



Protesters outside BBC Broadcasting House demonstrate against the 2019 Eurovision song contest being held in Israel. Photograph: Penelope Barritt/Rex/ Shutterstock

While this year's competition opened already mired in contention, I'm going to listen back to the controversial winning song of the 2016 contest, whose media frenzy peaked in its aftermath. That year's champion, a pop singer of Crimean Tatar heritage who goes by the mononym Jamala, represented Ukraine with a song called "1944." Just two years before, Crimea had been annexed from Ukraine by Russia following a dubious referendum. Some Crimean Tatars—the predominantly Sunni-Muslim Turkic-language minority group of Crimea—fled to mainland Ukraine following the Russian annexation, viewing the Ukrainian state as the lesser threat; many of those that stayed continue to endure a deteriorating human rights climate (though there are some Crimean Tatars who have bought into—and who reap benefits from—the new Russian administration of the peninsula.)

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Screen capture from Stopfake.org

Jamala's very presence in the contest inevitably evoked the hot geopolitics of the moment. Her victory angered many Russians, and the subject of Eurovision became fodder for conspiracy theories as well as a target of disinformation campaigns waged online and in Russian-influenced media in Ukraine. In much of the Western European and North American media, the song was breathlessly interpreted as an assertion of indigenous rights and a rebuke to the perceived cultural genocide enacted against Crimean Tatars by Russian state power.

In the wake of her victory, many commentators described Jamala as giving voice not only to the repressed group of Crimean Tatar indigenes living in the Russian-annexed territory of Crimea, but to threatened indigenous populations around the world (for better or worse). But indeed, it was not only her metaphorical voice but the sound of vocal anguish that intensified the song's effectiveness in the contest and made it relevant well beyond the specific geopolitical bog shared by Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, and Russians. Specifically, the timbre, breath, and dynamic force of Jamala's voice communicated this anguish—particularly during the virtuosic non-lexical—wordless—bridge of the song. Despite her expertly controlled vocal performance during the dramatic bridge, Jamala's voice muddies the boundaries of singing and crying, of wailing from despair and yelling in defiant anger. To pilfer from J.L. Austin's famous formulation, what made Jamala's performative utterance felicitous to some and infelicitous to others was as much the *sound* of her voice as the words that she uttered. Put simply, on the bridge of "1944," Jamala offers a lesson in *how to do things* with sound.



"Netta from Israel Wins the Eurovision Song Contest" by Flickr User David Jones, CC BY 2.0

Some background: the world's longest-running televised spectacle of song competition, the Eurovision Song Contest began in 1956 with the peaceful mandate of bringing greater harmony (sorry not sorry) to post-war Europe. Competitors—singers elected to represent a country with a single, three-minute song each—and voters come from the member countries of the European Broadcasting Union. The EBU is not geographically restricted to Europe. Currently, some fifty countries send contestants, including states such as Israel (last year's winner), Azerbaijan, and Australia. Many of the rules that govern Eurovision have changed in its 62-year history, including restrictions governing which language singers may use. Today, it is common to hear a majority of songs with at least some text sung in English, including verses of "1944." Some rules, though, have been immutable, including the following: songs must have words (although the words need not be sensical). All vocal sounds must be performed live, including background vocals. Voters, be they professional juries or the public—who can vote today by telephone, SMS, or app—cannot vote for their own nation's competitor (though unproven conspiracy theories about fans crossing national borders in order to vote in defiance of this rule have, at times, flourished.) Finally, reaching back to its founding mandate defining Eurovision as a "non-political event," songs are not permitted to contain political (or commercial) messages.

Both the title and lyrics of Jamala's "1944" refer to the year that Crimean Tatars were brutally deported from Crimea under Stalinist edict. Indicted wholesale as "enemies of the Soviet people," the NKVD rounded up the entire population of Crimean Tatars—estimated to be some 200,000 people—packed them into cattle cars, and transported them thousands of miles away, mostly to

Uzbekistan and other regions of Central Asia. The Soviet regime cast this as a "humanitarian resettlement" intended to bring Crimean Tatars closer to other Muslim, Turkic-language populations. However, Crimean Tatars, who estimate that up to two-thirds of their population perished before arriving in Central Asia, consider this a genocidal act. They were not given the right to return to Crimea until the late 1980s. So, through clear reference to a twentieth-century political trauma with consequences that stretch into the present, "1944" was not the feel-good fluff of classic Eurovision.

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"Coin in memory of the genocide of Crimean Tatar people" by Flickr User National Bank of Ukraine (CC BY-NC-

Jamala's performance of "1944" at Eurovision was also atypical in that it largely eschewed pizzazz and bombast. Little skin was shown, there were no open flames, no smoke machines befogged the scene. Instead, Jamala stood, mostly still and center stage, encircled by spotlight. Large projections of flowers framed the stage for the first two minutes of the song, as she sang verses (in English) and a chorus in (Crimean Tartar) that utilized lyrics from a well-known twentieth-century Crimean Tatar protest song called *Ey, Güzel Qirim (Oh, My Beautiful Crimea)*. The groove of the song is spare and rather slow, and the singer's voice meanders within a fairly narrow range on both verse and chorus.

But then comes the vocalise on the bridge: two minutes and fifteen seconds into the Eurovision performance, the song's chilled-out but propulsive motion stops, leaving only a faint synthesizer drone. In the sudden quiet, Jamala mimes the act of rocking an infant. Beginning in the middle of her range, she elaborates a melismatic wail that recalls the snaking modal melody of the traditional Crimean Tatar song *Arafat Dağı*. The bridge consists of two phrases interrupted by a forceful and nervous inhalation of breath. Her breath is loud and intentional, calling attention to the complex ornaments that she has already executed, and preparing us for more ornaments to come.

Over the course of eight seconds, Jamala's voice soars upwards, increasing steadily in volume and intensifying timbrally from a more relaxed vocal sound to an anguished belt. At the apex of the bridge, the Eurovision camera soars above the stage just as the singer looks into the camera's eye. Meanwhile, the screens framing the stage explode into visuals that suggest a phoenix rising from the ash. The crowd erupts into applause.



https://youtu.be/oxS6eKEOdLQ

Other renditions of "1944" deliver a similar emotional payoff at the climax of the bridge. In the dystopian narrative of Jamala's official music video, a tornado whips free, setting a field of

immobilized human figures into chaotic motion (minute 2:35). In a reality TV song contest called *Holos Kraïny* (the Ukrainian *Voice*), a young singer's powerful elaboration of the bridge propels a coach out of her seat as she wipes tears from her eyes (minute 3:42). In other covers, the bridge is too difficult to attempt: one British busker leaves the "amazing vocal bit in the middle" to "the good people of Ukraine to sing along."

Timbrally and gesturally, I also hear the resonance between the plangent sound of the *duduk*—a double-reed wind instrument associated most closely with Armenia, and often called upon to perform in commemorations of the 1915 Armenian genocide—and Jamala's voice on the vocalise. According to Jamala (who generously responded to my questions via email through her PR person), this was not intentional. But the prominence of the instrument in the arrangement, the lightly nasal quality that her voice adopts in the bridge, and the glottalized movements she uses between pitches suggest that this connection might have been audible to listeners. After all, the opening melodic gesture of "1944" is sounded by a *duduk*, and it re-enters spectacularly just after the peak of the bridge, where it doubles Jamala's vocal line as it cascades downwards from the high note. Through sonic entanglement with the *duduk*, Jamala here communicates anguish on another register, without translation into words.

The performance of sonic anguish through the voice might be understood, in Greg Urban's terms, as a "meta-affect." Jamala delivers the emotion of anguish but also fosters sociality by interpellating listeners into the shared emotional state of communal grieving. I paraphrase from Urban's well-known analysis of "ritual wailing" to argue that Jamala, through this performance of vocal anguish, makes both *intelligible and acceptable* the public sentiment of grief. This utterance of grief is a statement of "separation and loss that is canonically associated with death" (392) that included the Eurovision audience as co-participants in the experience of grieving, of experiencing anguish over loss. A popular fan reaction video by "Jake's Face Reacts," posted to YouTube, and the hundreds of comments responding to it, attest to this experience of co-participation in the experience of grief. Furthermore, the power of this meta-affect is almost certainly heightened through normative gendered associations with performative anguish. Lauren Ninoshvili (2012) identifies this in the "expressive labor" of mourning mothers' wailing in the Republic of Georgia, while Farzaneh Hemmasi (2017) has recently elucidated how the voice of the exiled Iranian diva Googoosh became iconic of the suffering, feminized, victimized nation of Iran.



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"Googoosh, collection du pasteur de l'église St Paul" by Flickr User Stéphane Gschwind (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The sociologist of music Simon Frith once wrote that "in songs, words are the sign of the voice" (97). To put it in slightly banal terms, songs, as we generally define them, include words uttered by human voices. (Or if they don't have words uttered by voices, this becomes the notable feature of the song, c.f. Mendelssohn *Songs Without Words*, Pete Drake's talking guitar, Georgian vocable polyphony). But non-lexical vocalities also function as a sign of the voice, and, as scholars such as Ana Maria Ochoa (2014) and Jennifer Stoever (2016) have argued, expand our capacity to recover more complex personhoods from the subjugated vocalities of the past. In fact, *often* the most communicative, feelingful parts of songs occur during un-texted vocalizations. As generations of scholars have argued, timbre *means* a lot—Nina Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press: 2019) presents a very recent example—and it is often overlooked when we take the key attributes of Western Art Music as our sole formal parameters for analysis: melody, rhythm, harmony, form. So as we watch the parade of aspiring Eurovision champions duke it out in the pop pageant of geopolitics, let's attune ourselves to the vocal colors, the timbral gestures, the ululations and the growls, to the panoply of visual and auditory stimuli demanding our attention and, more important (depending on where we live), our vote.

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Featured Image: "Jamala" by Flickr User Andrei Maximov, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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