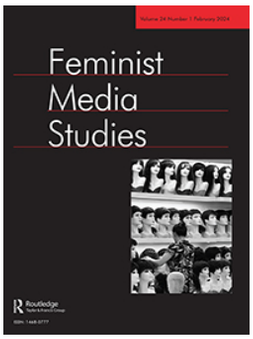

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Demet Gülçiçek

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A historiography intervention through 90's pop music in Turkey: an interview with İlker Hepkaner and Sezgin İnceel

Demet Gülçiçek

Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

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A podcast series on 90s popular culture in Turkey helped its audience to think about the period through feminist and queer perspectives. *Yine Yeni Yeniden 90'lar* (Again, Anew, Once Again the 90s—YYY90) is produced by İlker Hepkaner and Sezgin İnceel, creating an original analysis of a range of topics, including on pop music (and others such as rock and arabesque), music videos and ads, TV series, festivals and many more. Resisting a rising nostalgic approach to 90's popular culture in Turkey, they analyse gendered lyrics, problematic representations of femininities and masculinities, as well as forms of resistance that occurred in the period. YYY90 do so by creating a historiography based on recent theoretical debates and their personal reflections. Feminist and queer historiographies are often produced by focusing on rights-based movements. This interview shows how an analysis of popular culture can be a strong way to develop a historiography intervention.

Demet Gülçiçek: You produce a very original analysis that affected many Turkish speaker people. Can you please talk about your motivations to analyse 90s pop music from a feminist and queer perspective through a podcast? I am interested in your personal (hence-political) and theoretical motivations.

İlker Hepkaner: Personal, political and theoretical interests are hard to separate for me. I left academia after finishing my PhD in Cultural Studies at the New York University. Even though I do not produce knowledge for the academic field anymore, I care about conveying academic knowledge to non-academic groups. I got very excited about making academic knowledge understandable with examples that everybody knows while critically analysing nostalgic feelings about the 90s. Nostalgic memory practices were a focus of my PhD research, I worked on Memory and Cultural Heritage Practices of Jews from Turkey (İlker Hepkaner 2019). Inspired from this research, I became interested in nostalgic

CONTACT Demet Gülçiçek demet.gulcicek.1@warwick.ac.uk Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

approaches to 90s popular culture thinking that such nostalgic memory practices can tell a lot about the contemporary Turkey as well as its future. While saying so, I am thinking of Svetlana Boym's (2001) book *The Future of Nostalgia* which suggests that nostalgia can be defined as a way of missing the past. This feeling is not individual but social. According to Boym, progress and change do not only happen with negative feelings, but nostalgia also can be used to build the future. Focusing on the productive aspect of nostalgia, I am excited about making women and LGBT+ as well as feminist and queer themes a part of the historiography; this is against dominant and mainstream historiography. For example, YYY90 wants to include the drag history in Turkey, feminist and political songwriting, the role of migration in Turkey's pop music and some other themes into the history of popular culture. Writing history in this way seems like a good way to suggest using the feeling of missing the past to *build a future*. So, personal, theoretical, political motivations go together.

Demet: I believe you do this contribution very nicely! While preparing for this interview, I wrote a note to myself: "Such a great way of producing feminist and queer historiography!"

İlker: So glad to hear that what we are trying to do make sense!

Sezgin: My motivations are quite similar to İlker's. Personally, I have always had a special relationship with music since childhood, and as a 10-year-old I described music as my best friend. Pop music was the most accessible genre due to TV. In my circles as a child, we used to talk about songs of Tarkan, Sezen Aksu, Sertab Erener, Yonca Evcimik and many others. I found out that music was bringing us together.

As I live and teach in Germany now, not being able to talk about Turkish pop music started bothering me. When one is a migrant, what they can share about the past and future might get limited. I remember the time Şokopop's Nez episode (Turkish pop star from the early 2000s with an interesting history) was released, and it did not make sense to my (German) partner at the time, even though I tried really hard to explain. With the podcast, I feel like I am getting rid of what is weighing on my mind because I cannot talk about them in other circles. Politically, I am thinking of the term "empowerment," that refers to people being "enough" for themselves, underlining what exists rather than what is lacking. I was feeling a lack, or rather "not enough," but I realised I have a rich source of knowledge to be shared in a safe space through the podcast. Last, but not least, as a music educator working with issues of inclusion and diversity, I believe that not everyone has the same access to music and music education. In our own humble way, we try to change this inequality by providing free and research-based resources.

Demet: Listening to 90s pop music in academic and political circles was rather embarrassing a while ago, but not anymore. Bars are full of 90s dance nights and playlists, younger

people started listening to this music. Why and how did 90s pop music got so popular nowadays and back then, what is your approach?

İlker: 90s pop music in Turkey was a productive period, a wide range of music types and themes were released during the time. The foundation of private TV and radio channels provided an alternative to the 80s which was a bit boring and was a repressive period in the country. A broader music scale reached more people with these private channels. You are right, it is hard to miss the popularity of that period in TV and online. In addition, we can mention the interview series "*Neredeler"* [Where are they] made by Melis Danışment, in which she asks questions about people's lives who got famous during the 90s. Another one is a documentary prepared by Handan Özsoy and Suat Kabukluoğlu for the TV channel NTV. Such content has a nostalgic approach, because a "loved and missed" time period is gone. Social media is full of similar nostalgia as well; 90s pop music is something that is *remembered*.

Sezgin: 90s pop music reminds me of an "explosion," like a burst of energy. Firstly, I would also like to underline the effect of TRT, the state TV channel which was the only option for a while with a strong censorship to certain music. When private channels were founded in the 90s, we observed an "explosion" of music channels, the ones similar to MTV, such as Kral TV and Number 1. The singers of the period were quite skilled; they were often graduates of conservatoire, played several instruments, and they were interested in different kinds of music in addition to pop, such as classical music and Turkish classical music. Secondly, 90s music videos made a significant effect on its popularity in Turkey. Some of them came with a story, they were nearly like short films, such as "Adam" by Sibel Alaş or "Hovarda" by Emel Müftüoğlu. Thirdly, "image making" was one of the themes that defined the 90s. This could most likely be an object, accessory or style of make-up associated with a particular artist. Some examples of this might be Seden Gürel's white hat, Yonca Evcimik's black line on her face, running from her forehead to her chin, Bendeniz's lamp shade dress, Mine's platinum blond hair.

Demet: How do you collect your data for your analysis?

Sezgin: We do not have a strict system, which suits for artists like us. The first thing we do is to turn to our own memories about a theme, think about our feelings watching a video clip, and reflect on what it reminds us. For example, we have a few episodes on "evil women" by which we mean that some women did not necessarily fulfil the traditional expectations of femininity at the time, but behaved in a way that inspired many queer people. So, to analyse this topic, we think about the expectations and inspirations. After talking to each other, we look at newspapers, journal archives, and go to the "depths of internet."

İlker: Because I live in New York and Sezgin lives in Munich, sometimes we have to reach archives in Turkey, then our friends help us. We do not follow a typical archival work but a rhizomic one that changes according to themes. For example, a deep dive into pop stars producing songs about the Sivas Massacre in 1993 took us to online video archives of TV channels, physical archives of newspapers, and oral history books. This was not the case when we made an episode on Eurovision. Also, people who listen to us share a lot of data with us, in addition to our own internet search (God save Google!).

Demet: In your episodes, you say that you want to focus on what is shadowed and marginalised in your analysis. Even when you talk about people who look like the "centre," you approach them by unsettling their hegemonic position. Why do you think this is important?

İlker: We engage with 90s pop music through music pedagogy and cultural studies. Contextualising social conditions and underlining the social inequalities became important to the discipline towards the end of 1950s in the UK. Such perspective is interested in analysing the exclusion and underestimation of working class or immigrants by dominant classes. The exclusion can be built by assuming some forms of culture are not worth conducting research about. We focus on the shadowed and marginalised because we cannot think in another way. We criticise the separation of "high culture" (literature, classical music, opera) and "low culture" in line with many cultural studies scholars.

Demet: How do you think high culture and low culture appears in Turkey?

İlker: What seems to come from the "West" often are considered as high culture, including pop music of the "West." Listening to the Beatles is in a skewed way cooler than listening to Güllü. The ban of arabesque music by the state TV TRT itself might be an example. This reminds us of Antonio Gramsci (2011) and how the hegemonic power uses culture to assert itself on the others.

Sezgin: We break a difference between high and low culture by reflecting and sharing our own stories. Sometimes what is overlooked are our personal stories that are caused by certain songs. A good example to this point might be Mustafa Sandal's song "*Top*".[1] In our podcast, we talked about how some LGBT+ people were harassed in the school due to this song.

Demet: After listening to your podcast, I removed his a one songs I saved in my Spotify list because your narration was very strong and affected me very much.

Sezgin: I am sorry to hear that it disrupted you too; I share similar feelings. James Baldwin refers to a motto that Madonna also used in her Madame X tour: "Artists are here to disturb the peace" (Alexis Petridis 2021). Also, Tupoka Ogette (2018) has a book called *exit RACISM*, arguing White Germans live in a "happyland," and they do not want to hear what she says about racism because her criticism disrupts their happyland. To my mind, this is similar to Baldwin's notion of "peace." In this happyland we do not want to go into the details, we do not want to listen to the stories, we accept "it is what it is," but at the same time this system is not doing us any good. We do have to leave our happyland or so-called peace for a more equal world! Our episode theme called "Problematical Lyrics" in which we revisit lyrics of 90s pop songs from feminist and queer perspectives got some negative reactions, I guess it was exactly due to this disruption of the happyland/'peace.'

Demet: I interpret your approach as a strong political intervention—and a bit of a killjoy in Sara Ahmed's terms!

Sezgin: Exactly!

Demet: You also provide a criticism of Orientalism in your episodes. How were Western and Euro-centric approaches produced in the 90s pop music in Turkey?

İlker: My cultural studies background is based in Middle East Studies which leads me to think about global political inequality beyond defining countries with their geographical borders. Edward Said's (1979, 1993) conceptualisation of Orientalism helped us to link culture and imperialism. Additionally, some scholars such as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994), Lila Abu-Lughod (2000), Elliott Colla (2007), Tawil- Souri (2011) and Yesil (2017), who do research on Middle East, through its media and culture, helped me to develop my analysis for the podcast. Producing analysis through such perspective by focusing on popular culture makes everything more engageable, and it is easier to explain the analysis with easily understandable examples.

Sezgin: Eurovision contests has been one of our themes, especially in discussing self-Orientalism. Sertab Erener's song became the first in the contest in 2003. The video clip was set in a hammam, clothing and the setting told a story of a female slave in the palace who was fighting with another woman (or women?) engaged with the Sultan. The lyrics "Every way that I can, I will try to make you mine again" pointed to this conflict. Sertab Erener had not previously produced many songs with such "Eastern" connotations. Eurovision video was an attempt to present herself in a way the West wants to see her. Many others who entered the contest from Turkey had similar approaches, including Sibel Tüzün, Athena or Hadise—in particular giving the song a "Turkish flavour," especially in the middle 8 (or bridge), by adding darbuka to the

music or a surprise belly dancer on stage, even if the general production of the song was more Western-inspired pop music.

Demet: In a way, it is producing music and images to talk to the "Western gaze." Popular culture/pop music is not the first that comes to mind when thinking about historiography. How do you imagine the area of popular culture as a form of resistance?

Sezgin: We have a right to talk about the world around us. Our themes including problematic lyrics, queer moments, "evil women" all aim to read popular culture in the way we connect with the world; it is an attempt to reclaim our field, which means "we are here and what we feel also matters." Demet, I believe this is what you called "political intervention."

İlker: The contemporary targeting of women and LGBT+ in Turkey often is legitimised by erasing their history. Claiming that there were no homosexuals in the Ottoman Empire, that LGBT+ came from "the West," that such concepts damages family are common narratives in erasing us from history. In examining nostalgia of 90s pop music through a feminist and queer perspective, we rewrite the history, and we say we have always been here. It is not the popular culture itself that can be seen as a resistance area, but a feminist and queer analysis of popular culture can be part of the resistance itself.

Note

1. This word literally means a "ball" in English, and it is used as a homophobic insult that particularly targets gay men.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Demet Gülçiçek is an honorary researcher at the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, University of Warwick. Her research interests include feminist historiography, affect theories, Orientalism and Occidentalism studies, travelling theories and popular feminisms. Her recent book 'Travelling Theory and Women's Movements in Turkey: Imagining Europe' is published with Routledge. She is a co-chair of AtGender and a co-editor of Feminist Tahayyül Journal.

ORCID

Demet Gülçiçek http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1830-2715

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