Antiplayback

There is a big connection between playback singing and acting. I'm more of an actor when I sing. Very emotional. I use my hands and my whole body. It's pointless to perform as if you're in the recording studio—then people may as well listen to the recordings. Nowadays we should be called playfront singers, not playback singers. We are not in the back anymore.

—ANUPAMAA KRISHNASWAMI, *INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR,*
DECEMBER 2009

In describing the transformations of the studio and the stage and the increasing value placed on "liveness," I have pointed to a tension between two regimes of voice: playback, a system that promoted the distribution of agency and the delegation of voice, and a newer set of logics and practices of voice that seek to couple voice ever more tightly with the self, body, and intention of the singer. Rather than separating out participant roles and role fractions through an elaborate division of labor, now the ideal is to do away with these layers of social mediation. Previously figured as "just the voice," an animator of others' lyrics, melodies, and onscreen bodies, the singer is now increasingly pressured to take on the role of author and principal as well (Goffman 1981).

In this final chapter, I examine two postmillennial developments that have emerged in this new dispensation and the fundamental ways in which they disrupt the aesthetics, practices, and ideologies of playback. The first of these is the rise of music reality TV shows since the early 2000s. Though they give pride of place to film songs and often feature playback singers as judges, such shows invert the regimes of voice associated with playback singing. Playback, as a technical/industrial system and a cultural institution, was based on the division between singing, on the one hand, and acting and speaking, on the other; the singer as a machinelike wonder who churned out thousands of songs; the affective attachment to the singer's voice and the hiding of his or her body. Reality shows, by contrast, are a site for generating discourse about film singing and a crucial site of appearance for singers. Both voice and body in these shows are conceived of as capable of being worked on and developed, molded and coached by "experts." In contrast

to the cultivation and aestheticization of stillness, the downplaying of the bodily effort required to produce a voice, there is now an emphasis on "performance" as a value in itself, a valorization of the striving, expressive body.

Contemporaneous with this development on television is the cinematic phenomenon of male actors singing their own songs, a trend that has become noticeable since the beginning of the new millennium. Collapsing the roles of singer and actor into one person jars with the aesthetics and principles of playback, where, however much a "match" between voice and body might have been praised, the fact that they were provided by two different people, with different personae and star texts, was essential. While actor Kamal Hassan sang in some of his films beginning in the 1980s as a way to distinguish himself from others by signaling that he was an actor engaged in artistic and sensitive character portrayals, it is only since the early 2000s that this exception has become a rule, with a crop of young Tamil hero-actors, including Dhanush, Vijay, Silambarasan (Simbu), Siddharth, and Bharath, singing many songs in their own films. Notably, this trend is limited to male actors.

Both the reality shows and this new trend of actors singing their own songs place the voice within a new representational economy (Keane 2002). Rather than representing the agency or greatness of another entity such as God, tradition, a musical lineage, the music director, the lyricist, or the onscreen actor, the singer—whether reality show contestant or onscreen actor—is now figured as the source of his or her own voice, as Anupamaa's statement above suggests. This combination, in the person of the singer, of roles that had previously been delegated or separated out, however, is not simply a reversion to a more natural or authentic state of unity. Instead, it is shaped by the seventy-year history of playback as a cultural institution that has established divisions of labor and participant roles along with particular conventions of performance and aesthetics of vocal sound. It is shaped, as well, by the contrast and interaction between two sites of appearance in India's post-liberalization media ecology: the "small screen" of TV and the "big screen" of cinema. In the Indian context, television, with its assumed middle-class, familial, domestic, and female-dominated context of viewing, introduces a different regime of vision than cinema, whose theater audiences are imagined as paradigmatically male and subaltern (Nakassis 2015; Punathambekar and Sundar 2017). Consequently, small screen and big screen differ in both their content and the implications for the singers and actors appearing on them, while also existing in a complex intertextual relationship.

THE VALUE OF TALK

Televised music reality shows enact a fantasy of democratization and social mobility. They present the well-worn trope of "talent" that can spring from anywhere (Meizel 2011) and, as a corollary to this, a promise that the striving, "performing"

bodies of contestants will be rewarded with commentary. Indeed, watching any of the music reality shows that have become ubiquitous on TV in South India since 2000, one is struck by the amount of airtime given to talk. As on popular American music reality shows like *American Idol* and *The Voice*, it is not only the contestant's performances but also the discourse surrounding them—the judges' comments, the encouragements of the MCs, the timid replies of gratitude by the contestants, and statements from their parents and fellow contestants—that constitute the entertainment.

A basic implication of the emphasis on talk in the new reality TV shows is that the skill required to sing film songs—previously conceived of as a god-given gift but also as too low-cultural to warrant study, practice, or careful examination—is now the subject of a whole socializing and pedagogical discourse. To understand the magnitude of this change, recall the fact that playback singers before the 1990s were all self-taught. My question about whether they had taught anyone was utterly absurd; what could they teach, when no one had taught *them?* Recall also the negative reactions of L. R. Eswari fans to my academic discussion of her skill in singing some of her racier songs. The emphasis on the voice as god-given went along with a disavowal of the striving, working body. The knowledge acquired along the way to make possible the illusion of a voice being produced without bodily involvement remained tacit and unofficial (remember Janaki teaching another singer how to position the mic to avoid making a breathy or spitting sound, or Uma Ramanan figuring out herself how to sing onstage with a handheld mic).

Now, however, matters that previously would not have been spoken of are named and labeled. With the proliferation and increasing popularity of these shows, the judges' comments have come to constitute "public ritualized evaluations of qualia . . . in which the work of evaluation is routinized and invested with authority" (Chumley 2013, 169–70). Michael Silverstein has dubbed this linguistic-discursive process, by which sensuous objects and consumables (or, in this case, vocal performances) are "brought into an enveloping political economy of stratified consumption," "semiotic vinification" (2016, 197). Central to this process is the proliferation of discourse that becomes more and more terminologically elaborated; "endowed with their own 'wine'-talk, once lowly, humble consumables are felt to undergo an elevation in cultural taxonomies of relative prestige" (Silverstein 2016, 188). Though there are real stakes for the contestants—money, fame, career opportunities—the value of the material stakes rides on the symbolic work that the shows do to elevate the status of singing and listening to film songs. The burden is not only on the contestants to display the right qualia in their performances but on judges and the show itself to verbally convey, and thus dignify, those qualia of a film song performance's feel or sound. Like the tasting note in wine culture, the judge's comments create "a normative cultural schema for experiencing and enjoying the object of aesthetic contemplation": a form of "expert knowledge" (Silverstein 2016, 194).

On *Airtel Super Singer Junior*, one of the most popular of these shows in Tamil Nadu, the judges' comments are complemented by those of Ananth Vaidyanathan, who works behind the scenes with each contestant for months, getting them to "understand how the voice works" and building "awareness of what they are doing." Defining himself as a "voice engineer," Vaidyanathan is a special kind of teacher who exists outside the boundaries of genre or tradition, who can relieve his students of the baggage of "cultural conditioning" by helping them become more aware of the technology of how the voice works. As he told me, "India has had some incredible voices, but they didn't have an awareness of how their body was working along with their mind and the music. A lot of it came through discipline." With the goal of teaching by instruction and awareness, rather than by discipline and imitation, he shows students that the voice is not simply a god-given gift but is something that can be worked on and developed.[1] The show thematizes the importance of expert knowledge by framing Vaidyanathan as "India's leading voice expert" and giving him an onscreen role rather than treating his work as taking place solely behind the scenes. Doing so makes explicit the show's status as "an authorizing center of semiosis," a source from which authoritative judgments and statements emanate (Silverstein 2016, 198).

A corollary to the idea of "awareness" is that one must be able to verbalize what one is hearing and doing; as Silverstein suggests, "expert knowledge" must be "terminologized" and appropriately "genred" (2016, 197). The judges on these shows should, as Vaidyanathan suggested, provide an analysis, not just diagnosing specific problems but more generally characterizing the singer and his or her performance. Here, for instance, is a comment that Vaidyanathan gave after a contestant's performance during the recording of a show in 2012:

> *Puriñcatu* [unclear] *muyarcci paṉṟaya*, it was great but, the voice acting—not your best. So, *oru* gap [unclear]. And *unnoṭaya* voice, *oru* metallic quality *uṅka* voice-*le*. That's one of the best aspects of the voice. *Atukku anta pāṭṭu atu* show *paṇṇale*, I would say. So that, the musicianship showed, *anā*, effect *atu koñcam korañcatu*. But, [contestant's name], always a pleasure. [applause]

> *That you made an effort to understand* [unclear], it was great, but, the voice acting— not your best. So, there was *a* gap. And *your* voice, *there is a* metallic quality *in your* voice. That's one of the best aspects of your voice. *For that, that song does not* show *that*, I would say. So that, the musicianship showed, *but that lessened* the effect *a little bit*. But, [contestant's name], always a pleasure. [applause]

By commenting on the performance as a whole and couching his comment in terms of "voice quality" and "musicianship," Vaidyanathan quite literally adds value to the whole enterprise of singing and listening to film songs by scaling up from the particularities of a single performance to larger English-language concepts that have currency in a wider market. This is iconically represented by his code switching between Tamil, reserved for comments specific to the contestant's

effort and performance, and English, used to make more general pronouncements. The invocation of "voice-acting," meanwhile, removes the contestant's act from association with playback singing, taking advantage of the cultural capital that celebrity voice acting has recently gained and suggesting a transnational, rather than a local or "Indian" frame of reference.

STIGMAS OF THE REALITY STAGE

One of the effects of this mode of judging and commenting on contestants' performances is that the songs are removed from both their lyrical content and narrative context. A song becomes a piece of music, independent of its placement within the film, that can presumably be treated just like any other. Seemingly regardless of its content, and regardless of the character with whom it is associated in the film, it is an opportunity for the contestant to show his or her skill. Even the raciest songs of a singer like L. R. Eswari, for example, are fair game for this treatment; in fact, these songs are popular choices for contestants precisely because of the skill required to sing them. Contestants' performances are dissected using English terms like *dynamics* and *modulation*, as well as terms associated with Karnatic classical music, such as *pallavi, anupallavi, charanam, sangati*, and *talam*.[2] Both sets of terms add value, one by pointing to supposedly universal aspects of vocal performance, the other by pointing to the cultural capital of a classical tradition. But most striking is that elements of performance that would have previously been considered too unseemly to be spoken of now become subjects of discourse, topics to be discussed and taught.

Consider, for example, this moment following a performance of the song "Elanta paḻam" during the "remix" round of the fourth season of the Malayalam show *Idea Star Singer* (2009). The original song sequence features the comic, sexualized character of a fruit seller hawking her *elanta paḻam*, a small gooseberry-like fruit, brazenly approaching strangers and dancing in the street as she does so (see chapter 4). Manjusha, a girl of about fifteen or sixteen, has performed the song, and the playback singer Chitra, known for her modesty and technical perfection, is giving her comments. Among specific critiques focused on particular "sangatis" or parts of the "pallavi," Chitra zeroes in on one phrase, "cakka sivanta paḻam" (ripe red fruits)—one of the song's lyrical double-entendres—and tells Manjusha that the way she has sung the line is wrong. She has Manjusha sing the phrase again with its complex melismatic ornament that elongates the last syllable of *paḻam*. Then, further separating the musical issue from the lyrics, Chitra herself, on a wordless "ah," imitates the way Manjusha sang the ornament. "That is not right," she says. She sings the phrase wordlessly again, this time giving a pronounced breathy voice drop at the end. "You have to give an exhale [kāṟṟu: breath or breeze] when coming down," she explains. "That expression is in the original song."[3] Through moments such as these, the licentious charge of a song like "Elanta

paḻam," with its ambiguous meaning,[4] is seemingly neutralized through the technical treatment of the song as a piece of music with melodic, expressive, and diction elements that can be targeted and improved. Chitra concludes her comments by saying that although in several places the *sruti* (pitch) goes very flat, "I like how you have really studied and mastered the folk [nāṭṭupura] diction, the folk slang."

Yet the removal of the song from the context of the film or the meaning of the lyrics through the focus on discrete musical or diction elements can also produce the opposite effect, linking the contestant and her performance back to the original song sequence. While Chitra is at pains to separate the musical and technical aspects of singing from the song itself and from the contestant's persona, the two male judges on the show couch their comments in terms that equate the contestant with the character in the song sequence: a woman hawking her wares, and herself, in an aggressive and sexually forward manner. "In fact," says the first judge, by way of commenting on how the pitch went flat, "in your performance, not a single fruit has ripened. . . . It was a green fruit, but seems as if you simply painted it red." The second judge says he was also troubled by the pitch problems, but "there was one part I liked a lot. That was when you looked at annacci [older brother, a reference to the other male judge] here and sang 'enta manusayyā' [what a man]. Please, do it again." Manjusha winces in embarrassment but complies and sings the phrase again. The first male judge is then called on to give Manjusha her "performance" points. "I'll only give you four out of ten," he says, "unless you sing that phrase again." Manjusha hesitates, looking acutely embarrassed. "Come, daughter, sing," the judge exhorts her. Manjusha sings the phrase. The judge playfully scolds her: "Ah! Now you looked at *him* [the other judge] while you were singing! You really know how to get around!"

Such moments highlight the tension between two semiotic ideologies of performance and evaluation that coexist in these shows, the representational and the performative. The former rests on the framing of the song as an opportunity for the contestant to present her skill at reproducing or evoking an "original" song sequence's aural and visual aspects within a contest format, while the latter brings to the fore the performative force of the contestant's singing, shifting the focus to the interactional event of the performance itself. While the representational mode focuses on the song and its proper or faithful rendition, the performative mode shifts the focus to the person and presence of the singer.

Female contestants, much more than male contestants, are subject to having their performances thus reframed. In another episode of the same show, Shikha, a contestant, sings the L. R. Eswari song "Paṭṭattu rāni," with its notorious whip crack sound and stylized gasp (see chapter 4). The first male judge compliments her on her performance: "When I hear 'Paṭṭattu rāni' I will now always see your face. But tell me, why are you so in love with this song?" He imitates the gasping effect, and there is a chorus of female titters from the audience on set. Attempting to reframe herself as a contestant within the reality show format, Shikha replies

that she likes the song because she has gotten appreciation for singing it onstage before. "You sang well," continues the judge. "But I have one piece of advice. When you sing in the high register, you are giving too much force, you are overdoing it [lit. 'giving over-shakti'].[5] This is not necessary—it can cause you to get hoarseness [karakkarappu]." The topic of hoarseness continues in the other judges' comments, where it is treated as a technical issue; Shikha is advised not to "strain" her voice or practice too hard. The last judge, however, calls for the whip crack sound and has her perform the gasping effect again. "If you keep doing this, how would you *not* get karakkarappu in your voice?" he asks rhetorically. Invoking shakti, the principle of powerful and potentially destructive female sexual energy, the term *over-shakti* implies that the hoarseness is not a technical defect coming from overexertion but, instead, a sign of moral depravity that comes from engaging in too many sexualized "effects." The representational mode, which demands the isolation and repetition of particular phrases or lines out of context to more closely approximate an original, can in fact heighten their performative force.

FETISHIZING PERFORMANCE

The tension between the representational and the performative in these shows, however, is not just an undesirable aspect to be eliminated or minimized; it is, in fact, cultivated as the very basis of their appeal. Rather than treating songs as purely technical objects, the shows require contestants to dress and perform the part, thereby purposely blurring the distinction between the content of the song and the circumstances of its rendition, the narrated event and the narrating event (Bauman 1986; Seizer 2005, 180, 399n2). For example, Manjusha, recalling the original "Elanta palam" song sequence, is decked out in "village" attire—a sungudi-patterned davani skirt, hair in two braids—her appearance and dancing meant to suggest the original actress's combination of folksy girlish innocence and saucy forwardness.

While contestants may labor to manage the "slippage of participant roles" (Chumley 2013, 178) that comes from animating songs through dress and performance, the goal is not to eliminate this slippage but to cultivate it, for this is what produces the frisson of excitement that undergirds the popularity of these shows. Particular pleasure is taken in the spectacle of children who are dressed for the part, in low-slung jeans, spaghetti straps, leather jackets, and miniskirts, and MCs' comments are often expressions of wonder at an adult-sounding voice coming from a child's body. These are often couched in the discourse of "cuteness" and "talent." In fact, it seems that the younger the contestants are, the more popular the show. *Airtel Super Singer Junior*, which features contestants between the ages of six and fourteen, is one of the most avidly watched because, as one of the contestants' mothers explained to me, "Kūṭṭi pasaṅka pāṯṟatu rompa vēṭikkaiyā irukka" (seeing little children sing is very entertaining). "Because they're children, it's jolly when

they dance and sing," another mother explained to me. "If I'm cooking dinner and the show comes on, my husband will just have to wait—I can't bear to miss it."

An inescapable element of these shows is their emphasis on—indeed, fetishization of—"performance." While the performance, rather than just the singing itself, is always being judged, this priority is intensified in special "performance rounds": episodes in which the premise is that contestants are to be judged *only* on their performance of their song—their capacity to "rock the stage"—and *not* on the quality of their singing. One such round of *Airtel Super Singer Junior*, in March of 2012, produced a particularly contentious decision, precisely because it brought to the fore all the tensions of gender, class, and caste that are elided by the show's democratizing pretense and privileging of "performance" as something that anyone can engage in. As the MC explained at the beginning of the episode, the contestants "need to sing, dance, perform, show their talents." The special guest for the episode was the rapper and Indipop singer Baba Sehgal, who was introduced as a "super performer." Praising one young contestant dressed in jeans, a leather jacket, and a chain, he admiringly called her "a Britney Spears." Later in the show, a contestant named Srisha, demurely dressed in a skirt that reached below her knees, sang "Kalasala," the item song originally danced by Mallika Sherawat and voiced by L. R. Eswari (see chapter 4). Srisha sang with an obvious command of the song but engaged in only a minimum of movement. The MC kindly asked Srisha if she had "got nervous" or "forgot" her steps. "No," Srisha replied innocently, as if she had no steps to forget. The judges called on Baba Sehgal to advise her on performance. "It's not about dancing," he said. "Don't think that you have to dance. Think that you are the queen. Just walk," he exhorted her, striding around the stage. "Connect with the audience—you're the winner. That's also performance." After this pep talk Srisha was given the chance to sing again, and this time she took a few awkward steps back and forth as she sang. She was eliminated at the end of the round.

Comments from viewers on this decision reflected the tension between the value placed on performance, on the one hand, and notions of gendered and classed propriety and respectability, on the other. "An adolescent child cannot dance on the stage in the name of performance," wrote one. "Srisha is a good singer and has come from a middle class family," wrote another. "Is that the reason to eliminate her?" Another called it "the worst decision in music i have ever seen. . . . If dancing is need[ed] for performance, i have never seen singer chitra dancing in any stage performance. . . . Actually singing without dancing is a talent according to tamil epic seevaga sinthamani[6] because for music our body will automatically dance for the beats. a singer should overcome the distraction and the singer should only concentrate in singing."

Invoking older schemata of value in which singing with a lack of visible bodily involvement is a skill to be cultivated rather than a defect to be overcome, this last comment draws attention to the contrasting figures represented by Baba Sehgal,

the expert "performer," and Chitra, the playback singer known for her personal modesty and technical perfection, who presided as a judge in this round. And in so doing, it draws attention to the way the show is concerned not only with the fate of the contestants but also with staging the appearance of the playback singers who act as judges. Reality shows, at a basic level, constitute a distinctive site of public appearance for playback singers, particularly those of older generations: one that calls on them to be present in ways different from their appearances in stage shows, TV interviews, or press interviews. As a correlate of the more general value placed on "liveness," which I discussed in chapter 6, reality shows revel in the unexpected, in the unscripted, in all that contradicts the previously valued "deadness"—the machinelike dependability and poker-faced poise—of playback singers.

In keeping with this carnivalesque inversion of playback's values, a show like *Airtel Super Singer Junior* is in large part built around the fascination and pleasure taken in seeing playback singers break frame. As I observed during the filming of several episodes of the show in 2010, the set itself was a site of spontaneous interaction over the hours and days taken to film each episode. At the judges' table, Chitra was flanked by two other playback singers, Mano and Subha. The difference between their personae, in many ways, *was* the show; Mano and Subha are jokesters, and a large part of the action was the spectacle of getting Chitra to loosen up. During one filming session I observed, for example, Chitra was egged on to sing a "remixed" version of a "classical" song from the 1985 film *Sindhubhairavi*, now given a driving backbeat, in a low-pitched voice. She first demurred, then finally sang one phrase to the beat, provoking cheers and whoops from the contestants, MC, and audience members. She quickly handed the mic back to Subha, who urged her to sing more. The beat continued as Chitra seemed to prepare to sing, then dissolved in self-consciousness and handed the mic back. Later, the judges were given sunglasses during a bantering exchange with the female MC. Getting Chitra to put on the sunglasses, a quintessentially male symbol of style and status, *was* the joke. She bowed her head in embarrassment and quickly took them off amid joking from the others about how they made her look like an actress.[7]

Positioned as "judges," playback singers in these shows must step outside their privileged role as vessels, the bearers of a god-given gift, to appear as mere mortals who should be able to teach their trade to the contestants. The demand that playback singers teach, talk, and interact runs counter to the inscrutability of a body or face that refuses to reveal what might be going on "inside." And in keeping with this promise of democratization, in these moments of breaking frame—whether it is Chitra donning sunglasses or Malathy dancing to an item number for which she was previously "just the voice"—singers are also symbolically lowered to occupy the same position as the contestants, subjected to the same kinds of ragging and quasi-playful humiliation. Female embarrassment, the mirror opposite of female poise and containment, has become a valuable currency in these shows, a major source of entertainment value.

Opening up the capacity to sing in a seemingly democratizing way to multiple contestants has in some ways led to the attenuation of the extreme stigma that female playback singers had to manage. Reality shows such as these that cater to middle-class audiences have inserted the act of singing film songs into paths of upward social mobility in ways both tangible and symbolic. Putting on glamorous clothes and dancing around while singing film songs no longer signifies cheap or vulgar taste but "a jolly, freedom-loving, consumerist attitude that is encouraged and celebrated."[8] Fed by the new permissiveness on the small screen, and by the expected and therefore everyday spectacle of female embarrassment, the overall intensity of the field's ambivalence has decreased. As Durkheim noted, in order to exist as such, the sacred and the profane must be strictly separated; when they are blurred, profanity is lessened, but so, too, is sacrality along with its benefits (in this case, respectability, longevity of career, fame, money, etc.). The lessening of the potential stigma of appearing onstage has also thereby lessened the power that can be gained from overcoming it, making it no longer possible or even desirable to be "just the voice"—that is, to transcend the implied stigma of appearing onstage into sonic sainthood.[9]

SINGING ACTORS AND DEVOICED HEROINES

If the increased visibility of and permissiveness toward the female voice and body together are a pervasive feature of the "small screen," a contrasting process is playing out on the "big screen." Here, as a growing number of male actors are now singing their own songs, there has been a general devoicing of the heroine. Increasingly, in newer films that depart from the "mass hero" or "masala" genre, the female singing body is eliminated altogether. These shifts are occurring in the context of a conscious departure from playback's industrial practices, divisions of labor, and aesthetics.

Perhaps the most well-known example of the postmillennial singing hero phenomenon is the song, "Why This Kolaveri Di" (*Moonu* 2012), which became a global sensation in the early 2010s. Its sound, lyrical content, and style, which featured an untrained male voice emphasizing its own lack of training, present a departure from the aesthetics of the male voice as defined by playback singers such as T. M. Soundararajan and S. P. Balasubrahmanyam.[10] The song dismantled the division of labor associated with playback, collapsing the four main participant roles previously involved in creating a film song—a music director, who composes the melody; a lyricist; a playback singer; and an actor, who sings, moves, and dances to the song onscreen—into the persona of actor (and now also director) Dhanush himself. Not only did Dhanush sing the song, but, as with most of the other songs for the film and many others since, he wrote the lyrics and seemed to play a collaborative role in composing and orchestrating the music.

This may seem similar to the situation I described in chapter 1, where, through the 1940s, even as female voice-body relationships were subject to experimentation, the unity of the male voice and body was left intact. But it is important to realize that when hero-actors sing now, it is not a return to the prior unity of the male singing star. The seventy-odd years of playback's history are not simply being reversed here. Having a hero sing for himself is not about creating a singular, embodied "self" who unites many roles in his own person in pursuit of artistic authenticity or realistic portrayal. It is, rather, one of several ways for the hero to claim presence at different sites, both on and off the screen, co-opting playback's infrastructure of fragmentation and division of labor in order to multiply himself as an agent playing many roles. The voice-body unity of these current hero-actors is derived from the logic of the "mass hero" as a construct in Tamil South India (Prasad 2014; Srinivas 2017; Nakassis n.d.). At stake here is the hero's claim to multiple sites of presence, not only the visual image and speaking voice but the singing voice as well (see Nakassis and Weidman 2018).[11]

This trend is highly gendered. The afterlife of playback has not afforded a similar opportunity for female actors or singers to combine playback's division of labor and role fractions to their benefit. Heroine-actresses in Tamil cinema, since the inception of playback and continuing to the present day, have not sung their own songs. The capacity to do so has only ever been held out as an impossible ideal, something to be considered strictly in wistful terms: "if only." Recall, for instance, Jayalalitha's unfulfilled "longing" to be allowed to sing her own songs in her films in the 1960s. Only "character" or "comedy" actresses, those whose sexuality was either covered by the film's narrative or framed as not serious, could sing their own songs. The heroine remained resolutely fragmented, her body and singing voice provided by two different people. And on the rare occasions when an actress did sing, it was not for her own onscreen image. For instance, a short article from 1991 in *Pēcum Paṭam* magazine relayed the news that Srividya, an actress who had played heroine roles in the 1970s and 1980s, had sung an item song in the movie *Amaran* (1992):

> Some hold up Srividya as an example of acting skill. Some know the truth that she is a good singer also. The music director Rajeshwar wanted to have her sing in his movie *Amaran*. Even though Srividya didn't act in it, she sang the song "Dring dringalē . . . Pōṭu dring dringalē." The dancer for the song is Disco Shanti. He said, "I had her sing because for a sexy *[kavarcci]* scene, if there is a sexy voice *[seksi vāyc]*, it will be even better. When we [are] listening to the song, it makes us feel the same way. Karthik [the hero] has sung two of his own songs in this movie. Just like that, Srividya is a famous actress who also wishes to sing. Wouldn't any actress who has, until now, not acted speaking in her own voice *[sontakkuralil]*, desire this? (*Pēcum Paṭam* 1991)[12]

In suggesting that singing could be a compensation for an actress's inability to speak onscreen in her own voice, this last line draws attention to another aspect of the fragmentation of the female figure: a devoicing of the female body that has

become more pronounced since the early 1990s. Female onscreen appearance has become more consistently separated not only from singing but from speaking, as well, since the 1950s and 1960s. In those decades, actresses in Tamil cinema largely dubbed their own dialogue in films. This protocol coincided with—indeed, depended on—the dominance of the figure of the "respectable" female playback singer (exemplified by a figure like P. Susheela), who provided her singing voice for actresses while maintaining the conditions of the singing frame. The moral licitness of the respectable singer worked to lift the status of the actress, enabling her to keep her own speaking voice.

Since the 1990s, however, heroine actresses in Tamil cinema commonly come from non-Tamil (mostly North Indian) backgrounds and do not speak Tamil well enough either to dub their own speaking voices (Karupiah 2017; Nakassis 2015) or to sing in Tamil. The few exceptions where a heroine-actress *can* speak Tamil and does sing for her onscreen image are qualified (through the logics I described in chapters 5 and 6) by her having some element of "foreignness" or alterity.[13] Meanwhile, the structural arrangement held in place by the sanctified status of the female playback singer has given way to a competitive field with many more singers, with new and different vocal sounds and styles, including breathy timbres, grunts, and other elements that, as we saw in chapter 5, would not have been allowable within the "singing" frame in earlier decades. While it is often argued that this expansion, linked with assertions of vocal modernity and cosmopolitanism, has afforded female singers more creativity and freedom to sound different ways, this breaching of the singing frame has also arguably lowered the status of singers and of singing more generally. The increased number of singers has resulted in a condition in which singers' careers are relatively ephemeral; they are often unable to get to sing enough songs to achieve the kind of voice recognizability that singers of earlier decades enjoyed.

At the same time, there has been a general decrease in opportunities for female singing voices. While "mass hero" films, with their established and incontrovertible moral universe (see Thomas 1995), did at least make room for a heroine, a vamp or "item" actress, and often other female roles such as mothers, sisters, or female friends of the heroine who might sing, this is not so with the postmillennium genres that have emerged in Tamil cinema. Building on the post-2000 trend toward "realism," "alternative" films made in the 2010s feature "character" heroes or seek to conform more to a Hollywood aesthetic of coherent narrative development and sleek cinematography. These films have decreased or even done away with song sequences, leaving very little screen or song time for female characters and sometimes doing away with them entirely (Kailasam 2017).

Meanwhile, the newest music directors are increasingly turning away from using the studio-recorded voices of playback singers to recording voices in the field,[14] a trend popularized in part by the Bombay music director Sneha Khanwalkar. For Khanwalkar, who is virtually the only female music director in the

Bombay (or any Indian) film industry, field recording is both an artistic choice and a way of circumventing the gendered dynamics of the film music industry, in which authorial roles such as music director and lyricist have been dominated by men (Jhinghan 2015). As Jhinghan's interpretation of Khanwalkar's work suggests, having a female music director cannot mean simply inserting a woman into the already established role but, rather, entails changing the social relations of production entirely: doing away with "playback singers," "musicians," and, indeed, with the studio itself. It also means more generally redefining the role of songs in films, doing away with the "mimetic relationship between the playback singer and the onscreen star," the conceit that the voice is somehow attached to or coming from the body onscreen. Most of Khanwalkar's music is, instead, used as background songs, where the voice is "part of an assemblage" of sounds instead of being positioned as the singing voice of the onscreen performer (Jhinghan 2015, 84–85).

In a similar way, most of the songs in the recent crop of "woman-centered" films released in Tamil are also positioned as background music. For instance, in *Aruvi* (2017), the story of a heroic young woman who defies norms and speaks truth to the hypocrisy of society, rather than using established playback singers, director Arun Prabhu sought out a pair of musicians who had never made music for a Tamil film. The "songs" in the film consisted of their vocals used as background to scenes that showed the progression of narrative time rather than constituting a performative "break," "interruption," or "stilling" of the narrative, as songs have more conventionally done in Tamil cinema (Gopalan 2002; Sen 2006; Mulvey 1975). The use of music as "background" rather than as performed "song" or "number" has, since the 1990s, been a way to establish distinctions of taste and class in the context of film industries that are trying to raise their status (Ganti 2012). Many young music directors with whom I spoke, for instance, said that their true artistic interest was in composing the background score, whereas the songs were simply commercial elements that they had to put in to please the director and audiences.[15] The avoidance of the body being seen to sing—that is, the "number," with all its performative and disruptive potential (Williams 1989; Dyer 2012)—is seen as central to claiming authorship as a music director. But more categorically, for a *woman* to assume an authorial role, whether that of hero-actor or music director, she must be distanced as much as possible from the appearance of the female body singing, shielded instead by the narrative of the film (Nakassis and Weidman 2018). Aruvi, the female hero, could not sing for her own onscreen image, but more to the point, she could not even be provided with another's singing voice.

REDISTRIBUTING THE SENSIBLE

It is no coincidence that the emergence of male hero-actors singing their own songs is contemporaneous with the increasing avoidance of the female singing body altogether. As singing one's own songs on the big screen comes to be identified less

with artistic or realistic portrayals and more with the swagger of male hero-stars, it becomes even less available to actresses as a possibility, something an actress would need to distance herself from as much as possible to appear "serious" on the big screen. Yet, just as the female singing body is increasingly avoided on the big screen, it increasingly appears on the small screen, a by-product of the numerous now popular TV music reality shows. The fetishization of performance, the emphasis on talk and breaking the singing frame, and the exposure of the singer to an objectifying gaze: all are ways of experimenting with couplings of the female voice and body. Reality TV provides a site where the female singing body, tamed by the small screen and set in the play frame of a contest, can be cultivated and disciplined, praised and scolded, glorified and stigmatized.

The asymmetrically gendered couplings and decouplings of voice and body that I have discussed in relation to these postmillennial phenomena constitute redistributions of the sensible, as Rancière would put it. They are new ways of parceling out visibility and invisibility, audibility and inaudibility, that are in many ways antithetical to playback's principles. As I have argued in this book, playback as a system functioned to control and manage the unruly potential arising from the combination of acting body and singing voice by dividing the labor and drawing strict lines between acting and singing, actor/actress and playback singer. For men, the separation of the roles and the play with their combination was productive; it generated a surplus power, as I argued in chapter 2, that continues to redound to the benefit of today's singing hero-actors. For women, however, playback's separation of roles used the assumed moral licitness of a woman singing to mitigate the assumed immorality of a woman acting. The female body singing could be seen as long as the voice was provided by another and as long as "singing" held a certain sacralized and enframed status. Once the vamp role and elements of her vampy sound were dispersed *among* female singers rather than concentrated and contained in a foil figure like L. R. Eswari, the status of singers, and of singing itself, was arguably lowered. Without a Susheela figure to hold the singing frame firmly in place, and an Eswari figure to mark its constitutive outside, the female singing voice could no longer serve as a guarantor of purity and moral licitness. With playback singing no longer able to guarantee a respectability that would counterbalance the stigma of appearing on the big screen, the fates of both singer and actress have been rendered precarious.

The contrasting regimes of voice I have described here point toward broader performative dispensations, those mediated sociopolitical assemblages that at once shape the possibilities for public cultural performance and police its contents and effects (Mazzarella 2013). Scaling up from the "micro" level of quotidian divisions of labor and the regimentation of qualia and their indexical associations to a larger "macro" sociopolitical context, we can see that the ideal of being "just the voice," and the kind of celebrity it generated, was a product of India's post-independence decades and the Dravidianist political dispensation that emerged

in the Tamil context during these years. Together, these opened the possibility of a structural position for female playback singers as the distinctive kind of animators I described in chapter 3. Post-independence Nehruvian socialism stressed technological modernity, often in the form of large infrastructural projects, as the key to India's development; it imagined citizenship as participation in a division of labor administered by centralized governmental oversight. Playback as a system took shape within this imaginary and its broadcasting-based media ecology, with the ideal of a few centralized "sources" disseminated to all, exemplified by government-controlled All India Radio (Alonso n.d.). In these decades, playback mimicked this model by promoting the monopolization of singing roles by a few singers at any one time and the resulting ubiquity of their voices.

Meanwhile, the Dravidianist political dispensation of these same years used cinema as a vehicle for cultivating a sense of Tamil ethnolinguistic and political identity. As I suggested in chapters 1 and 2, playback endowed the distinction between acting-speaking and singing with particular significance, constructing the former as an act of identity and expression, the latter as an act of alterity. The emergence of politically potent male hero-stars in the 1950s and 1960s depended on their delegation of singing to someone else. By doing so, they distinguished themselves from earlier singing actors, focusing, instead, on their capacity to speak and thus represent the Tamil ethnolinguistic polity. The contrast between acting/speaking, on the one hand, and singing, on the other, solidified a particular economy of voice and appearance. At one end was the hero-star who spoke and acted but did not sing; at the other end, maximally distant within the system, was the female playback singer, who sang but did not speak or act. The mutual differentiation and opposition of these two figures created both the perceived political potency of the male voice and the perceived and idealized purity of the female voice.

Though it continues to command respect and affective power, the ideal of being "just the voice" is, in the third decade of the new millennium, considered an outmoded form of female performance, incongruous with the new dispensation that has emerged in the wake of India's economic liberalization in the 1990s. The altered media ecology produced by liberalization, marked by the proliferation of new privatized media that brought in images and sounds from abroad and provided alternatives to state-controlled radio and television, produced major structural and aesthetic changes in the field of playback singing. A field that had been organized around a few voices dominant at any one time gave way to one with many competing singers. This evolution has fundamentally altered the goals and forms of recognition to which singers can aspire. Singers who entered the field in the 1990s and after can't and don't strive to sing thousands of songs like the older singers did; they view this negatively as "mass production." Rather than ubiquity, it is being exclusive that lends a singer status. As one young singer put it to me, "It is important to find your own niche. Music directors don't want to hire a voice

that is too well-known." The older conception of playback singing as reproductive work and the concomitant value placed on the inscrutability and emotional opacity of the singer have been replaced by practices of performance that seek to project the singer's creativity and personality, as well as modes of self-presentation geared toward producing a sense of spontaneity and connection with the audience (Weidman 2014b). Bodily stillness, too, now carries a negative taint of automaticity rather than a positive valence of poise and control.

These shifts have occurred in the context of a broader neoliberal dispensation characterized by a concept of personhood that contrasts markedly with an older one based on the notion of fulfilling a specific function (e.g., "just the voice") within a larger coordinated system of persons and roles.[16] One of the pervasive features of neoliberalism is the way it seeks to relocate within the individual the agency that was previously distributed or delegated to different social actors, promoting the idea of the independent and self-sufficient (and therefore flexible) subject, the concentration of all functions within one's own self and person (Gershon 2011). Perhaps not surprisingly, neoliberal notions of personhood and agency are marked by the intensification of promises, desires, and industries centered on the voice as a site of individual distinction and aspirational social mobility. In the Indian context, these include the voice/accent training and PDE ("personality development and enhancement") that call center workers undergo; the numerous Indian reality TV singing contest shows that promote the idea of one's voice as the key to self-realization and the ticket to social mobility;[17] and the chatty, accessible persona of the FM radio jockey and TV veejay/MC that has emerged in the new millennium.

Coexisting with such voice-based aspirational projects is the increased value placed on visibility and bodily display in post-liberalization India (Lukose 2009; McGuire 2011; Dean 2013). Along with, and enabling, the increasing salience of class as a category of social differentiation in the post-liberalization context, a new logic of consumption has refigured the ability to attract the gaze of others and the act of gazing itself as positive (Dean 2013). Where visibility had once been considered suspect, it is now considered a key to positive publicity and the raising of one's status. In a highly apparent redistribution of the sensible, those things previously considered appropriate to hide from public view—sites and acts of consumption, objects of wealth, and the female body—are now being made visible in various ways. This new emphasis on visibility has combined with the neoliberal logics of voice I have described to contradict the earlier conception of playback singers' work as "all in the throat" (Weidman 2014b). For female singers, whose mode of singing, dress, and self-presentation—in short, the whole complex associated with being "just the voice"—was used to deflect the gaze, there is now pressure to perform in ways that attract visual attention.

. . .

Playback started as a seemingly straightforward practice of borrowing or trading voices in the 1940s and became a ubiquitous element of Indian aural public

culture, a cultural institution with its own social facticity and performative entail-ments. Rather than the simple dismantling or "death" of playback's practices and values, what I have characterized here as "antiplayback" is, instead, part of play-back's afterlife: a play with its distributions of the sensible, its semiotic economies of voice and appearance.

As I hope this book shows, this complex story is not just interesting to think about; it is also good to think with. The story I have told here offers a way to under-stand how distributions of the sensible—the regulation of the audible and the inaudible, the visible and the invisible or hidden—come to constitute a semiotic economy. Semiotic economies depend on relationality; elements within a system derive meaning from their interactions with each other, within and across modali-ties. As playback so elegantly demonstrates, a complex set of exchanges is at the heart of any semiotic economy. The visibility of one element depends on keeping another hidden; the audibility of some hinges on the silencing or inaudibility of others and on the visibility of still others.

Through the construction of such relations, semiotic economies govern how the "source" of words, acts, images, or voices is determined and, in turn, what their meaning or effect will be. The distribution and attribution of agency and the cali-bration of tension between representation and performance become the basis for more specific and seemingly ideological distinctions like those that have appeared in these pages: distinctions between the political and nonpolitical, the sacred and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the "live" and the "dead." Distributions of the sensible—not just on a mass scale, as the phrase seems to imply, but also on the small-scale level of how or where a singer feels her own voice within her body—are the quotidian practices and experiences that make such distinctions appear to be common sense.

The concept of a semiotic economy also addresses the ways that different kinds of voicing are delegated to different persons in a relational system (Irvine and Gunner 2018). It can thus make clear how voices that seem to serve entirely separate functions, and acts of voicing across seemingly disparate domains (for instance, the domestic and the public or the world of entertainment and the world of politics), interact to produce meaning. The relevant questions become, Who appears, in what contexts, and in what ways, and who does not? Who gives voice, for whom, and to whom? What are the actual ways that speaking and singing, voicing and appearing, are parceled out in a given context? This, indeed, is the performative, "world-making" capacity of animation (Silvio 2010): a practice that fundamentally creates opportunities for voicing and shapes the ways that voices, separated from their originating bodies and put into relations of exchange, gain affective and effective power.