A Tamil-speaking Heroine

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Abstract

Most actresses who play heroine roles in the contemporary Tamil film industry are not considered, by audiences or industry insiders, to be either ethnolinguistically Tamil or competent Tamil speakers. Drawing on interviews with industry insiders in and audiences of the Tamil film and television industries, this article interrogates discourses that take up this absence and non-identity within Tamil cinema. I show how these discourses ambivalently turn on—that is, mobilize and problematize—the historical stigma of cinema and, relatedly, its gendered performative semiotics, as well as a Dravidianist politics of language, gender, and ethnolinguistic identity. The article traces out the political contours of this stigmatic performativity and the culturalist identity claims that are made through appeal to it. I focus, in particular, on how this identity politics of the image comes to be articulated and contested in a recent reality television program devoted to finding a Tamil-speaking heroine. As I show, the tensions and contradictions that underlie this televisual attempt point to the productively fraught relationship between cinema, gender, vision, language, and regional Tamil identity in a post-television, post-liberalization context.

Keywords

Tamil cinema, identity, vision, gender, performativity, television, India

In the beginning is the word. "*Tamiḻ*" (தமிழ்) silently floats on screen, approaching us out of the dark void. Images of Tamil literary figures from the immanent past flicker in and out: Tiruvalluvar, Bharathiyar. The first aphorism from the Tirukkural materializes on screen: "*Akara mutala eḻuttellām āti Bagavan mutarrē ulaku*" (As the letter *a* is the first of all letters, so the eternal God is first in the world). Along with it comes the first letter of the Tamil syllabary: அ (*a*). We see the Tiruvalluvar statue in Kanniyakumari, the statue of Bharat Mata in Yanam (seen as the lyrics invoke *Tamiḻ Tāy*, "Mother Tamil," the female deification of the Tamil language), as well as the Kannagi statue in Chennai (Figure 1). Each is intercut with shots of ancient Tamil manuscripts. A woman's voice sings wordless notes, while a man rhythmically chants "*Tamiḻ*, *Tamiḻ*, *Tamiḻ*, *Tamiḻ*." These are the opening seconds of Raj TV's *Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki* (TPK), a 2012 reality television competition show for finding an eponymous "Tamil-speaking Heroine."

These symbols of primordial Tamil ethnolinguistic identity are quickly swept up by the music, as the song's lyrics lay out a series of oppositions. A female voice asks, are you (*nī*) the angel of *Tamiḻ Tāy*?

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Figure 1. Screenshots of some of the opening images of *Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki*'s (2012) introductory sequence

Figure 2. Are you the sweet language of "pure" Tamil (left)? A *Tamiḻacci* (center)? A Tamil-speaking heroine (right)? Screen Shots from *Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki*'s (2012) introductory sequence

Are you the sweet language of pure Tamil (*sen Tamiḻ ten moḻi*) or a new, modern Tamil-speaking girl? A male and female voice ask, are you the angel that the film world has been searching for, the *Tamiḻacci* (Tamil woman) with unchanging Tamil dignity? The music becomes more peppy as the voices onscreen invoke various cinematic figures, past and present, Tamil and not (Figure 2). Do you want to become the next Vijayashanti? Are you your neighborhood's Sridevi? A Jennifer Lopez or a Marilyn Monroe? Are you a *Tamiḻacci*, or are you a Tamil-speaking heroine? Are you a seductive young girl or T. Rajendran's younger sister (that is, a homely family-oriented character)? Are you ready to act? If you know how to speak Tamil, jump and come running! In this fast-paced smorgasbord of gender clichés, a tension emerges: between Tamil, chastity, antiquity, and traditional femininity and the modern, the bold, the foreign, sexuality, and cinema.

The last word of this introductory song-sequence is initiated by its first. Telling, it is delivered by three male directors: A.R. Murugadass, K.V. Anand, and Vetrimaran. Each is spliced after the other saying "*Tamiḻ*," as if to reiterate the authority underwriting this enterprise. The show's title follows in jingle form as its logo and title (along with the show's brand sponsors) appear on screen, the name of the language "TAMIL" conspicuously rendered in upper-case roman script while the rest of the title is in Tamil script (Figure 3). This logo condenses the above-mentioned tensions in a tableau that literally

Figure 3. *Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki*'s Logo; Screenshot from *Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki*'s (2012) introductory sequence

splits the feminine (and the linguistic) into two cartoon figures, each a side of the fantastical, perhaps impossible, figure the show announces itself as bringing into being. Standing on a lotus is a young woman in a short skirt and sari blouse, a diaphanous fabric draped across her exposed breast, her long hair plaited and adorned with flowers, a gun holster on her leg. Peeking behind it all are the disembodied shoulder and head of a traditional-looking, bejeweled Tamil woman, her body backgrounded and dissolving into the show's title, overlooking her alter ego as she fades into the cold airless space behind her.

TPK comprised 45 episodes shot in 2011. The first half of the show featured open auditions in seven cities with significant Tamil communities (Bangalore, Madurai, Coimbatore, Mumbai, Cochin, Chennai, and Kuala Lampur), wherein young women were asked to display the talents necessary to be a heroine in the Tamil film industry: to act out a scene, deliver a monologue, dance to a song, and the like. I became aware of the show after meeting its creator, the actor John Vijay, who later invited me to participate as a guest judge in TPK's Madurai episodes. Each city competition had between 100 and 200 contestants, of which 10–12 were selected. The winners of each citywide competition went on to subsequent rounds in the show's second half, where they were groomed and trained to be actresses. The last two episodes winnowed the final 30 contestants to 15, of which five performed on-air at a live stage show. Out of the final five, a single "Tamil-speaking heroine," Sanchana, was selected. It was announced that she would play the lead in the next Tamil film directed by Balaji Sakthivel of *Kaadhal* (2004) and *Vazhakku Enn 18/9* (2012) fame.

This article takes as its point of intervention that point of intervention that TPK took up as its premise: the conspicuous lack of heroines in the contemporary Tamil film industry who are considered to be Tamil or, more important for TPK, can speak and understand the language. TPK figured this ethnolinguistic lack as a problem both for the Tamil film industry and for the Tamil language itself, and it aimed to fill it.

In this article, I explore how reflexive discourses about this lack are one modality of articulating regional identity. As I suggest, through the ambivalent figure of the non-Tamil(-speaking) heroine, such discourses assert a cultural authenticity and identity that is ultimately deferred elsewhere, to Tamil women who do not appear on the screen, ideologically fixing the identity of the industry and ethnopolity through fixating on, and thereby constituting, the gendered extimacy lodged within it. I put "speaking" in parentheses here because, as I discuss below, the question of being and speaking Tamil are tightly linked, and frequently conflated, in such discourses, such that the lack of the latter (Tamil-speaking heroines) is often implicitly, and ambivalently, lamented as a lack of the former (Tamil heroines).

The argument of this article isn't that the extimacy of the non-Tamil(-speaking) heroine is a necessary feature of Tamil regional identity in India or of Tamil cinema, or even a historically constant one. Indeed, neither the presence/absence of Tamil(-speaking) actresses in the industry nor reflexive discourses about it have been historically static, even if the stigma and exteriority of her subject position has a long history. Further, such discourses and their politics of the image are a site of contestation and re-signification and are thereby variable by social domain. Rather, the argument is that a certain kind of identity work is done by discourses that reflexively construe and construct this absence and, as I would further suggest, such identity work leaves its traces on and off the screen. As I discuss next, this entanglement of

identity, cinema, and gender has to be situated within a longer history of Dravidian identity and language politics as they have come to be refracted in a post-liberalization, post-television milieu.

Gender of Language, Gender of Identity

Central to the modern politics of language, gender, and cultural identity in post-colonial Tamil Nadu, India, has been the so-called Dravidian movement, a heterogeneous political movement that emerged in the nineteenth century Madras Presidency around questions of caste discrimination (namely, Brahminical monopolies of civil service positions), religion (namely, Brahminical Hinduism as exogenous imposition), language difference (namely, Dravidian versus Aryan languages), and regional sovereignty (namely, south versus north India/the Indian nation) (Pandian, 2007; Ramaswamy, 1997). While one strain of an early Dravidianist imaginary, as articulated by the rationalist social reformer E.V. Ramasamy (also known as Periyar), for example, was pan-south Indian and largely focused on issues of caste and region, other, and in particular later, iterations of the Dravidian movement in the Tamil-speaking regions of the Madras Presidency (and later, Madras State and Tamil Nadu) focused its identity politics of difference more specifically on the state and status of the Tamil language. This difference and shift in ideological focus and rhetoric was particularly central to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) political party, which was founded in 1949 with the aim of participating in electoral politics (in distinction to Periyar's Dravidar Kazhagam [DK] organization from which it split). The DMK formally contested elections in 1957 (after the reorganization of the Madras State along linguistic lines) and captured the state government in 1967. Since then, Dravidian parties have continually been in power in the state.

Central to this Dravidianist dispensation (and in contrast to Periyar's more progressive politics; though see Lakshmi, 1990) has been the tight ideological nexus of language, gender, and cultural identity. This dispensation's imaginary of the Tamil ethnopolity has centered on the chastity (*kaṟpu*) of, on the one hand, its womenfolk (figured as a *tāykulam* or community of mothers) and, on the other, the chastity of the Tamil language, itself feminized and deified in the figure of *Tamiḻ Tāy* (Mother Tamil) (Lakshmi,1990; Ramaswamy, 1997). Here, the self-sameness and other-difference of ethnolinguistic identity and the ethnopolity it anchors is caught up in, and scaled to, the boundaries presupposed in, and thus entailed by, a patrilineally articulated enclosure of female/linguistic chastity.

This entanglement of Tamil identity, linguistic purity, and female chastity took narrative form in a number of mass communicative modalities, important of which for our discussion is cinema. Many prominent DMK members were hero/actors (for example, M. G. Ramachandran [MGR], S.S. Rajendran, and for a time, Sivaji Ganeshan), scriptwriters (for example, C.N. Annadurai and Karunanithi), and lyricists (for example, Kannadasan) in theater and film, and the DMK utilized both platforms in their political mobilization and propagandizing. In the politically driven cinema that came to be known as the DMK film of the 1950s and 1960s (Hardgrave, 1973; Pandian, 1991; Sivathambi, 1981), both figurations of chastity—linguistic and sexual—were central to the emplotment of the DMK's politics of Tamil cultural identity (Lakshmi, 1990). This involved both positive and negative characterizations of female/linguistic purity, with the ideal figure of the chaste Tamil woman and her various others (the fallen woman, the vamp, the modern English-speaking girl, and the like) being a central preoccupation of such films.[1] As C.S. Lakshmi (2008) and Sathiavathi Chinniah (2008) have both emphasized, this cinematic fixation on chastity has continued in various forms over the decades (though not without important shifts, of course), forming a critical thread in the genealogy of the cine-political present.

But if scholarship on Tamil cinema's relationship to the gendered articulation of regional and cultural identity has largely focused on textual representations of femininity, in this article I focus on the other side of the image: not the representation of femininity, but the animating body of that representation, on

the actress herself. I am particularly interested in interrogating how the heroine/actress is figured as exterior to the boundaries of respectability through which Tamil cultural identity has come to be articulated within the political envelope opened by the Dravidian movement, namely, her (hyper-present) sexuality/body and her (lack of) speech. What requires reflection, then, is the systematic exteriority of the heroine/actress (narratologically, morally, politically) *and* the reflexive attunements to that exteriority in and out of the film industry (and the social projects that are undertaken thereby), and how both have historically manifested in various entangled ways. Doing this requires us to rethink the question of what a filmic image is beyond questions of representation, to consider the image's performativity, the dialectical tension and movement between the onscreen and offscreen, the textual and its extratextual peregrinations, the pro-filmic and its apprehension on the screen's thither sides (Nakassis, 2016, n.d.).

The Porous Boundaries of Regional Cinemas

The early film industries of India were not regional industries as we understand them to be today, that is, defined against the ethnolinguistic communities that they eventually came to address as audience-markets. This was partly due to the first era of Indian cinema being silent. And yet, it was not with the advent of sound that India's film industries became regionally and linguistically based. Stephen Hughes (2011) tells us that early south Indian cinema, on both sides of the sound divide, was resolutely multilingual and cosmopolitan, not just in the languages used onscreen but also in its personnel, production locales, advertising strategies, and distribution. Neither language nor region was a self-evident site of identity difference. Similarly, S.V. Srinivas (2013) has also shown for what became "Telugu" cinema that the question of regional identity was a political economic project of the emergent industry itself, and a relatively late one at that.

It is important to see that this porousness is not simply of the past. While today it is seemingly self-evident that "Tamil" cinema is distinct from, say, "Telugu" cinema—just as it has become self-evident that Tamil (Ramaswamy, 1997) and Telugu (Mitchell, 2009) are distinct language communities (*sensu* Silverstein, 1998)—regional industries are still porous across their boundaries (as are the speech, and language, communities and the languages themselves).[2] Stories, actors, directors, technicians, to say nothing of films, move across their putative boundaries. What makes the past distinct from the present, then, is that these complex continuities are overlaid by a relatively sedimented ideological sense of regional difference that is historically emergent and performatively consequential in a number of modalities (textually, economically, institutionally, politically, etc.).

Of interest to me here is how this ideologically mediated, and often erased, porousness is differentially inflected by gender, in particular, in the mirroring inverted images of the hero/actor and heroine/actress. As Madhava Prasad (2014) has noted, one central site for the emergence of such a sense of regional cinema in south India has been the figure of the so-called mass hero. And indeed, along with language (as defined in our contemporary common sense at least), mass heroes are one of the few elements of south Indian cinema that are relatively difficult to transpose into other ethnolinguistically circumscribed regional industries.[3] This is because, as Prasad has argued, mass heroes are taken to politically represent a virtual polity defined precisely by the contours of the linguistically and politically defined region (and thus film market). By contrast, heroines—like comedians, character actors, to say nothing of directors, producers, technicians, etc.—are not so constrained in their movement.

In the contemporary Tamil case, we can say more though. As noted above, heroine/actresses are rarely considered to be ethnolinguistically Tamil,[4] and if they are (as with Trisha, Priyamani, or Sruthi Hassan, for example), they are often already ideologically located at the margins of the Tamil

language community as urban, English-educated Brahmins.[5] Of course, the iconic mass heroes of the Tamil film industry, such as MGR and Rajinikanth, were/are also well known to be from other language communities. Here, as Prasad (2014) has argued, the relationship of the hero to regional identity—in the realm of populist cine-politics at least[6]—is not a straightforward one of authenticity or membership, but is one of partial inclusion as proxy. By contrast, the (non-Tamil) heroine's exteriority, sociological and textual, verges on the absolute (Krishnan, 2009, p. 190)—or rather, is always immanent to her, and thus can be productively called upon, as Khushboo's travails in the mid-2000s attested (Anandhi, 2005) and as Jayalalitha's later disavowal of her cinematic image suggests (Pandian, 2005, p. 59; Prasad, 2014, pp. 186–192; also, see Lakshmi, 1990, p. WS82)—foreclosing her ability qua heroine/actress to stand in as a proxy of the ethnopolity, to say nothing of as an authentic instance of it (Lakshmi, 2008, p. 17). And yet, as I show, the heroine/actress figure is, in fact, a proxy for a particular kind of identity politics; she mutely appears as the disavowed proxy of the putatively authentic Tamil woman who refuses to appear on the screen. If, then, the hero is one site from which linguistic and regional identity is consolidated for the Tamil industry and ethnopolity, then so too is the figure of the heroine, whose stigmatic exteriority presents another modality by which the porousness of regional identity is hedged, made continent, coherent, and (with her fixed as exception) seemingly self-same.

The Scene of Sight

TPK put into televisual form a common discourse about why (respectable) Tamil women don't appear on the film screen: the intense historical stigma of the cinema, and in particular, of being an actress. One standard argument invoked to explain this stigma is that from its inception, India's film industries have been filled with "dancing girls," a stereotype linked to the historical overlap in personnel between actresses and women from so-called *devadasi* communities, who, through nineteenth century reform movements, were rebranded as prostitutes and relegated to the margins of respectability and community (Ramamurthy, 2006, p. 215; Soneji, 2012; on the repression of the *dasi* figure within 1930s and 1940s Tamil film narratives, see Kaali, 2013).[7] The so-called father of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke's statements on the subject, while almost 100 years old, still have a current ring to them:

> God willing, if one day these prostitutes can be removed and replaced with women from good families, our studios will no longer be compared with whore houses and the prestige of the filmmakers and their teams will be salvaged...Then it will no longer be embarrassing to see films accompanied by one's mother, mother-in-law, daughter or daughter-in-law. (quoted in Pande, 2006, p. 1649)[8]

Such stereotypes, even as they have been steadily eroded, are still in circulation today in Tamil Nadu (Chinniah, 2008, pp. 40–41; Hardgrave, 1993, p. 95; cf. Ganti, 2004, p. 94). I often heard similar statements from filmgoers, and even filmmakers, decrying actresses as "prostitutes," though here the suggestion was not that cinema was corrupt because its women came from communities exterior to traditional or bourgeois Indian cultural respectability, but rather that cinema itself corrupted and compromised women (or attracted morally loose women), even those that came from "decent" (read: upper-caste and -class) backgrounds.

But more than fears of casting couches or corrupting immoralities, that is, to what goes on offscreen, this stigma of cinema is also caught up with the screen itself, with particular anxieties about (and desires for) how the screen exposes those on its surface to the open edge of mass visibility, to adapt a phrase from William Mazzarella (2013). Vadivukkarasi, a veteran actress in the Tamil cinema, explained this stigma

to me as we drove in her car from the shooting spot of the mega-serial *Thirumathi Selvam*, in which she was acting, back to Chennai city in 2011. She noted halfway through the conversation that she began her career doing "glamour" (that is, sexy roles that involved exposing some amount of flesh). With time, she shifted to a more respectable, homely heroine image (*vīṭṭu poṇṇu*) and eventually, as she aged out of heroine roles, to sister and mother character roles (and eventually to television). Explaining that actresses have to constantly be careful to stave off the forms of gossip that adhere to their bodies, she ruefully but defiantly noted that some section of society will never respect you. Her voice dropped in pitch and changed quality as she acted out in Tamil the voices that badmouth actresses: 'What is this?! That girl is half-naked, wearing a glamorous dress...standing in a transparent sari. She's dancing with everyone!' Here, as Vadivukkarasi implied, it is the mediation of the screen itself that marks the actress's body. Baring flesh in a dance, hugging the hero, kissing him onscreen—these are all transgressive because to have done them onscreen is to have done them offscreen, on set, in front of the camera.[9] And, moreover, to have offered oneself up to being publically seen as having done them (Chinniah, 2008, p. 40). By this logic, the membrane of the screen is traversed by a spectatorial gaze that suspends the representationality of the onscreen image *as* simply a fiction or acting, and instead reckons such images as morally implicating performative acts themselves. Such acts dialectically entangle onscreen and offscreen through the actress' visible body, making it, and her, bear the responsibility of her onscreen act/presence (versus, say, the director or dance master who authors her presencing as a character). As one relatively conservative friend and his wife put it, what kind of "family girl" (*kuṭumba poṇṇu*) would *choose* to attract people with her body, would let *anyone* (read: low-caste, working-class men) see her doing such "glamour" on set and on screen, let them whistle, leer, and covet her (cf. Krishnan, 2009, p. 196)?

It is important to underscore the particular kind of vision that my friend assumed that film heroines give themselves over to, what young Tamil men—those most likely to be negatively invoked by others as inhabiting this sexualizing gaze—call *sight aṭikkiṟatu*.[10] *Sight aṭikkiṟatu* denotes a quality, a scene, an intent of (masculinized) vision, of publically, if furtively, ogling the opposite sex as a sexual body, or for those more romantically inclined, as a *kanavu kanni*, a "dream girl" (*kanni* meaning "unmarried girl" or "virgin"). While an amorous, sexualizing male gaze has long surveiled and been inscribed on the Tamil film screen, this mode of sight has taken on a particular acuity and intensity in a post-television milieu. The widespread advent of television and associated home-theater technologies in the 1980s and 1990s enabled the easy circulation of film and other entertainment programming into the privacy of the home, shifting the focus of filmmakers (whose profits derive primarily from theater's ticket sales) away from the increasingly absent "family"—that is, women's—audience to young men,[11] those pupils that commercial film has increasingly orchestrated the scene of sight for since the 1980s (cf. the emergence of the "rape scene," the "item number," the collapse of the vamp and heroine, and the decreasing age and unmarried status of heroine characters [Chinniah 2008]).

It is also important to underscore that this scopic logic of the cinematic image and its attendant disgusts and (male) desires is inherently political in nature; indeed, it operates within the politics of chastity noted above, as both the stigma of the actress' sexuality/body (as "prostitute") and the fantasy invested in her (as "*kanavu kanni*") indicate (Lakshmi, 2008). And further, that this politics of the image does not go uncontested. Many of the people with whom I talked about these issues stressed that they did *not* evaluate film actresses as my friend and his wife did above, focusing instead only on the character and her acting, that is, on the image as narrative representation. As many noted, you can't say whether a woman is a good or bad person, a family girl or a prostitute, based on how she acts onscreen (or even from the fact that she appears onscreen). Problematizing the conflation of the onscreen and offscreen that they associated with a sexist politics of the image, this counter-discourse figurates the screen image as a mere fiction, as a shield and veil to the film actress' Janus face.

This refusal to link onscreen and offscreen is inflected by gender, generation, and class. Many educated, urban young women, in particular, rejected the idea that actresses were necessarily fallen women. They were just like everyone else who worked a job, they said, reanimating a discourse that has long circulated in the industry (Krishnan, 2009, p. 194), and that TPK itself took up. As they suggested, implicitly calling on a familiar elitist imaginary of credulous, subaltern film reception (Mazzarella, 2013), it was less-sophisticated filmgoers of the past, conservative older generations, the subaltern poor, or those in rural areas who see female characters onscreen as simply the actresses' bodies, who reason about film images not as narrative representations but as performative acts in the here-and-now of their appearance. My good friend's mother—a lower-middle-class Dalit woman in her mid-sixties—figured her own parents, born in the late 1920s, in precisely this way, betraying the generationally shifting, and relational, nature of this politics of the image.

The Kinship Chronotope of Sight

As the juxtaposition of the homely "family girl" against the "prostitute" (or *kanavu kanni*) discussed above indicates, this scopic regime of *sight aṭikkiṟatu* is mediated by a particular kinship chronotope (Ball and Harkness, 2015; Dent, 2009; cf. Bakhtin, 1982), that is, by a particular projection of (non-)kin relationality onto the time–space of the event of seeing the film heroine/actress onscreen. This chronotope is always implicitly a way of drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and thereby articulating identity. To *sightaṭi* those who appear onscreen is to figure them as *not* kin. This came out in a conversation about film actresses with a lower-middle-class Chennai friend. There is nothing morally wrong with women acting or with actresses per se, he explained to me in Tamil, voicing the progressive politics of the image noted above. That is, he then hedged, as long as they aren't kin, as long as they aren't "our girls." That we can't accept. "It's like *sight aṭi*-ing girls," he explained: "when they aren't our sisters or mothers, we enjoy it. But if others are looking at them like that, we get upset."

Such a kinship chronotope is what linguistic anthropologists call a *shifter* (Silverstein, 1995 [1976]), a semiotic form whose reference and scale shifts across instances and contexts of use (for example, deictics like *here/there*, personal pronouns like *I/we/you*, verbal tense, and the like). The "our" in "our girls" doesn't only encompass actual kin, but potentially shifts and expands, maximally including "our" Tamil women, scaling precisely with the ethnopolity carved out by the Dravidian politics of chastity discussed above. Entailed in this kinship chronotope is the implication that in order to be sighted onscreen, the film actress must be unrelated as such, both in the sense of being not "ours" (which is to say, not consanguineal in both a restricted and expanded sense[12]) and thus also sexually available (which is to say, potentially affinal and hence unmarried; indeed, film heroine/actresses today are almost always unmarried[13]). In this expansive sense, this kinship chronotope excludes, or condemns to exteriority, those upon whom its gaze falls by normative fiat (namely, the charge of being a "prostitute" or not being a "family girl"—on which, more below), just as it seems to explain, as fact, why "our girls" don't, or rather shouldn't, act in films.

Such explanations are often presented in terms of "Tamil culture" or *kalāccāram*, as something inherent to the place and people of Tamil Nadu. In explaining to me why Tamil cinema has a dearth of Tamil actresses, Vadivukkarasi pointed to a fear (*bayam*) that is deeply ingrained in, and particular to, the "culture" of Tamil ("*Iṅkē Tamiḻukku ṇṇu oru* culture *oṇṇu irukku*"), a culture that prevents parents from allowing their daughters (who otherwise, she noted, have the talent and desire) to act onscreen. This culture, this fear about the corrupting influence of the cinema (and, importantly, its impact on daughters' future marriage prospects) is, as she put it, in the "blood," an unchangeable primordial fact of

Tamil culture (here ambiguously, if tellingly, attributed to the language and its adult speakers) and thus its film industry. The actor, Sriman (2008), likewise noted that a "*kuṭumba peṇ*" (family girl) will always think twice about entering cinema. Animating the internal voice of this homely family girl, he rhetorically asked: after hugging four different people and dancing around onscreen, after acting in a rape scene, after putting on revealing, glamorous dress, will anyone marry us? The girls in Tamil Nadu today, he continued, don't believe that cinema is an industry, that acting is an art. This worry, this lack of belief, this stigma, he concluded, has been there since the beginning of the industry and will still be there 200 years from now as well. Finally, consider how one TPK producer explicitly formulated *kalāccāram* and its visual politics of the gendered image as the reason why women in Tamil Nadu won't act:

"*Kalāccāram. Tamiḻ Nāṭṭule irukkuṟavaṅka yārumē vantu katānāyaki āgātatukku orē kāraṇam. Ennannā, avaṅka yārumē namma Tamiḻ Nāṭṭu peṇkaḷai pārttu kēliyāvum sirikka kūṭātu, kāmattōṭa pārkka kūṭātu. Santōṣamā kai taṭṭaṇum ānā namma ūr makkaḷ enna paṇṇuvāṅka? Ottukka māṭṭaṅkaḷē.*"

[Culture. This is the only reason that no one in Tamil Nadu becomes a heroine. No one should look at our Tamil Nadu women and make fun of them. No one should look at them with lust. If people happily clap their hands (when they're onscreen), what will our rural people do? They won't accept it at all.]

Here, this producer ruefully explains the absence of "our Tamil Nadu women" by reanimating another's anxiety (that of "our rural people") about the scopic pleasures of the lustful, anonymous (and in his discourse, unpossessed and unidentified) masses. This double displacement figurates cultural identity (for, here, "our rural people" comes to stand in for the "culture" of Tamil Nadu more generally) precisely by, and as the cause of, the onscreen absence of the women of Tamil Nadu. Read alongside Sriman's and Vadivukkarasi's explanations, this producer's scaling up from the nuclear family to "our Tamil Nadu women" inscribes and sites "culture" in the *absent* female body, even as it figurates the "family girl"—the girl who is shielded from the stigmatic performativity of the screen by her family and (the anticipation of) marriage—as the prototype of normative, respectable femininity, implying that those who do appear onscreen are neither family girls nor, thereby, authentically Tamil. Indeed, it is this circularity that allows for the self-evident explanation that the absence of "our" Tamil women from the screen follows the fact of cinema's stigma.

In all these examples, the absence of Tamil, and even Tamil-speaking, heroines points to a self-same authenticity and identity elsewhere, to the absent presence of Tamil women who do not appear, who inhabit an elsewhere where "good" "family girls" follow the (adult) "culture" of Tamil Nadu (cf. Chatterjee, 1993).[14] To certain industry insiders and filmgoers, then, "our" girls' avoidance of the film industry and the screen is a site of cultural authenticity and identity, even if it is also a site of lament and frustration, and, as we saw above, political contestation. Indeed, the continual slippage in this culturalist discourse from the "is" and the "ought" not only belies its implicitly political nature but also its regulatory function, a function that operates over and above the empirical truth of its claims (namely, that "our rural people" won't accept "our girls" acting, or even that Tamil girls are unwilling, or, by force of kin, unable to act) and that thereby must be continually reiterated.

Important here are the ways in which vision and audition, sexuality and language, are linked by this politics only to be rendered apart and located as always elsewhere (and elsewhen) from each other. Here, femininity either appears onscreen as a mute foreign body—she who is unrelated and thus can be sighted—or is heard offscreen as a disembodied Tamil voice (or as a voice from the past)—she who is "ours" and thereby publicly invisible (or no longer existent). This is both literally—in that

non-Tamil-speaking actresses have their voices dubbed for them by Tamil-speaking others (or speak in their own voices as foreigners)—and in the sense that the heroine/actress cannot seemingly function as a positive, self-present site of identity; rather, she is only ever the proxy sign of that other, unseen woman, she who can speak and thus be spoken *for* as a site of Tamil identity.

As I discuss next, this disarticulation of vision/appearance and audition/speech is not only at play within the gendered division of cinematic presence/absence. It also characterizes the complementary relationship between the visual and textual regimes of cinema and television, a relationship that is itself narrativized and replayed by TPK, a television show dedicated to putting a Tamil(-speaking) heroine on the big screen.

The Heroine that Speaks Tamil

TPK was made, as its creator John Vijay told me, to counter precisely the stigmas and stereotypes of the cinema discussed above, to argue that acting was a respectable industry and art, that it didn't necessarily corrupt. Like the contestations discussed in the previous section, TPK argued for another regime of cinematic vision and representation, one where appearance on the screen didn't performatively leave its stigmata on the film actress' body or her or her family's reputation, where one could act in a fiction and still be chaste in reality.

Here, I reiterate two interlinked points. First, TPK's argument was already cast, as we saw at the outset of the article, within a longer history of Dravidian politics that has figured language and identity through an idiom of purity/chastity, a politics that is tangled, as we saw above, with the semiotics of the image that TPK attempted to unsettle. While TPK at times aligned itself to this political genealogy, in other ways, it also attempted to problematize it. The result, as I show, is an insoluble ambivalence about the possibility of a Tamil(-speaking) heroine, one that ultimately conceded to the identity and gender politics of language and image that it tried to combat.

Second, TPK's attempt to instate its alternate semiotics of the film screen took place on the small screen, in a medium where the performative stakes of women's onscreen appearance are, relative to film, considerably attenuated. One can appear on television and still be chaste, as it were, a fact that has everything to do, as noted above, with the migration of the "family" audience from cinema to television and the textual effects therein. By contrast to cinema, television presents a different—more domestic, more "decent," less stigmatized—scene of vision and textual surface of visibility.[15] Hence, while making a show about the difficulties of getting Tamil(-speaking) women to appear onscreen of necessity faces, and thereby must itself narrate, its own difficulties of getting Tamil(-speaking) women to appear onscreen, this constitutive contradiction could be glossed over and worked out—for ultimately, TPK had to and did produce female bodies onstage and onscreen—precisely because of television's different regime of vision, that is, by displacing the performatively sexualizing open visibility of the big screen on to the dull, domesticated enclosure of the small screen. Reflecting this medium transposition, TPK was largely narrativized not in the idiom of visibility and appearance, but in the idiom of speech, of audition and understanding, of pronunciation and fluency. Indeed, the name of the show was not *Tamiḻ Katānāyaki*, but *Tamiḻ* ***Pēsum*** *Katānāyaki* (Tamil **Speaking** Heroine), the intervention of the verb to speak (*pēsu*) indexing at the outset that the problem TPK addressed wasn't simply that of the ethnolinguistic identity of actresses as such (though it was often ambiguously that too), but their ability to speak Tamil (be they ethnolinguistically Tamil or not). TPK subtly shifted and yet also blurred the coordinates of the multiple politics that it ambivalently tangled with, from ethnolinguistic identity to linguistic competence, from anxieties of visibility to anxieties about speech and language loss.

Much of the first half of the season focused on negatively framing the linguistic incompetence of its (potential) contestants. The episodes teemed with playfully critical representations of women who didn't or couldn't speak Tamil (but implicitly, should). Such representations were often framed by male voices.[16] Such voices not only fluently spoke Tamil, they also often spoke it in high registers that invoked a Dravidianist aesthetic (Bate, 2009), an aesthetic that vests the purity of the Tamil language as the seat of respectability and cultural identity. Such critical representations followed an unsurprising set of stereotypes of linguistic others: rich-looking girls in expensive malls, girls on college campuses, girls in jeans and tee-shirts, none of whom could properly speak Tamil, but who could speak in hip, stylish English.[17]

Figure 4. Young woman struggling to say, "I want to become a heroine"; Screenshot from *Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki* (episode 1, 2012)

Consider, for example, the first episode, which took place in Bangalore, a metropolis in Karnataka with a sizable Tamil population. In it, TPK's male host, Balaji, says in colloquial Tamil: "Beautiful girls can be found, but finding a Tamil-speaking heroine is really difficult, don't I know it" ("*Aḻagāna peṅkaḷ keṭekkalām. Ānā Tamiḻ pēsum katānāyaki kaṇṭupiṭiccutu romba kaṣṭam ṇṇu enakku tān teriyutu*"). Cut to a montage of Balaji having a hard time getting any girls to appear on camera and talk to him. No one wants to be an actress, and Balaji jokes that they're all afraid of him. We then see Balaji on a college campus, querying girls on their interest in cinema. The editing suddenly cuts to a glitzy, high-end mall. An upper-class young woman is stammering out a phrase in Tamil (Figure 4). Each word of the phrase is separated by a jump cut, the camera's changing position calling attention to her prompting, her inability to speak, or remember, the line except one morpheme at a time. This disjointedness penetrates within the cuts, the words upwardly intoned in uncertainty, the verb ungrammatically unconjugated:[18]

	<jump cut>	<jump cut>	<jump cut>
Enakku	*katā*↑	*nāyaki*↑	**āku*	*āsai.*
1pers.DAT	hero-	-ine	*become-IMP	desire
	(lit. 'story')	(lit. 'lady')		

"I want to become a heroine."

What follows is a montage of college girls struggling to speak Tamil, speaking with anglicized accents, their utterances riddled with grammatical mistakes. The editing then cuts to a clip from veteran actor Sivaji Ganeshan's 1959 film, *Veerapandiya Kattabomman*, with Sivaji's oratorical virtuosity displayed through his flawless high-register Tamil (Figure 5).[19] He says:

Amutenum Tamiḻ moḻi aḻiyātu evaruḷḷattum ninṟu nilaipeṟa aruḷpurivāy appanē.

[Lord, grace us with the Tamil language, as sweet as nectar, that it may stay forever in everyone's heart without disappearing from the world.]

A comedy whistle sound effect punctuates Sivaji's monologue, framing this clip not simply as an example of "good" Tamil, or perhaps even what Tamil cinema used to be like, but as a juxtaposing

Figure 5. Sivaji Ganeshan in *Veerapandiya Kattabomman* (1959); Screenshot from *Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki* (episode 1, 2012)

commentary on the inability of these young, modern girls to speak like this male film icon of yesteryear, to drink from the sweet nectar of the Tamil language, to keep it inside themselves, and thus to keep it alive in the world. Important here is that Sivaji Ganeshan has long been understood as the consummate actor and cinematic site of cultural authenticity in Tamil cinema (Krishnan, 2009; Prasad, 2014), and thus also an emblem for a particular middle-class politics of taste and authenticity. Here, however, the roar of Sivaji's powerful oratory (and we might also suggest its presupposed political connection, both to anti-colonial nationalist politics, as manifest in the story of *Veerapandiya Kattabomman*, but also to the language politics of the Dravidian movement within which Sivaji's linguistic performance takes on positive value) is rendered nostalgic, converted from a potent performative of linguistic and cultural identity into a senile, impotent performance of the past. Indeed, the juxtaposition and the whistle sound effect also irreverently ironicize Sivaji's dialogue as old-fashioned and comic, even as they figure these young, modern women as exterior to the Tamil language/cinematic community that can fully appreciate, and thus nostalgically lament, that very ironic cinema effect (*sensu* Rajadhyaksha, 2009).

Such examples from early on in the season are perhaps unsurprising: in order to justify its very existence, the show needed to demonstrate the inability or unwillingness of young women not only to appear, but once presenced, speak Tamil onscreen. But also consider the fact that the female hostesses of the show were also selected for their non-canonical, even deficient Tamil. The Madurai episodes in which I participated had four hosts: Balaji, a young man who was fluent in both Tamil and English, and three young women: Pooja, a Malayali music television video jockey (VJ) who was fluent in English and only partially fluent in Tamil; Nila, a light-skinned Malayali who spoke an urban form of English-mixed Tamil (not atypical for television compering); and Honey, a Malaysian-born Tamil, whose Tamil, while relatively unmixed with English, was affected so as to make her sound childish (also not atypical for television compering). While Balaji was chosen by TPK's producers because he spoke standard Tamil well, these cosmopolitan young women were chosen precisely because they spoke markedly non-normative (Indian) Tamil.

While on the set of the Madurai episodes, the hosts shot a variety of link bits, small scripted scenes where they talked about the show and its contestants. Most of the scenes revolved around Balaji making fun of the female hosts, whom he tellingly referred to as *katānāyakikaḷ* (heroines).[20] He teased them for being unable to speak Tamil correctly, for butchering the language. In a conversation during a break with Pooja and a TPK producer, the producer explained this making fun as just part of the show's larger "flow." What the script elicits, the producer said, is for the audience to respond to the female hosts by aligning with Balaji and saying, "You [female hosts] don't know the language properly, please speak properly and protect the language" (*Nīṅka oḻukkamā teriyale-īṅka, nīṅka oḻuṅkā pēsi kāppāttuṅka*). Pooja jumped in, laughing, "they've (that is, you've) just kept us as comedy pieces, haven't they/you?" (*nammale* comedy piece *tān vaikkiṟāṅka, le?*). The producer replied, as if it was self-evident, "it's just entertainment," using the English word "entertainment" in his Tamil. If everyone, he went on, perfectly

spoke the same way, the show wouldn't have any "interest." If everyone spoke the same way, how could anyone make fun of anyone else? Note here how "everyone" is gendered; for indeed, as discussed above, TPK consistently positioned the male speaker (Balaji, Sivaji Ganeshan, etc.) as the arbiter and unproblematic site of normative Tamil speech and identity, thereby producing female speech on the small screen as always imperfect, non-standard, mangled.

Through rendering an anxiety about linguistic loss, gender, and identity into "entertainment," TPK continually reinscribed the very figure which it aimed to replace, the non-/not-quite Tamil-speaking *katānāyaki*, doing so in a way that awkwardly sat with its own aspirational vision of a Tamil media space filled with fluent Tamil-speaking women. TPK, in fact, never really provided a ratified example of a Tamil-speaking heroine as such. Rather, either it presenced markedly deficient versions of her, as noted above, or, as I show next, it made the question of language irrelevant as such.

Indeed, what was most surprising was that in a show dedicated to the problematic of actresses who can't speak the Tamil language, when it came to the actual competition of the show, language as such was relatively unimportant and uncommented upon. This was true for both the judges and the contestants, many of whom frequently spoke in stilted Tamil, in heavily English-mixed colloquial Tamil, or sometimes simply in English. Tamil as a linguistically and politically infused emblem was absent in the contestants' performances and in critiques of them, in footage featuring their training, and in their candid interviews reflecting on the competition. Rather, Tamil as a political emblem of identity only appeared in TPK's self-framing: in its introductory sequence; pre-recorded montages (which nostalgically recounted the history of Tamil cinema as one that used to have actresses with Tamil competence); film clips (for example, such as those of Sivaji speaking "pure" Tamil); narrative voiceovers (which often deployed high-register Tamil); and in its scripted lampooning of young women's disfluent speech. The frame of the show animated a particular politics of culture and language, while its content was resolutely indifferent to, and sat in tension with, that very frame. When it came down to it, linguistic skill just wasn't that important to being selected as a Tamil-speaking heroine. It was sufficient that one could speak Tamil to some, any level (more on this below). And even this wasn't really ever raised as an issue in the show.

The very textuality of TPK, then, was riddled with unresolved tensions and contradictions: while pitched as invested in producing Tamil-speaking heroines, it never quite did; while concerned about the Tamil language, it was indifferent to the language used in the competition; while at times valorizing a particular Dravidian aesthetics and politics of language, it also transgressed and made light of them. Moreover, these tensions and contradictions played out through, and were ideologically ironed out by, a predictably status quo gendered division of linguistic labor. Ultimately, TPK both problematized and reproduced what it announced as its reason for being (the absence of Tamil[-speaking] heroines), just as it continually replayed, without ever really overcoming, its own seeming impossibility (presencing a Tamil[-speaking] heroine onscreen).

From the given discussion, it might be said that TPK never took its own mandate that seriously; that while it took on the cultural politics of identity, image, and gender that I discussed in the first half of the article as its premise, it only did so for "entertainment." We might also argue that this points to a contemporary moment where the (cine)politics of Tamil identity has been televisually cannibalized and cited into banality. While I am sympathetic with this line of critique, I would also emphasize that to cite is not simply to defease, but also to necessarily repeat and conserve (Nakassis, 2013), just as to cannibalize the body of another is also to become consubstantial with it.[21] That is, in the very act of being disavowed through ironic nostalgic play, this identity politics of visibility, language, and purity necessarily reappears in and *as* TPK's politics, and not simply as farce. Rather than relegate TPK as an unserious simulacrum of the political, then, I want to take its unseriousness seriously, underscoring how this politics of the gendered image lives on precisely through its televisual re/dis-appearance, not as the performatively excessive

glimmer of the cinematic screen or the bite of a more "serious" political cinema, but *as* the very lack that it reiterates through its banal presencing of not-quite Tamil(-speaking) heroines on the small screen.

Consider again the question of speech, and how one of TPK's producers explained (in playfully affected "pure" Tamil) why the show was named *Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki* and not just simply *Tamiḻ Katānāyaki* (as I had asked him).

"*Tamiḻ Nāttil piṟanta oru Tamiḻacciyum tanniṭam iruntu tān tavamiruntu perṟa oru peṇmaṇiyai katānāyakiyāka ērṟukkoḷḷa muṭiyāta kālam itu.*	[This is an era when no *Tamiḻacci* (ethnic Tamil woman) born in Tamil Nadu would accept her daughter as a heroine.
Avaḷ appaṭiyē ērṟukkoṇṭālum avaḷuṭaiya pūrvīgattai pārttīrkaḷ enṟāl Teluṅku pēsubavarkaḷākavō Kannaṭam pēsubavarkaḷākavō yārāvatākavō iruppārkaḷ. Tamiḻacciyāka irukka māṭṭār.	Even if she did accept her acting, it would turn out that when you looked at her heritage, they'd be Telugu speakers, Kannada speakers, or some such. She won't be a *Tamiḻacci*.
So Tamiḻacci peṇmaṇiyai oruvan kūṭṭi vantu nī vantu oru Tamiḻ katānāyakiyāka mārṟavatu enbatu naṭakkāta kāriyam.	So, taking a *Tamiḻacci* and making her into a Tamil heroine is an impossible task.
Appaṭi irukkum pōtu nān ēn Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki enṟāl pēsināl pōtum, purintu koḷḷa kūṭa vēṇṭām appaṭiyē taṭṭu taṭumāṟi iṅkēyum aṅkēyum sāyntu aṅkē nērāka ninṟu pēsa muṭintāl pōtum. Tamiḻacciyāka irukka vēṇāmē.	When it's like that, if you can simply speak (i.e., say your lines), then it's enough to be a Tamil-speaking heroine. You don't even have to understand. If she trips over the language here and there, if she can speak (i.e., reproduce the dialogues) then that's enough. She doesn't have to be a *Tamiḻacci*.
Illai enṟāl "Tamiḻacci enṟa Katānāyaki" enṟu tēṭiyiruppēn, allavā? "Tamiḻ Pēsum Katānāyaki" enṟu tēṭavēṇām. Oru Tamiḻacciyai tēṭirukkalām. Oru tolaikkāṭci nikaḻcciyai vaittu . . . Tamiḻacci eppaṭi ṇṇu namakku teriyum, allavā?	Otherwise, I'd be searching for "*Tamiḻacci* Heroine," wouldn't I? We wouldn't have to search for a "Tamil-speaking heroine." We could search for a *Tamiḻacci*, and have that be the TV show. . . . But we already know what a *Tamiḻacci* is like, don't we?
Nān Tamiḻan. . . . Appō en vīṭṭār parṟi enakku teriyātā? Anuppa māṭṭāṅka. Sērttukka māṭṭāṅka. Appuṟam etukku kaṣṭappaṭaṇum. Palakkātule irukkuṟāṅka, Coimbatur-le irukkuṟāṅka. Intappakkam antappakkam niṟaiya pēr irukkuṟāṅka. Birāmaṇa samutāyattiliruntu niṟaiya pērkaḷ irukkiṟārkaḷ. Kalai ulakattil sēvai seyvataṟkāka avarkaḷ varaṭṭum. Tamiḻ pēsubavarkaḷ, allavā?"	I'm a Tamilian. . . . So don't I know about my family (i.e. Tamilians)? They won't send (her) to act. They won't join her (to the industry). So why should I suffer (searching for a *Tamiḻacci* heroine)? They (i.e., girls who will/can participate) are in Palakkad, in Coimbatur, here and there there are lots of people. A lot of people are working for the arts world from the Brahmin community. Let them come! They're Tamil speakers, aren't they?]

Here, this producer reiterates the typical narrative: Tamils won't let their daughters act. Critical here is the word *Tamiḻacci*, a term that denotes a traditional, ethnic Tamil woman, born and raised in Tamil Nadu, who speaks Tamil as her mother tongue. (On the anachronism and present impossibility of this figure, see the visuals of TPK's introductory sequence in Figure 2). He notes that if such a *Tamiḻacci* did appear, ultimately her background would be non-Tamil. He further makes the distinction between those who *are* Tamil (the *Tamiḻacci*) and those who can *speak* Tamil (perhaps without understanding

what they are saying); a few lines later, this producer makes a similar distinction between those who are ethnolinguistically Tamil and those who are part of the wider speech community of Tamil speakers (which includes Palakkad Brahmins and Kovai Malayalis[?]), who are thereby implicitly figured as *not Tamiḻacci*s. Why not include them, he asks?

This attempt to distinguish regional Tamil ethnic identity from the notion of a wider Tamil speech community was an explicit intervention of TPK, which aimed to cull Tamil speakers from places outside of Tamil Nadu and even India (Bangalore, Mumbai, Cochin, Kuala Lampur). The same producer playfully emphasized this point with reference to that shibboleth of "correct," "pure" Tamil pronunciation, the word for the language itself: *Tamiḻ*.

Tamiḻ [t̪ɐmɪɻ] *Pēsum Katānāyaki* is a search for a Tamil speaking heroine. Not

"*Tamiḻ* [t̪ɐmɪɻ] *Pēsum Katānāyaki*,"

"*Ṭamil* [tæmɪl] speaking heroine."

Niṟaiya vittiyāsam irukku.

"Ṭamil [tæmɪl] speaking"*-kkum*

"*Tamiḻ* [t̪ɐmɪɻ] *pēsum*"*-kkum niṟaiya vittiyāsam irukku.*

Ṭamil [tæmɪl] speaking heroine from all over India and around the world, okay, and it's up to people to find out what they suit in and what to give them.

[*Tamiḻ* [t̪ɐmɪɻ] *Pēsum Katānāyaki* is a search for a Tamil speaking heroine. Not

"*Tamiḻ* [t̪ɐmɪɻ] *Pēsum Katānāyaki*" (but)

"*Ṭamil* [tæmɪl] speaking heroine."

There are a lot of differences.

There are a lot of differences between

"*Ṭamil* [tæmɪl] speaking" and

"*Tamiḻ* [t̪ɐmɪɻ] *pēsum*."

Ṭamil [tæmɪl] speaking heroine(s) from all over India and around the world, okay, and it's up to (industry) people to find out what they suit in and what (roles) to give them.]

Contrasting the standard pronunciation of the name of the language ([t̪ɐmɪɻ]) with its foreign-pronounced, anglicized variant ([tæmɪl]) (themselves paired with co-occurring Tamil and English words for speaking, respectively; cf. the show's logo in Figure 3),[22] this producer points out that the show was never supposed to be normatively contained by the Tamil language community. Rather, it was to open it up to a cosmopolitan horizon, one that stretched beyond the provincial politics of language and community that he emblematized by his emphatically "pure" pronunciation of the name of that very language and community. Indeed, simply being able to locute (without understanding), as noted earlier, or simply being able to understand (without speaking), as he elsewhere noted in our conversation, was enough to be a Tamil-speaking heroine.

So who, then, does TPK put in the place of the film actress who can't speak Tamil? Conceding from the outset the impossibility of an authentic Tamil heroine appearing onscreen and speaking, TPK settles on a linguistic minimum that strains the very coherence of the ambivalent discourse from which it is enunciated. But more than this, I would suggest that this discourse, and the televisual text that it underwrites, erases and devoices the to-be Tamil(-speaking) heroine's speech onscreen by continually framing it as *not*-quite Tamil. In putatively contesting the very discourse discussed above that disallows she who appears onscreen to *be* Tamil, TPK ends up inscribing that very discourse by admitting its premises, for the flipside of the concession of the impossibility of a "real" Tamil heroine appearing on the film screen is that it isn't just that young Tamil women won't act (as some empirical proposition), but that if they did, then they would cease, in some sense, to be authenticated *Tamiḻacci*s (by normative fiat). Something of the performative visibility of the cinematic screen is carried over to the textuality of the small screen, not as a visual stigma but as the negation of the possibility of the (to-be) heroine/actress's voice authenticating itself *as* Tamil. This politics of the cinematic image appears precisely in the appearance of not-quite Tamil(-speaking) heroines on the small screen, their televisual presence again standing as proxy for the impossible figure of the authentically Tamil(-speaking) film heroine. This was

evinced when I asked a TPK producer why, in the end, the top five contestants were all from Chennai, the cosmopolitan state capital of Tamil Nadu. One reason, he suggested, was that "They can go and handle themselves (in the) outside world. *Oru Madurai poṇṇāḷe atu muṭiyātu*" (A Madurai girl can't). When I asked why, he said:

> "*Ēnnā avaḷukku vantu veḷiyulaka vāḻkkaiyē illai. Ēnnā nāṅka Tamiḻacci tēṭiṭṭu irukkōmā atule pāti Tamiḻacci tān vantirukkā ānālum avaḷ Tamiḻacci, illaiyā?*"
>
> [Because she [the Madurai girl] doesn't have a life in the outside world. If we're looking for a *Tamiḻacci*, the one who shows up will only be half *Tamiḻacci*, even though she's still a *Tamiḻacci* though, right?]

In this complex and cryptic equivocation, this producer explodes the very notion of the *Tamiḻacci*, splitting her into two halves that don't, and perhaps cannot, meet, for the *Tamiḻacci* who appears onscreen is only ever half of herself, either lacking in the necessary worldly experience to handle life on the screen or lacking the cultural authenticity that would have prevented her from appearing (and speaking) in the first place. Here, TPK's cosmopolitan, anti-chauvinist opening of the ethnopolity to linguistic and caste difference belies a strong investment in a gendered form of cultural authenticity (one which fractally recurses itself, note, as a stereotyped distinction of girls from provincial Madurai and cosmopolitan Chennai), an ambivalence that manifests in the involuted, self-contradictory textuality of TPK's discourse on the (im)possibility/non-actuality/necessity of a Tamil(-speaking) heroine. TPK's farcical, and thus also serious, politics of identity is realized *as* the contradictions it puts into play, as the impossibility of the very project that inaugurates it, and perhaps most importantly, as the fraught identity that it thereby instates, ambivalently and liminally located between the very positions it fails to resolve.

Conclusions

If Tamil heroine/actresses, and even Tamil-speaking heroine/actresses, are a lamented lack on the "Tamil" film screen, then who may appear in her place? From within the coordinates of the discourses discussed in this article, it would seem that in her fantastical stead are only ever iterations of the figure she is meant to replace. In the heaving breast of identity, we find a deferral and a disavowal, a performative contradiction that continually loops back around, as if in orbit of a figure who will not, and cannot, appear and be heard at once. At least, not on the terms set for her, be it in the titillating image on the glimmering big screen or the entertaining, if banal, image of the familiar, and familial, small screen. Within this contestable and contested ideological enclosure, the heroine appears as being anything but a possible site of Tamil identity or authenticity, and thus as its very basis.

Here, identity is produced in the inverse image of itself, as a set of differences and proxies, as signs of foreignness, in laments and negations, in the sight of the body and image of the heroine/actress. Such laments and negations confirm and expiate the stigma of cinema (and perhaps cinema itself), reinvesting it in the non-identity of its actresses and their speech. Such confirmations and condemnations turn on a visual regime, a kinship chronotope that creates and feeds desires, that generates textual forms through which such desires are stoked and realized, denounced and decried, cannibalized and rendered into entertainment value seen and heard on television. They connect and render apart vision/appearance and language/speech, disappearing an authenticated Tamil heroine from the big screen even as they devoice she who appears in her place, either as the mute non-Tamil(-speaking) heroine of the big screen or as a not-quite Tamil-speaking heroine on the small screen. This is not an uncontested formulation of identity, nor is it a historically static or culturally essential one. Rather, it is the reiterated and reiterating fragment

of an identity politics that registers its trace on the cinematic screen as a visually inscribed lack, and on the televisual screen as the ambivalent echo of that lack.

Perhaps the sad, if tellingly ironic confirmation of this is that in the end, TPK's winner, Sanchana, did not, as promised, get the lead role in Balaji Sakthivel's next (and as of the writing of this article, still to be released) film (Sanchana, 2014). She did not get to stand in the onscreen space made for her as a Tamil(-speaking) heroine. As she told me, the film's producers wanted someone else to play the lead. Despite his protests, Balaji Sakthivel was obliged to have a different actress, a Kannada actress, Subhiksha, play the heroine. Sanchana instead settled for a character role: that of the heroine's friend.

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Notes

1. This is not to say that questions of chastity are particular to the DMK film or to the Dravidianist rhetoric with which it is associated; indeed, this strain of Dravidianism was itself formulated by citing older literary traditions concerned, in part, with such questions (Lakshmi, 1990; Ramaswamy, 1997). Rather, it is to say that such questions, as posed within this political genealogy, are central to the discourses discussed in this article. It is also not to imply that this Dravidianist/DMK politics of chastity condemned film actresses to an exterior position vis-à-vis the ethnopolity; rather that, in the discourses that I discuss in this article, the Dravidianist scaling of chastity to the language community intersects with a stigmatic performativity of the film image. That intersection point is the heroine/actress.
2. Here, I follow Silverstein's (1998) distinction between *language communities*—groups reflexively organized around their ideological allegiance to some named, standard language (qua denotational code)—and *speech communities*—the (potentially plurilingual) social networks formed by discursive interactions between those who may or may not be part of the same language community.
3. "Relatively difficult" since mass heroes have and do act in other regional industries, just as heroines, directors, and the like come to be associated with particular regional cinemas more than others.
4. By my rough and preliminary estimates (surveying 220 actresses who acted in Tamil-language films from the 1930s to the 2010s, in particular, as heroines), about half of heroine/actresses from the 1930s to the 1950s were of Tamil backgrounds (though such a claim is problematized, of course, given that notions of Tamil identity were themselves dynamically changing across this very period). Since the 1950s, however, Tamil heroine/actresses have formed a minority (around 20–30 percent from the 1950s to the 1980s), declining again in the 1990s to slightly above 10 percent or so. These estimates are tentative and the percentages/correlations themselves non-conclusive; however, it strikes me as important to note that the sociology of actresses in the Tamil film industry has mirrored in broad strokes, on the one hand, the rise of a particular strand of Dravidianism following the post-independence formation of linguistically defined states, *and*, on the other hand, the post-liberalization emergence of television (on which, more below). These correlations call for more thorough research that, in any case, is beyond the scope of this article; indeed, my interest here is not to explain these demographics but to interrogate the discourses that make use of them in articulating identity claims.

5. Here, Brahmin is coded as non-Tamil in the context of the political history of the Dravidian movement, wherein Brahmins came to be figured as foreigners to Dravidian south India (Pandian, 2007; Ramaswamy, 1997). This contrasts with the first three decades of talkies in south India, which featured a significant number of Brahmin actresses and producers (Hardgrave, 1973, p. 295; also, see Note 4).
6. Indeed, in distinction with the action-oriented mass hero, the consummate actor (as with, for example, Sivaji Ganeshan) has also been the site of a middle-class politics of taste, cultural authenticity, and identity (though see Krishnan, 2009, pp. 221–225).
7. There has also long been a presence of actresses figured as foreign on the Indian screen and within India's film industries, be it Caucasian actresses in the American and European silent films screened in the first decades of cinema in India (Hughes, 1996) or the conspicuous presence of Anglo-Indian and white(-like) women acting in the early years of Hindi cinema (Majumdar, 2009; Pande, 2006; Ramamurthy, 2006) or playing the vamp role in the 1940s and 1950s (Pinto, 2006; Virdi, 2003, p. 168).
8. Also see Pandian (1996, p. 951) on the appeal by the Ceylonese Brahmin actress, Thavamani Devi, in the 1930s that "women from respectable families should give up their reluctance and act in films" and the popular press' tellingly satiric rebuke (perhaps given her controversially glamorous onscreen image). TPK, then, is not the first such call to reform cinema's gendered stigma; such attempts exist from the very inception of "Tamil" cinema.
9. Similarly, note Prasad's (1998) discussion of the long-standing, if informal, cinematic prohibition in post-independence Indian film of seeing the Indian heroine kissing. While Prasad's argument regarding this ban has to do with the way in which the onscreen kiss problematizes the "contract" between pre-modern and modern elites by inaugurating a private realm that bypasses traditional patriarchal authority (cf. Jain, 2007, pp. 301–313), here I am more interested in the semiotic mediation of the screen as such, in the performativity of the image and how it comes to be rationalized and enabled by a meta-discourse on gender and cultural identity (also see Krishnan, 2009, pp. 180–199).
10. Much work on vision in Indian cinema assimilates it to *darshan* (e.g., Gerritsen, 2012; Jacob, 2009; Rogers, 2011). This assimilation is often read out of fan practices that citationally reanimate religious practices in felicitating mass heroes (cf. Prasad, 2014). And yet, the performative presence of the actress abides no such religious logic, even if its semiotic form is similar. I would suggest that this onscreen/offscreen dialectic is a more general semiotic feature of film that is variously realized within and across cinematic traditions. While this dialectic is reflexively elaborated and conspicuously put to productive use in commercial Tamil film (in different ways and with rather different effects, as the comparison of hero and heroine evinces), we can also note its operation in other cinematic traditions, as discussions of Von Triers' *Nymphomaniac* (2013) show (see Saner, 2014; also, see Narenmore, 1988) or as any fan of stars like Humphrey Bogart or stunt actors like Jackie Chan will tell you (also see Hansen, 1991).
11. The issue here isn't that families (or women) no longer go to the cinema (for they do). Rather, it is how shifting market and demographic dynamics involving the so-called family audience come to be construed by filmmakers, and how this mediates their textual and economic practices. While since the widespread advent of television the "family" audience is, in fact, a smaller chunk of the theater audience, just as important is the changing temporality of theater attendance. With the spread of television and piracy in the 1980s and 1990s (and satellite and cable television in the mid-to-late 1990s and digital piracy in the 2000s), and with the increase in numbers of films released in the 2000s, theater runs have significantly shortened. Films, today, no longer serially circulate through so-called A, B, and C centers over the course of many months. Instead, they are simultaneously released on a large number of screens over a relatively short time period. This makes a film's opening critical to its success, for if a film doesn't open strongly, it will likely be quickly replaced. As producers note, today, family audiences wait for a week or two to see if a film is "good" (that is, popular, well-made, "decent"), leaving young men as the prime audience for a film's opening. This temporality, and how it registers as tiered target audiences within film texts, is thereby central to what has emerged as a division of sexuality and respectability between the big and small screen (see Note 15).
12. Consider how the director, Vasanth, in describing his own responsibility for failing to cultivate and promote Tamil-speaking heroines, referred to both Jyothika and Simran (two non-Tamil heroines whom he introduced to the Tamil film industry) as today being daughters-in-law (*marumagaḷ*) to Tamil Nadu (post-finale TPK press

meet, Chennai, January 12, 2013). When Vasanth made this comment, both actresses had since married and passed out of heroine roles, transformed from exterior objects of sexual desire to being semi-exterior affines to the larger Tamil community (and not, tellingly, consanguineal daughters, sisters, or mothers) (cf. Thomas, 1989, p. 24, on Nargis). This affinal trope in turn, of course, figurates the film industry (and its publics) as consanguineally related men (cf. Chinniah, 2008, pp. 32–33; Lakshmi, 1990). See Note 13.

13. Implied in this kinship chronotope is that after marriage, film actresses generally cannot function as sites for *sight aṭikkiṟatu* and romantic fantasy, at least not in the textual position of heroine. Within this kinship chronotope, marriage, like consanguinity, introduces a blockage in the male spectator's sight line (and potentially vice versa), problematizing a gaze that desires, and perhaps loves, the actress offscreen through her onscreen image. As one young director, exaggeratedly and cynically, said to me, "Heroines are like dolls, they are there to be sighted." He continued: "To be crass, in Tamil Nadu for most guys, there are no relationships with women that are not as a sister or a mother. Other women are barely even human as far as most guys are concerned. One can look at them however one wants. *Except* if they are married." Then, he implied, it's like you are coveting someone else's wife. This interferes in, and in some cases amplifies (as with sexualized "aunty" figures), this filmic visual regime, generating a performative excess that makes the act of sighting the actress/character taboo. As another director explained over email, this interference (which he noted, decreases the actress' "market") is caused because "now they [the male audience] know that she [i]s not there's [*sic*] anymore," that is, she is not and should not be there onscreen precisely because her image is no longer theirs to possess. While this topic requires more research, we can note how this kinship chronotope doesn't simply normatively construe the image and its offscreen entanglements. It also inscribes its gaze on the screen, conditioning who appears on it and how. Indeed, it is almost always the case that actresses in the contemporary Tamil film industry cease playing the heroine in "commercial" films after marriage, either shifting to older sister or mother roles (that is, becoming "character" actors whose bodies are enveloped and clothed by the narrative); to lead roles in women-centered genres such as devotional *amman* films; or simply disappearing from the screen altogether. (Of course, marriage is not always the cause of moving out of acting as a heroine; in certain cases, it is the consequence of a career coming to an end.) This robust association dates to the 1980s and 1990s. While from the inception of south Indian cinemas we can detect this post-martial tendency to move away from acting (as a heroine) (Hardgrave, 1995, p. 95), up until the 1970s and 1980s, many actresses—by my estimates, upward of 40–50 percent—acted as heroines while married. From the 1980s onward, however, the number of actresses who continue on as heroines after marriage increasingly drops to a smaller and smaller minority. The reasons for this are complex and multiple. My sense, however, is that this historical shift is not due to the appearance of a sexualizing gaze that didn't exist before (though, certainly, the quality of this gaze has not been unchanging). Nor do I think it is due to shifting dynamics that surround pre/post-marital family relations, though these too have certainly not remained static over the last 80 years. Jealous or status-conscious husbands, in-laws concerned about family reputation, or increased demands of post-marriage family life have all been cited as reasons for why actresses have stopped acting as heroines over the decades ("Film News" Anand, 2008; Shakeela, 2013; Simran, 2011). What I would suggest, rather, is the increasing importance and salience of these dynamics within shifting industry and market conditions; in particular, the rise of a new generation of young heroes and heroines in the mid- to late-1970s; the significant increase in number of films made in the late 1970s and early 1980s (both abetted by MGR's move to the chief minister position [Dhananjayan, 2011, p. 27]); and, most importantly, as already noted, the rise of television and related technologies in the 1980s and 1990s, and, as a result, the increased importance of young men (relative to the "family" audience) and their gaze to filmmakers' textual and economic projects. Rather than one among many, the scopic regime of young men's sight has become increasingly dominant, surveiling the screen and inscribing itself in the textuality of film and, I have suggested here, on the sociological status (and bodies) of those films' actresses.

14. My point is not that this discourse is chauvinist, nor that the voices from which I elicited it are a homogeneous group. Indeed, actors like Sriman are not "Tamil" on hegemonic conceptions of ethnolinguistic Tamil identity. The point, rather, is that the particularity of the Tamil cinema is figured in his and others' discourse by recourse to the absence of Tamil women onscreen as heroines, and that this carries with it particular, often valorized, moral overtones linked to questions of "culture," kinship, respectability, and visibility.

15. By contrast to cinema-after-television (see Notes 11, 13), much television is dominated by programming aimed at women (for example, serials, game shows, and talk shows), watched not as a heterogeneous anonymous mass in the darkened theater, but as a dispersed audience, contained by the home and its kin relations. Such viewing practices correlate with different narrative genres and a different regime of vision. Television programming, on the whole, presents a different kinship chronotope, both in the image projected onscreen and in its context of reception. (Recalling Phalke, in contrast with film, in general, one can more comfortably watch programs made for television with one's female kin). In comparison to the glimmering silver screen and its sexualized images of alterity/affinity, regional televisual images are like consanguineal kin: familiar, everyday, pedestrian. They don't shine like and, in a sense, aren't as visible as the cinematic image. (Hence mass heroes historical avoidance of the small screen.) This medium difference in stigma and respectability is often framed by industry insiders not only as a difference in textual form and receptive context but also as a difference in production process. As S. Kumaran, the director of the mega-serial *Thirumathi Selvam*, said to me in 2011 on set between takes, people are more likely to see television as "office work." The work is steady, fixed, fast, and in one place. There is no time for *kaṭalai* (flirting), and thus less chance to go "amiss."
16. The other figure of exteriority at play here, of course, is me, a researcher from the United States turned guest judge for TPK's Madurai auditions. What was I, a foreigner, a man, a non-media personality, doing on this show at all? One might suppose that my qualification as an academic who writes about Tamil cinema, and who had been researching the question of the dearth of Tamil(-speaking) heroines, was relevant. And yet, it wasn't. It was never even mentioned on the show (or by TPK's producers). Rather, my function was to display my foreignness *and* my ability to speak "pure" Tamil words. Indeed, when the show aired, the caption explaining my qualifications was not professor of anthropology but professor of Tamil literature, a field that I have no qualification in. That I pointedly emphasized that I was *not* a Tamil professor to the producers was ignored. It didn't make for good television. Rather, my presence there was to demonstrate that Tamil was a language of value, something that even foreigners were interested in, which foreigners learned because of its value, beauty, antiquity, and literary complexity. Indeed, the contestants weren't the only ones on display onstage. I was asked to open the stage competition with the prayer/song to *Tamiḻ Tāy*. I was to manifest, oddly enough, Tamil-ness. Hence, for example, in judging the contestants, I was asked by the producers to give tongue twisters featuring the Tamil shibboleth *ḻ* (ழ), a sound which many Tamils believe to be unique to the Tamil language and unpronounceable by non-Tamils (Nakassis, 2016, chapter 4). What I uttered, contestants had to repeat, an odd reversal to say the least, as most of the contestants were native speakers of Tamil. It was as if my presence on the show was to point to the putative absence of Tamil. I was a surrogate placeholder who would interpellate these young girls to be the Tamil speakers that they already were, or at least, could perform onstage, and maybe even onscreen. It was to say, if he can speak Tamil, why can't you? My foreignness, my masculinity, and my Tamil, these made me (for TPK's producers at least), paradoxically, in exactly that discursive place from which to judge and incite a *Tamiḻ pēsum katānāyaki*.
17. Another interpretation is that such bits pointed to the absurdity of women who don't belong to the language/speech community acting in its films. While perhaps this was at play, the show often left this possibility ambiguous by not mentioning these young women's language community membership, and certainly not as the reason for their lack of Tamil fluency.
18. 1 pers. = first person pronominal form; DAT = dative case; ↑ = upwards intonation; * = disfluent speech; IMP = imperative mood.
19. John Vijay (2014) noted that the unique idea he had for the show was to avoid the typical format of contestants and judges. Instead, he said, why not have Sivaji Ganeshan, Nagesh, and others now gone as his judges? To that end, he used film clips as "comments" from "judges." The other "new" aspect of the show that John Vijay stressed, in comparison to the larger field of Tamil reality television, was TPK's emphasis on "fun" rather than tear-jerking drama (*sōgam*). The overall effect of playfully using such clips as commentary, however, was to turn contestants' performances into farce, as the director and TPK judge, Santhakumar, noted in the TPK post-finale press meet (January 12, 2013).
20. When the episodes that I participated in aired, many of the derisive jokes toward the hostesses were cut out. And yet, even without their airing, something of the ambivalence that their humor turned on remained.

21. It isn't clear to me that TPK's mandate to entertain, or television's abductive relation to cinema more generally, imply that TPK or its producers were insincerely committed to the politics they parasited for entertainment. My experiences with the producers indicated that they did identify, if ambivalently, with the larger language and identity politics that they playfully cited.
22. The main phonetic contrast here is between the initial consonant (dental in the "correct" pronunciation and post-alveolar in the anglicized variant) and the final consonant (a retroflex frictionless continuent in the "correct" pronunciation and a dental lateral in its anglicized variant), and between the vowels (which are fronted and near-open in the anglicized variant) (Nakassis, 2016, chapter 4).

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