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Of Anthems, Pauses, and Resonance with Iran: Kalhor, Boochani, and Diasporic Listening from Spain after Woman, Life, Freedom

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OF ANTHEMS, PAUSES, AND RESONANCE WITH IRAN: KALHOR, BOOCHANI, AND DIASPORIC LISTENING FROM SPAIN AFTER WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM[1]

Parisa Delshad

Abstract

This study explores how Kurdish Iranian artists and public intellectuals use musical and linguistic refusals to challenge Persian-centric narratives during and after the Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) movement. Focusing on Kayhan Kalhor's refusal to perform "Morḡ-e Saḥar" at a concert in Spain and Behrooz Boochani's interventions around Kurdish language and political voice, the paper examines how these gestures resisted the reduction of collective struggle to fixed national symbols. Drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy's theories of listening and resonance, it argues that meaning emerges not from stable signs of identity, but from open, embodied, and relational acts of listening. Situating these interventions within diasporic contexts, the article shows how solidarity depends on acknowledging ethnic and linguistic plurality rather than enforcing a homogeneous national identity. Ultimately, it argues that aesthetic and linguistic choices function as political interventions that keep open the unfinished, plural horizons of Woman, Life, Freedom.

Keywords: *Woman, Life, Freedom; resonance; listening; Jean-Luc Nancy; Iranian diaspora; Kayhan Kalhor; Behrooz Boochani.*

Resumen

Este estudio analiza cómo artistas e intelectuales públicos kurdo-iraníes recurren a formas de rechazo musical y lingüístico para cuestionar las narrativas de carácter persocéntrico durante y después del movimiento Mujer, Vida, Libertad (WLF). A partir de la negativa de Kayhan Kalhor a interpretar "Morḡ-e Saḥar" en un concierto

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celebrado en España y de las intervenciones de Behrooz Boochani en torno a la lengua kurda y la voz política, el artículo examina cómo estos gestos se opusieron a la reducción de la lucha colectiva a símbolos nacionales fijos. A partir de las teorías de Jean-Luc Nancy sobre la escucha y la resonancia, se sostiene que el significado no emerge de signos estables de identidad, sino de actos de escucha abiertos, corporales y relacionales. Situando estas intervenciones en contextos diaspóricos, el artículo muestra cómo la solidaridad depende del reconocimiento de la pluralidad étnica y lingüística, en lugar de la imposición de una identidad nacional homogénea. En última instancia, se argumenta que las elecciones estéticas y lingüísticas funcionan como intervenciones políticas que mantienen abiertos los horizontes inacabados y plurales de Mujer, Vida, Libertad.

Palabras clave: *Mujer, Vida, Libertad; resonancia; escucha; Jean-Luc Nancy; diáspora iraní; Kayhan Kalhor; Behrooz Boochani.*

Introduction

In September 2023, I attended a concert in Madrid by the renowned Iranian Kurdish *kamancheh* player Kayhan Kalhor, held at the Teatro Infanta Isabel. This was a year into the protests that had swept Iran following the state killing of Jina (Mahsa) Amini. And it was the first public gathering for the Iranians in Spain whose only chance at showing their solidarity with their compatriots at home, as well as performing collective mourning, had either been online or the occasional demonstrations in a few Spanish cities. Spain, of course, is not one of the primary hubs of the Iranian diaspora. The community here is comparatively small when set against larger and longer established formations in Germany and England, or in North America and Australia, where Iranian migrants had been gathering in far greater numbers and with greater visibility to show their support for those protesting at home. Precisely because such moments of collective assembly are rarer in Spain, one could sense that the atmosphere in the concert was heavy with expectation for some action, some reference, or some gesture that would purge the audience's energy and induce a sense of togetherness and solidarity. But the performance, I

have to concede, was somewhat far from the crowd's expectation, as the trio of *kamanche*, *setar* and *tombak* would play extended instrumental harmonizations without repeating many familiar melodies. This was disappointing, since one would expect a diaspora concert to offer recognizably shared tunes, whether in the form of familiar melodies or songs whose lyrics could anchor the political moment and render it collectively intelligible. However, something extraordinary happened at the show's close.

The audience rose in a standing ovation when the concert ended and shouts of *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* (Woman, Life, Freedom) filled the hall. At the same time, as in nearly every concert, the familiar plea for "Morḡ-e Saḥar" arose as a closing gesture and a last attempt to redeem the evening's rather uncathartic drift with something simultaneously emblematic and anthemic. "Woman, Life, Freedom", or in its original Kurdish equivalent *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi,* a slogan likewise echoed in the concert hall, had emerged as the central rallying cry of the Iranian uprising. And the requested song to be played during the encore, "Morḡ-e Saḥar", is widely regarded as the unofficial anthem of Iran. The song's lyrics come from the early twentieth-century poem of the same title written by Mohammad Taghi Bahar, the famous poet of the Constitutional Revolution period (1905-1911) who came to bear the moniker *Malek-o-shoara*, poet laureate. Written in a register of disillusionment, the song addresses the nightingale as a witness to suffocating and seemingly unending darkness. It has since become widely familiar among Iranians, and it is often sung collectively, especially at gatherings where communal singing remains a valued practice. It also stands as a prototypical example of Persian classical music. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that in such an emotionally charged atmosphere, and with such a long applause from the audience, the maestro could hardly refuse the plea for an encore and would likely perform what was requested of him. In this way, he would offer a chance to the audience to practice their belonging and collective nostalgia. But when he sat down and picked up his *kamanche*, what followed was not "Morḡ-e Saḥar".

Before beginning the closing piece, he said: “I am going to play a Balochi tune and dedicate it to our Balochi compatriots”[2]. The dedication acquires sharper significance here, as by the time the concert took place, widespread atrocities had already unfolded, especially in marginalized regions of Kurdistan and Balochistan, in the crackdown of nation-wide protests. Out of the hundreds of lives that were lost around the country because of the brutal security policies of the Iranian state, these two regions bore the biggest shares of the brunt[3]. Why, then, did Kalhor refuse to play the Persian song, and instead perform a Balochi melody? Why did he choose not to play a more familiar piece? The performance gave the impression of being spontaneous and under-rehearsed, which suggests that it was, in fact, the Kurdish maestro’s immediate reading of the room and his response to it. This moment, albeit musical rather than linguistic, can be understood in a distinctly Bakhtinian sense of a dialogic utterance whose meaning emerges at the point of contact between sound and situation.[4] Read in this light, Kalhor’s performance can thus be understood as a Bakhtinian response shaped by its immediate social and affective context rather than a purely musical statement. Put differently, his refusal can be read as an utterance shaped not only by musical material, but also by the timing of the moment and the charged exchange between stage and audience. It was as though he, like many Iranians at the time, was questioning the propriety of the same familiar repertoire of Persian music and poetry to serve as the voice of a pluralist movement. From the very beginning of the protests, one of the most striking features of the movement had been the chanting of demands for equality in multiple languages spoken across Iran. *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* (Woman, Life, Freedom) was only one of the translations of the original Kurdish slogan *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*. In Balochistan, people chanted *Janin, Zend, Ajooyi*; in Azerbaijan, one could hear *Qadin, Yasham, Azadliq*. Persian was

[2] Video available on: youtube.com/watch?v=UkbHzq89ofk.

[3] It is difficult to determine the exact number of fatalities, as human rights organizations documenting the protests—such as the Iran Human Rights Society (2023) and HRANA (2022)—report different figures based on distinct methods of verification and data collection. Available statistics consistently identify Sistan and Balochistan as the province with the highest number of deaths, followed by Tehran and Kurdistan. However, if Kurdish-majority regions are considered collectively, as the report by HRANA does (ibid.: 40-41), the data suggests that Kurdish communities, alongside Baloch communities, have experienced the greatest loss of life during the protests.

[4] Although Bakhtin develops this concept in relation to language rather than music, his emphasis on the event-based and relational nature of expression remains instructive. For Bakhtin, expression does not inhere in the word itself but arises in its encounter with “actual reality” under the conditions of a concrete event (Bakhtin 1986: 88).

thus sidelined to become one other language among the other ones. These multiple and eclectic articulations of the movement's unified message and spirit of liberation constituted a symbolic turn to emphasize the longstanding marginalization and lack of visibility of minoritized Iranians' demands across the country. It brought the issue of discrimination into focus and it was gradually accepted that one cannot speak of freedom without also speaking of equality (Sadeghi and Shohadaei 2023; Delshad 2026).

Kalhor's refusal mattered because the encore ceased to be a simple addendum to the concert and became its most consequential act. As it effectively transformed the concert into a site where meaning was negotiated in real time, the main aim of this paper is to examine this resistance to the audience's expectations. Especially since the encore felt under-rehearsed, I will elaborate on it by drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of resonance (2007) and referral, through which meaning is not understood as a fixed representation but as a relational event in which it emerges through listening and response. In this sense, the apparent improvisation of the performance suggests that "Iran" and "Iranianness" are sites of resonant encounters, where the audience's performance of identity through a stabilizing gesture meets Kalhor's response as a deviation and opening.

The paper is also informed by the notion of communication in the sense articulated by Steven Feld as "a socially interactive and intersubjective process of reality construction through message production and interpretation" (1984: 2). For Feld, "[c]ommunication is neither the idea nor the action but the process of intersection where objects and events are rendered as meaningful or not, through the work of social actors" (ibid.). I therefore draw on an understanding of music not as an isolated sonic text, but as a socially embedded and dialectical object capable of self-referential meaning. Thus, the concert that took place in Spain, attended majoritarily by Iranians in a politically-charged historical moment, is taken as a social and sonic event. It is interpreted within the shifting social realities of the Iranian diaspora, where the "local" does not denote a fixed geographic site but is reconfigured according to the specific locus of diasporic formation, producing distinct constellations of meaning. As an intervention into the politics of audibility through

which national belonging is imagined, and taken as a cultural text and as a communicative event, Kalhor's refusal to perform "Morḡ-e Saḥar" is viewed as an interruption of the expectation that collective unity must be articulated through immediately recognizable and implicitly Persian forms.

The analysis begins by examining the symbolic weight of "Morḡ-e Saḥar" as a de facto anthem and the desire for national rearticulation it carries, before showing how Kalhor's resistance unsettles the reduction of unity to homogeneity and instead foregrounds the audibility of marginalized voices. The article then develops this claim through Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of listening and resonance, arguing that the performance invites audiences to remain at the threshold of signification rather than collapse difference into a singular national sound. From there, it broadens the discussion by placing Kalhor's musical act alongside a previous performance shaped by the context of Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF), when another anthemic song is resisted in order to show that such interruptions are not isolated moments but part of a wider struggle over language, listening, and the terms of collective expressions of identity. The final sections situate these tensions within the longer history of Persianization and modern Iranian nation-building, and then within the diasporic setting in which such performances unfold, arguing that calls for unity in the diaspora runs the risk of reinstalling linguistic homogeneity in response to anxieties of fragmentation.

While this paper draws on Nancy's call to move beyond interpretive mastery and toward a mode of listening that remains open to resonance, it does not claim to abandon meaning altogether. Rather, the aim is to distinguish between the stabilization of meaning and its ongoing emergence. The analysis that follows does not seek to fix the meaning of Kalhor's gesture or to replace one dominant interpretation with another; instead, it attends to the conditions under which meaning is unsettled and reconfigured in the moment of performance. In this sense, the discussion remains attentive to the ways in which Kalhor's refusal altered the very terms of listening, shifting the encounter from one oriented toward recognition and repetition to one that sustains uncertainty, exposure, and plurality.

Listening and the Politics of Audibility

To make sense of Kalhor's refusal to play "Morḡ-e Saḥar" and his decision to perform an instrumental Balochi piece instead, it is useful to consider how absence and substitution became meaningful in this context. In politically charged settings, musical decisions, including what is performed or withheld, can function simultaneously as political gestures and aesthetic acts that produce meaning. This is particularly evident in the case of unofficial anthems, whose significance cannot be reduced to a particular musical form or to a conventionally triumphant affect. Unlike official anthems, whose authority is institutionally established through repetition in civic and ceremonial contexts, unofficial anthems acquire their force through collective recognition, circulation, and the affects they activate. Their anthemic quality, in other words, lies less in how an anthem is supposed to sound than in what repeated acts of performance and listening enable people to do together.

"Morḡ-e Saḥar," a *tasnif* saturated with symbolic resonance, is a particularly revealing example. Rather than Iran's singular unofficial national anthem, a designation more conventionally associated with "Ey Irān" (Loloi and Hosayni Dehkordi 2000a), it is better understood as one of the country's most recognisable unofficial anthems of protest, resistance, and unrealised freedom. The contrast is instructive. "Ey Irān" addresses the homeland directly, imagines national belonging independently of a particular government, and does so through an emphatic, march-like musical idiom. "Morḡ-e Saḥar," by contrast, creates collectivity through an imagery of captivity and liberation, moving from the night of oppression towards the freedom heralded by the nightingale, which, as the title suggests, is literally the "bird of dawn" (*morḡ-e saḥar*). This movement gives the song its distinctive affective tension, holding sorrow and a sense of captivity together with a wistful anticipation of release that remains perpetually on the horizon. Emerging from the political atmosphere of the Constitutional era, Bahar's imagery carried the weight of the repression of its own time, but its political life did not remain confined to that context. Over subsequent decades, the song was repeatedly performed and its imagery reactivated in relation to changing experiences of censorship, repression, and political disappointment. Its meanings have therefore remained anchored in a

general sense of melancholy and longing for a future freedom. Indeed, the song's allusions to sociopolitical repression have been identified as central to its sustained relevance (Maghazei 2014: 6). Its slow melodic movement and mournful vocal expression are therefore crucial to this process. Although such qualities may seem at odds with the conventional affective expectations of an anthem, they are central to how "Morḡ-e Saḥar" performs its anthemic function. This is all the more striking given its setting in *māhur*, a mode whose intervallic structure broadly parallels that of the Western major mode (Farhat 1990: 89). The contrast with "Ey Irān" makes this unconventional anthemic affect particularly clear. Whereas the latter projects an affirmative and defiant nationalism, addressing Iran as *ey marz-e por gohar* ("O jewel-studded land") and declaring *Ey došman ar to sang-e ḵāra-ʾi man āhan-am* ("If the foe is granite hard, I am clad in iron") (Loloi and Hosayni Dehkordi 2000a), "Morḡ-e Saḥar" locates political force in a very different affective register.It speaks of the *qafas* ("cage"), calls upon the nightingale to sing the *naḡma-ye āzādi-e nawʿ-e bašar* ("song of freedom for humankind"), and pleads for the dark night to be turned into dawn (*šām-e tārik-e mā-rā saḥar kon*) (Loloi and Hosayni Dehkordi 2000b). It is through this imagery that sorrow, frustrated hope, and the desire for liberation are transformed into a collectively recognisable political affect. Its anthemic force thus lies not in overcoming sorrow through triumph, but in making the experience of unrealised freedom collectively felt.

As noted above, this affective and anthemic force was repeatedly renewed through performance, becoming particularly significant in the post-revolutionary period through Mohammad Reza Shajarian, with whom "Morḡ-e Saḥar" became closely identified. In his concerts, audiences would repeatedly request it as an encore, and in so doing, would themselves participate in its reproduction as a collectively recognised anthem. Following the disputed 2009 presidential election and the violent repression of the protests that followed, Shajarian publicly opposed the state's treatment of protesters and was subsequently subjected to restrictions and censorship and thus gave his association with the song still greater political weight. Yet this strong association with dissent does not mean that "Morḡ-e Saḥar" speaks only to those who position themselves against the state. The song has continued to circulate in state-sanctioned concerts and official cultural spaces,

suggesting that its history as a vehicle for dissent coexists with a canonical status within Persian classical music. Indeed, its language of resistance to oppression is not inherently incompatible with the political vocabulary of the Islamic Republic, itself born of a revolution that, at least in its official discourse, was deeply invested in opposition to tyranny and injustice. Its shared affective vocabulary of captivity, darkness and liberation allows "Morḡ-e Saḥar" to carry an accumulated memory of dissent without requiring every listener to identify with the same political position.

This ambiguity also matters when considering the audience's request at Kalhor's concert. By this point, particularly through the song's association with Shajarian, requesting "Morḡ-e Saḥar" as an encore had become a familiar concert convention. The request therefore need not have reflected an explicitly political intention on the part of every listener, but neither was it politically empty. In the charged context of the WLF movement, this familiar ritual activated a song already sedimented with history of dissent and freedom. The encore could thus become a moment of collective alignment in which familiarity, mourning, protest, and national identification converged through a dominant narrative of the Iranian "we." Kalhor's refusal, and his substitution of a Balochi piece, interrupted that ritual, opening instead onto a reconfigured vision of unity that resists homogenisation and takes the audibility of Iran's marginalised voices as its point of departure.

If Kalhor's refusal unsettled a desire for unity grounded in a single national narrative, then the question is how such unsettlement operates at the level of listening itself. Approaching music as a socially embedded phenomenon means that its meaning cannot be treated as fixed but must be understood as emerging through the conditions of its reception in specific contexts. It is precisely at this level of relational encounter that the paper draws on Jean-Luc Nancy's theorization of listening. Nancy sets a distinction between *entendre* (hearing/understanding) and *écouter* (listening). For him, music is not simply a sonorous object that can be reduced to a stable message, nor does it merely confirm the fusion of the "musicianly and the musical" (Nancy 2007: 64). Rather, Nancy's emphasis on active listening resists interpretive certainty and challenges the impulse to stabilize sound into legible meaning. His call for "an art beyond signification" (Nancy 1997: 85) may

therefore initially appear paradoxical in light of the approach to music as symbolic form outlined earlier in the introduction. After all, there has been criticism levelled against Nancy's philosophical musings about listening for ostensibly leaving music bereft of any kind of signification and its alleged "reinvention of the nineteenth-century metaphysics of music under other names" (Kramer 2011: 97). Yet such critiques overlook the nuance of Nancy's distinction. In fact, this nuance makes Nancy's sense of listening homologous to Feld's notion of meaning making and communication. Whereas *entendre* signals the closure of meaning through comprehension and the consolidation of truth, *écouter* remains oriented toward openness to resonance and the ongoing emergence of sense. What matters most in Nancy's formulation is that listening is not an exclusively interpretive mode but a disposition that resists premature closure and instead sustains negotiation and exposure. Drawing on H. G. Gumbrecht, Paul Simpson clarifies this distinction in *Non-Representational Theory* (2021), emphasizing that this view of meaning does not entail its abandonment:

> Such an approach to listening would 'certainly not mean that we would abandon meaning, signification, and interpretation', but rather seeks to develop an understanding of listening that would allow us 'to relate to the world in a way that is more complex than interpretation alone (Gumbrecht, 2004: 54)' (Simpson 2021: 184).

What is at stake in Nancy's account, then, is not a rejection of meaning but an insistence on inhabiting the threshold where signification is neither fixed nor foreclosed, but continuously in the process of becoming. He calls for a kind of listening that works to dismantle systems of signifying reference, since he believes "we never hear (*entend*) anything but the already coded, which we decode" (Nancy 2007: 36). Nancy speaks about *sense*, which can be roughly understood as a sign that resists signification. Music's *sense* is thus not a fixed product with a fixed meaning but one whose meaning is subject to change and difference. In his own words, when we listen, we are always "on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge,

this fringe, this margin" (2007: 7). This listening at the edge of signification is what Kalhor's performance also tacitly encouraged. In doing so, it disrupted the mode of hearing that consolidates the nation into a singular, legible sound and instead opened a space in which voices relegated to the margins can be heard without first being absorbed into a homogenizing script.

Let us linger further on the issue of marginalization by considering a comparable instance of resistance to homogenization of a plural movement. This episode, too, took place in a public venue and around the same historical moment as Kalhor's concert, and it likewise centered on a charged request for a familiar anthem. Here, another Kurdish cultural figure–this time a writer–is making a similar statement to Kalhor's in the diaspora. It involves Behrooz Boochani, the Kurdish Iranian writer who came into public acclaim because of his whistleblowing pieces about the harrowing situation of Australia's offshore refugee detention camps in a series of press articles and also his poetic memoir *No Friends But the Mountains* (2018). The episode at the focus of this paper unfolded during Boochani's Australian tour promoting his second book, *Freedom Only Freedom* (2022), approximately six months before Kalhor's concert and around six months into the WLF protests. At the end of the event at a hall in Melbourne packed with Iranian migrants, the presenter draws the discussion to the political situation of Iran and especially mentions the song *Baraye*, by Shervin Hajipour, which had come to be known as the anthem of the WLF movement. Then he asked Boochani, who is known for having a very good singing voice, if he would honor the evening by singing that song.

It is important to note that the musical explosion sparked by the WLF movement has been unprecedented in the post-revolutionary history of protests in Iran, with an extraordinary proliferation of protest songs that have both articulated and amplified the uprising's emotional energy and political demands (Siamdoust 2023). When the protests broke out in Iran, people across the country and around the diaspora witnessed, listened to and sang along a wide variety of songs associated with the movement. Out of the strikingly vast number of songs that emerged, the song "Baraye", which can be translated as 'Because of', quickly went viral. It spoke about the different reasons 'because of' which the Iranian people were

protesting: “Because of dancing in the street; Because of fear while kissing; Because of my sister, your sister, our sisters;Because of changing rotten minds” (Hajipour 2022). The song won the then-newly introduced category of “Special Merit Award for Best Song For Social Change” at the 2023 Grammy Awards. Boochani’s book event took place some days after the song won the Grammy. His response to the request to sing “Baraye” is summarized by the author himself in his Twitter account: “I was asked to sing this song and I congratulate Shervin on winning the award but I couldn’t bring myself to sing it because I found no connection between that song and the streets of Kurdistan. So I sang my own song”[5] (Boochani 2023). Quite expectedly, his song was not a rendition of the Persian song “Baraye”. It was rather a song with themes of homeland, exile, and attachment to Kurdistan, with lyrics in–most likely[6]–the minority language of Laki.

Of course, his action received severe criticism and backlash from mindsets that understood his singing a different tune as sparking division and polarisation among the people and fracturing solidarity in a time when everybody was emphasizing unity. Yet Boochani’s choice can also be understood as a refusal of a model of unity that presumes a single linguistic and cultural center. By turning away from a song that had come to symbolize the movement largely through Persian language expression, he drew attention to the uneven ways in which the experience of protest was lived across Iran’s regions. Far from amounting to the divisiveness of which his critics accused him, his insistence that “Baraye” bore little relation to the streets of Kurdistan signals a resistance to the idea that solidarity must be articulated through forms that remain distant from the realities of marginalized communities. Thus he made audible a different geography of belonging and foregrounded voices that tend to remain peripheral to dominant narratives of national unity. The public reception is thus another point of comparison between his performance and Kalhor’s. When we left Kalhor’s concert, excitement was not the only emotion perceived in the

[5] Video available at: https://x.com/BehrouzBoochani/status/1622498075309903873.
[6] Identifying this piece proved more difficult than anticipated. I attempted to crowdsource an identification through both personal contacts and more formal academic channels, consulting Kurdish speakers from different regions and with familiarity with different Kurdish varieties. None was able to identify the song or transcribe its lyrics with sufficient confidence. By the time of submitting the final version of this article I had been unable to establish it. Further research is therefore necessary.

audience, as I could hear frustrated sentiments not only about not having the chance to sing “Morḡ-e Saḥar” but also about chanting the slogan Woman, Life, Freedom in Kurdish, instead of in Persian. The tensions surrounding these performances suggest that solidarity is negotiated not only through the content of what is said or sung, but through the very forms in which belonging becomes audible.

Boochani’s decision to sing in a vocal idiom likely unintelligible to much of the audience, together with Kalhor’s non-verbal response, produces a deliberate interruption by which “the symbolic reference of language is no longer functional” (Zbikowski 2012: 129). In both cases, what is being negotiated is not only the content of what is said or played, the unequal conditions under which different sounds become intelligible, recognisable, and available as expressions of a collective Iranian “we”. Boochani places the audience outside the comfort of immediate linguistic comprehension, while Kalhor makes a different intervention by turning not to his own Kurdish musical heritage but to a Balochi melody, drawing attention to a musical tradition associated with one of Iran’s most economically and politically marginalised regions and one that had suffered particularly severe state violence during the WLF uprising. The expectation that a song such as “Baraye” would provide an immediately intelligible and collectively recognizable point of reference gives way, in Boochani’s performance, to a linguistic register that displaces Persian from its assumed centrality. Kalhor’s response, meanwhile, suspends verbal meaning altogether while bringing a markedly less familiar regional musical voice into the space of collective representation. The two gestures therefore operate differently as Boochani makes linguistic difference itself audible, whereas Kalhor moves beyond language to unsettle the expectation that collective Iranian expression should take a familiar and immediately recognisable form. In both cases, however, opacity redirects attention towards the affective and sonic dimensions of listening and raises the question of whose sounds can be readily heard as belonging to the collective. The linguistic dimension of this inequality has a particularly long institutional history in Iran. One important context for understanding this unequal distribution of intelligibility and recognition is the long institutional history of linguistic inequality in Iran, whose effects do not simply end at the borders of the nation-state but travel into diasporic spaces, where, as the interventions of Kalhor and Boochani

suggest, they encounter new linguistic and political environments and are negotiated anew.

Unequal Intelligibility across Borders: Language, Recognition, and Iranian Diasporic Unity in Spain

The question of an official language has been extremely contentious throughout the modern history of Iran. In general, linguistic pluralism has always been important in plural geographies. Any study that deals with modern identity and modern nation-state necessarily has to deal with the issue of language (Anderson 1983). In Iran too, with the formation of the modern Iranian nation-state, and the election of Persian as the official language, other languages were minoritized and marginalized. There are around eighty languages and dialects in Iran. In spite of the many speakers of languages such as Kurdish, Azeri and Balochi along with Persian, the Iranian nation-state policies opted for Persian as the only official language.

The constitution of 1906 established Persian as the official language of the nation-state. And this created a hierarchy that cannot be understood simply as a distinction between a permitted Persian and prohibited minority languages. Persian possessed considerable cultural prestige long before the emergence of the modern nation-state as its literary tradition, and particularly its poetry, had become central to the historical imagination of Iran and to Iranian cultural identity. Modern nation-building institutionalized this already powerful cultural position. Under the Pahlavis, Persian-language schooling, administration, and mass literacy became important instruments of national cohesion, consolidating Persian not only as the language of the state but increasingly as the unmarked language of Iranian public life. Its privileged position is therefore affective as well as institutional since Persian evokes not simply administrative authority but a vast literary inheritance and also with broader ideas of Iranian history, civilization, and national pride.

And this linguistic hierarchy has endured to the present. Even though the constitution of the Islamic Republic in 1979 recognizes, in Article 15, the use of languages other than Persian, these provisions have not translated into sustained

institutional support or implementation. Article 15 permits the use of regional and ethnic languages in the press and mass media and the teaching of their literature in schools, but Persian remains overwhelmingly dominant in education and national institutions. This does not mean that Kurdish, Balochi, Azeri, and other languages are simply prohibited or absent from public life. They sustain rich oral, literary, musical and, to varying degrees, media cultures. The asymmetry lies instead in their unequal institutionalization and in the different forms of legitimacy attached to them. In other words, and as Cecilia Gialdini maintains, even though Persian is supposed to be the lingua franca, in practice it is the national language (2023: 11). So the Islamic Republic's claim to be a multilingual and multiethnic state remains largely a matter of formal recognition on paper. Gialdini also highlights the sidelining of the linguistic claims of the WLF movement by "a general call for human rights" (ibid.) a framework that tends to subsume linguistic difference under a universalizing discourse of unity.

Seen against this hierarchy, Boochani's performance not only displaces Persian from its assumed centrality but it momentarily reverses an ordinary distribution of linguistic intelligibility. Rather than the Kurdish speaker entering Persian in order to become legible to a national audience, Persian-speaking listeners are placed in the position of not understanding and are asked to remain with a voice whose semantic content they cannot fully master. Thus, resisting Persian in Boochani's performance, and suspending speech altogether in Kalhor's, do not simply signal the absence of a common tongue. This suspension of tongue and signification is an invitation to immerse oneself in sound and it is then "from sound itself," as Nancy would put it, "that sense is offered" (2007: 6). It also exposes the limits of any attempt to stabilize WLF into a single, authoritative language of unity, since once the movement is made fully legible, it risks reproducing the exclusions it seeks to undo. Read together, these two instances of sonic interruption mark both historical linguistic injustice and the incompleteness of signification itself, while inviting a practice of listening that remains open to what the dominant language has rendered peripheral and unintelligible.

The significance of these gestures becomes especially visible in Iranian diasporic settings, where collective gatherings tend to serve as surrogate spaces for political expression and where the desire for unity intensifies the pressure for symbolic coherence. Importantly, this intervention is also coming from inside the Iranian diaspora. Both Kalhor and Boochani are diasporic figures, and both occupy the particular position of being Kurdish within that space. Their interventions therefore reveal a contestation internal to diasporic life itself, in which different positions produce competing understandings of what an Iranian collective "we" might contain. Their Kurdishness is thus particularly significant here as a positionality from which the exclusions of a Persian-centred national imaginary may become differently audible.

It is in these contexts that the invitation to pause and to listen, in Nancy's sense of *écouter*, becomes most palpable, since the terms of belonging are not given in advance but must be negotiated in the moment of performance. Across the diaspora, then, the nexus between language and identity reappears as a fault line through which solidarity is tested and belonging is performed. In the case of Spain, however, this negotiation acquires an additional layer of significance, since it unfolds within a host society whose own democratic project has been marked and shaped by debates over multilingualism, regional autonomy, and the public legitimacy of minoritized languages. This is precisely what makes the experience of Iranian migrants in Spain especially relevant to the democratic debate in Iran.

The Iranian diaspora in Spain is relatively small and internally diverse, shaped by different periods and trajectories of migration. As Sheida Besozzi (2026) shows, arrivals increased following the 1979 Revolution, when Spain also served as a transit point for Iranians intending to continue elsewhere in Europe or North America. Some remained, while subsequent decades brought new arrivals for political, educational, professional, and personal reasons. The community consequently includes long-established first-generation migrants, more recent arrivals, and a second generation born or raised in Spain. Besozzi's interviews also reveal diverse political positions and socioeconomic circumstances, including experiences of downward

occupational mobility. For many, however, Spain gradually became a site of belonging and home-making through sustained engagement with Spanish society.

Crucially, this engagement tends to be understood relationally through connections between Spain and Iran. Across hospitality and social interaction, language and expressive culture, and gastronomy, Besozzi's interlocutors identify affinities between the two societies that help mitigate estrangement and facilitate belonging; language and music, like food and everyday sociability, become sites through which Spain is interpreted in relation to Iran (Besozzi 2026). A similar relational orientation has emerged in my own research on *Kargadan*, an Iranian cultural magazine based in Madrid and in interviews with Iranian flamenco musicians in Spain, where cultural practices and experiences in Spain are repeatedly articulated through references to Iran (Delshad 2027).

This relational experience of Spain does not, of course, demonstrate that Iranian migrants consciously compare the linguistic politics of the two countries.[7] My argument is instead that their negotiations of Iranian belonging take place within a political environment in which linguistic plurality is publicly visible, institutionally recognised, and continually contested. In Spain, multilingualism is not merely a private matter of heritage or sentiment but a publicly contested dimension of democratic life, one that forces questions of unity and equality to be articulated in linguistic terms. For Iranian migrants in Spain, then, the performance of solidarity unfolds within a political environment that has already institutionalised, even if imperfectly, the idea that democracy must reckon with linguistic plurality rather than postpone it. Against this backdrop, the persistence of monolingual assumptions within diasporic spaces became evident to me in the course of a dialogue I overheard as we were leaving the concert, offered as a critique of the use of the Kurdish slogan *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*. One of the interlocutors articulated a defense of Persian as the presumed language of political unity, drawing on a familiar logic that

[7] Besozzi (2026) does not examine whether this comparative perspective extends specifically to Spain's politics of multilingualism, nor has this question been a focus of my own research. I therefore cannot assume that Iranian migrants consciously relate debates over Spanish minoritized languages to those in Iran. Nevertheless, these findings establish that Spain is not simply a geographical backdrop to Iranian diasporic life but a social and cultural environment interpreted relationally through Iran, making its highly visible negotiations of linguistic plurality relevant to the context in which diasporic understandings of language, difference, and national belonging unfold.

casts linguistic plurality as a threat to cohesion. Frustrated with articulations of difference, the speaker promised that if those demanding equal rights waited long enough, then “once we achieve democracy, we will give each what they want”. What struck me was precisely the postponement contained in this formulation where linguistic equality was imagined as something to be addressed after democracy had been achieved, rather than as part of the democratic question itself. The remark is all the more striking not only for its conditional understanding of equality, but also for the context in which it was voiced as it emerged at a moment when Spain itself was undergoing an intense public debate over multilingualism. Importantly, the linguistic question in Spain did not end with the democratic transition but has remained constitutive of democratic contestation, as the 2023 debate over the use of co-official languages in parliament clearly demonstrated.

At the time of the concert in Madrid, the Spanish parliament was debating the reform of its Rules of Procedure (*Reglamento*) to allow the use of the co-official languages of the Autonomous Communities in parliamentary activity, which eventually passed on September 21, 2023. The case of multilingualism in Spain is particularly revealing, since linguistic pluralism has historically been central to Spain’s democratic project. As scholarship on the Spanish democratic transition has emphasized, the shift from dictatorship to a decentralized democratic regime positioned plurilingualism as a structural principle of conviviality and coexistence (*convivencia*), closely tied to the territorial model envisioned in the 1978 Constitution, which explicitly commits the state to protecting Spain’s diverse “languages and institutions” (Pons Parera 2013: 94-95). Spain’s Constitutional Court has itself acknowledged the linguistic question as one of “considerable symbolic and affective importance” in the structuring of the autonomous state (STC 205/1990, 13 December), underscoring the extent to which linguistic plurality has been understood as integral to the democratic reconfiguration of the state. In this sense, one of the most consequential issues raised during Spain’s transition after the death of Francisco Franco in 1975 was precisely the relegitimization of languages such as Basque and Catalan, which had been ostracized and suppressed under the dictatorship.

While this brief digression into Spain's multilingual politics may seem to momentarily shift the focus away from the concert itself, it sheds light on the interpretive context in which Kalhor's performance was received. If, as Feld reminds us, meaning is produced communally and remains contingent upon local conditions of reception, then the diasporic scene demands simultaneous attention to both loci, the Iranian political locality that the audience carried into the hall and the Spanish democratic context within which the gathering unfolded. It is in this sense that the reception of Kalhor's performance acquires an additional diasporic dimension, shaped both by Iranian debates over unity and language as well as by the multilingual public sphere that surrounded the concert. Yet the fact that this diasporic context did not embrace multilingualism exposes a striking double erasure, perhaps induced by forgetting and overlooking the uneven geography of state violence in Iran, namely against Kurdish and Balochi communities, and a simultaneous inattentiveness to the host country's own ongoing democratic struggles over linguistic pluralism. Once this is taken into account, the next question that arises is why diasporic spaces so often respond to plurality with a renewed insistence on homogeneity, whether linguistic, cultural, or political, presented under the guise of unity.[8] Stuart Hall's account of diasporic cultural identity offers one way of understanding this impulse.

Hall describes a dominant conception of diasporic identity as an effort to recover unity through the invocation of "historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (Hall 1990: 223). This impulse, Hall suggests, responds to the "rift of separation" (224) produced by displacement and fragmentation. From this perspective, the appeal to a single linguistic ground appears not simply as an ideological position but as an attempt to stabilize belonging in conditions marked by dispersal and uncertainty. The insistence on homogeneity

[8] This question has acquired renewed urgency in light of recent diaspora mobilizations around regime change, particularly among monarchist currents associated with Reza Pahlavi. In 2026, Pahlavi's supporters organized large rallies calling for international pressure on Tehran, while Pahlavi himself publicly adopted the phrase "Make Iran Great Again" in a context shaped by war and renewed calls for regime change. Such mobilizations are not discussed here as the object of analysis, but they clarify why the article's concern with unity, plurality, and the sonic production of Iranian identity remains politically urgent.

can thus be understood as a response to the vulnerabilities of diasporic existence, even when it risks reproducing forms of exclusion that the movement itself seeks to overcome. Thus, by suspending speech and withholding Persian as the unmarked language of unity, Kalhor redirects his audience toward a different understanding of collective belonging not in terms of "essence" but "positioning" (Hall 1990: 226). And it is not language alone but the very organization of listening which is at stake in his encore as he alters the sonic horizon through which national belonging is expected to become audible. Rather than confirming unity in a familiar musical-linguistic form, the encore reorients the audience toward a different distribution of resonance (see below), one in which belonging must be heard through plurality. In a historical moment when many Iranians once again imagined the possibility of a new nation, Kalhor's performance resists the temptation to treat unity as an "already accomplished fact," (Hall 1990: 222) or to impose what Hall calls an "arbitrary closure" on meaning (Hall 1990: 230). Instead, it keeps the space of listening open to forms of collective identity that cannot be reduced to a single voice.

Listening as Resonance

Sense, essentially, has to repeat itself.
(Nancy 2003: 93)

If the previous section considered listening as a mode of openness that resists the stabilization of meaning, the next step is to ask what such openness makes possible. Here, it is useful to return to Jean-Luc Nancy, but with a shift in emphasis. Beyond the distinction between *entendre* and *écouter*, Nancy ultimately turns to the notion of resonance, suggesting that "perhaps it is necessary that sense not be content to make sense (or to be logos), but that it want also to resound" (Nancy 2007: 6). Listening, in this sense, is not simply a matter of attending to sound rather than decoding it, but of entering into a field in which meaning emerges through vibration, extension, and more importantly, return. He pushes listening further away from mere interpretation and toward an encounter with what remains unresolved. The quote I mentioned earlier, where listening is situated on the edge between meaning and

sound, and where sound itself is described as nothing other than this edge, culminates in a definition of listening “as a resonant meaning, a meaning whose sense is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance” (2007: 7).

This is central to Nancy’s relevance for the present paper, because Kalhor’s performance similarly invites listeners to move beyond hearing as recognition, familiarity, or immediate comprehension. His musical gesture asks the audience to suspend inherited assumptions about what it means to be a self, an Iranian self, or a freedom-seeking self. Rather than simply offering an alternative meaning to replace an existing one, it alters the very conditions of listening and opens a space in which meaning can no longer be immediately stabilized. This openness is precisely what Nancy describes when he writes that “a blow from outside, clamour from within, this sonorous, sonorized body undertakes a simultaneous listening to a ‘self’ and to a ‘world’ that are both in resonance” (2007: 40). Resonance, then, allows us to describe a form of listening that does not contain sound within fixed interpretive or musicological categories, but instead attends to the material and affective relation through which sound touches the body and disposes the self to transformation. Read in relation to WLF, the “blow from outside” names the sonic force through which the movement’s chants, songs, slogans, and musical energy reach the listening body, while the “clamour from within” registers the affective and political responses they awaken within it. In this sense, listening is not the reception of an already formed meaning, but an embodied exposure to sound, through which the self both “tightens” and “dilates” becoming “distressed and rejoicing” in the same resonant movement (Nancy 2007: 40). Listening, then, is not simply exposure to the sound, but to the moment in which the diasporic subject opens itself to a resonant field where self and world, memory and protest, grief and political possibility are heard together.

Resonance is thus the social and affective life of sound once it has been set in motion. For this reason, the distinct experience of temporality entailed by resonance also gains importance. As Nancy writes, sonorous time is “not the instant of philosophico-scientific time either, the point of no dimension” (2007: 13), but a thickened present in which sound lingers, returns, and continues to act even as it fades. What is heard does not simply vanish as it persists as echo. This temporal

dimension is crucial for understanding the diasporic circulation of WLF, which has been both spatial and durational. The movement did not communicate as though it were delivering a stable message to be passively received; rather, through the repetition of slogans, the circulation of songs, and the creation of shared sonic practices, it generated a sonic space in which meaning was collectively experienced and embodied. It is this resonant force that Kalhor and Boochani carry into new diasporic contexts, freeing the sounds and demands of WLF from the confines of the immediate moments of protest and performance and allowing them to return, reverberate across dispersed Iranian communities, and acquire renewed force. The listener, whether the resisting artist who gives sound a form or the audience that receives and reanimates it, is therefore not external to sound, but implicated in its circulation.

Conclusion

In returning, three years later, to Kalhor's Madrid concert, the stakes of his refusal become even clearer. The January 2026 crackdown of protesters in Iran, a violent nationwide repression involving the killing and detention of thousands of demonstrators, and the subsequent war of aggression against Iran in March, have produced a political moment in which survival, fear, and urgency risk overwhelming the slower work of listening. Yet it is precisely amid the noise of war and the silences imposed both by state violence and by opposition forces invoking the urgency of the moment to suspend disagreement so that foreign military intervention can do its work of liberation that the resonance of WLF must continue to be heard. If, as Hall argues, identity is always produced through contingent and strategic "cuts" (1990: 239), then it is dangerous to mistake such cuts for natural or permanent endings. This danger has become especially urgent in the present conjuncture, when some of the most vocal and visible sectors of the diaspora opposition, including monarchist currents gathered around Reza Pahlavi, have responded to war and renewed state violence by reasserting a more unified and centralized image of Iranian political identity. The paper has therefore revisited Kalhor's refusal of "Morḡ-e Saḥar" as a resistance to

forms of unity that gather collective struggle around an already stabilized sonic and national sign, and in doing so limit the plurality that WLF had placed in resonance.

The paper has invoked Nancy's notion of listening and his critique of reducing music to signification to clarify the force of this gesture. It has specially focused on Nancy's idea of resonance to shed light on how notions such as Iranian identity, diasporic solidarity, national unity, freedom, and collective struggle are imagined. By doing so, the paper bears a cautionary reflection on the hazards of music losing its capacity to resonate and becoming instead an instrument of persuasion rather than a mode of sensibility, especially when songs with mythical and anthemic status, such as "Morḡ-e Saḥar" or "Baraye", are received as fixed signs of collective identity. Against such closure, the paper has suggested that Kalhor's and Boochani's resistance lies in challenging forms of community-building that foreclose the space in which a community can listen to itself differently. Their interventions resisted this tendency by refusing to let music confirm an already settled content and instead returned listeners to the threshold where sound opens meaning without exhausting it. To remember Kalhor and Boochani in the present moment of war, repression, and renewed diasporic calls for unity is therefore to remember a form of diasporic resistance resonant with, and sensitive to, the unfinished demands of the WLF movement. Ultimately, this article has argued for the necessity of continuing to listen, not in order to recover a single Iranian self, but to remain attentive to the resonant emergence of other possible Iranian subjectivities.

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