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Why Sad Songs?: Women's Laments in Popular Music

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Why Sad Songs?:

Women's Laments in Popular Music

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Musicology

by

Ramona Maia Gonzalez

2025

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Why Sad Songs?:

Women's Laments in Popular Music

by

Ramona Maia Gonzalez

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Nina Eidsheim, Chair

Why Sad Songs?: Women's Laments in Popular Music situates sad songs by contemporary female pop musicians within the lineage of women's lament. This research aims to undo the common perception that female artists who sing sad songs express their own personally felt suffering. Instead, I posit that these pop lamenters, precisely because of their expertise in performing grief, instill the contradictory notion in their public that their acts are effortlessly real. Using practice-based methods related to my own work as a professional recording artist and by examining sad songs by singer-songwriters and producers Björk, Rosalía, and Sade, I challenge critical and scholarly approaches that assess these women according to a rubric of authenticity. I draw from ethnographic accounts of women's ritual lament practices in both the ancient and modern traditions, utilizing what scholars define as the role of the professional mourner to highlight these pop lamenters' agency and technical skill. I argue that female pop singers of sad

songs are experts in mourning, who perform listeners' most difficult emotions not only as a means to assist them in processing personal and historical traumas but also as a studied artistic practice.

By focusing on the labor and critical thought behind each performer's set of sad songs, I consistently illustrate a disjunct between what the artist created and public perception. In the case of Björk, I discuss her role in the film *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and her efforts to counter the interpretation—abetted by the film's director, Lars von Trier—of her as an emotive vessel rather than a composer and actor. With Rosalía, I show how discord in purist flamenco circles regarding the artist's authenticity overshadowed her vocal, narrative, and musical undertakings to critique Spanish patriarchy. In my study of Sade, I examine how derisive critical assessments of her work and vocality by prominent media outlets undermined her sorrow songs that were often political in nature and addressed to marginalized communities. Through these case studies, I reconfigure women's sad songs in popular music by deemphasizing the focus on lamenters' inner lives in favor of centering their agency and authorship.

The dissertation of Ramona Gonzalez is approved

Joshua Javier Guzmán

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Shana Redmond

Nina Eidsheim, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2025

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Re-entering academia after a decade on the outside as a working musician would have been a daunting task were it not for the people who supported me along the way. First off, I must thank the late Bruno Louchouarn; without his recommendation to meet with Mitchell Morris to discuss applying to the musicology department at UCLA, I would not be here today. I will remember Bruno for his unyielding pursuit of interdisciplinary scholarly aims as a dedicated researcher-composer. I am deeply grateful to the chair of my committee, Nina Eidsheim, who knew me as a singer, but also knew I could become a scholar. Nina patiently walked me through the paces of academic writing, taking the time to think through my ideas in the utmost detail. Through her book *The Race of Sound* (2019), I learned how the delights of philosophical inquiry could be merged with musicology in ways that speak to significant sociocultural issues that inform our everyday lives. I will continue to carry with me Nina's invaluable writing exercises and methodologies, foremost the notion that thinking, diagramming, singing, and dreaming all count as "writing." Thank you to Shana Redmond for always challenging me to contemplate further, and for convincing me to write about Björk and *Dancer in the Dark*—the crucial starting place for the dissertation's central thesis. The critical feedback and incisive scholarship of my committee members Elisabeth Le Guin and Joshua Javier Guzmán likewise proved essential this research.

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2016	*Liquid Cool,* Album, Gloriette
2012	*One Second of Love,* Album, Secretly Canadian
2008	*Good Evening,* Album, Gloriette

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November 2017	National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne: *Dior Exhibition*
October 2017	Hammer Museum, LA, *Voices of Xtabay: A Tribute to Yma Sumac*
September 2017	Waves Festival, Vienna, AT
February 2013	Laneway Festival, Australia
September 2013	Train Station, Santa Fe, NM, Doug Aitken's *Station to Station*
October 2013	Vacant, Tokyo
December 2013	Art Basel, Miami, Ry Rocklen's *Night Court*
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June 2012	Ford Amphitheater, Los Angeles, *Krautrock Classics*
July 2012	OYA Festival, Oslo, Norway
March 2010	Festival NRML, Monterrey, MX

Select Press Interviews

2021 "Ramona Gonzalez Channels Grief and Loss on New Album," *NPR*
2021 "How Nite Jewel Broke Through Heartbreak," *Rolling Stone*
2016 "Nite Jewel talks 'Liquid Cool,' Dam Funk and R&B," *Los Angeles Times*
2012 "Even on the Retro Highway, It's Best to Watch the Road Ahead," *NY Times*

On-Screen Performance

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2021	*Sisters with Transistors*, Dir: Lisa Rovner
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2014	*Song Exploder*, Guest, Nite Jewel's "One Second of Love"

Introduction: Stages of Grief

They say grief is nonlinear. So the music to sound it—lament—takes enigmatic shape, often strongly impacting audiences while evading strict comprehension. In my work as a professional singer, songwriter, producer, and recording artist, I have long observed how listeners, even those close to me, tend to receive my laments as transmissions of my own personal sadness. In 2009, I had just released my first album and was talking to my father on the phone. His voice had its familiar phlegmy, obstructed sound. Although we hadn't spoken in many years, I had noted his attempts at communication through comments left on various YouTube videos of mine under his online alias, @chilebravo1. Sometimes his words spoke to me directly as a hopeful form of asynchronous contact, and other times he took a more typical tone of a fan speaking to the community ("Nite Jewel is a poet"). On that day, he rang me from his studio apartment in the Tenderloin district in San Francisco, I could faintly pick out the sound of busses wheezing in the background, the honks of impatient cabs. His cell service was shaky, and as we navigated the awkward gaps as the connection reestablished, the conversation turned to my debut album. He cleared his throat and asked, "Were you singing 'Daddy, daddy, don't leave me'?" I winced. "No. It's not about you."

Fast-forward to more than ten years later, I am preparing for a tour of my 2021 album *No Sun*, a collection of sad songs in part inspired by the tragic circumstances of the dissolution of my twelve-year marriage. I had hired my new beau to accompany me for a few shows in the US and Europe. On a tight budget, we staged rehearsals in his living room: me seated on his mustard mohair couch, surrounded by an arsenal of synthesizers and drum machines, and he, in front of a vibraphone. I launched into "Before I Go"—a soft, sultry lament that touches on notions of

romantic separation and loss—and led the first half, playing Wurlitzer-like keys, singing a gentle yet rhythmically insistent melody along to a sequenced Moog bass line. My partner sat there motionless, mallets in hand, waiting to deliver his solo. At the end, I let out a singsongy exhale, relieved that I had managed to get through the song without flubbing the last chorus. But my partner's attention was on other things. I noticed he was grimacing. "Honestly, I'm having a lot of trouble performing this," he said, "I feel like I am inside your relationship." My relief suddenly turned to strain as various considerations flooded my mind. I remained collected. "But it's not literally about that." I explained that the lyrics were drawn from slices of life, a dramatized re-creation of past events. It didn't matter though. The music and my delivery had done their job; they emotionally invaded him with a seemingly true-to-life replica of my prior marriage. Despite his uneasiness, as professionals, we continued to perform it.

In 2022, as a spectator of someone else's laments, I had the opportunity to see Spanish artist Rosalía live in concert at the YouTube Theater in Los Angeles in promotion of her new album *MOTOMAMI*. Halfway through the performance, she took front and center stage and launched into song "De Plata," from her 2017 album *Los Ángeles*, a fusion of two public-domain flamenco *siguiriyas*. Siguiriyas are powerful flamenco laments, typically sung in E Phrygian in a 12-beat pattern, often accompanied by guitar and *palmas* (hand claps). As Rosalía transitioned into the section of "De Plata" of the second siguiriyas, she shifted from her belting register to falsetto as the guitar dampened and she began to utter the tender lyrics. At the height of the section, as the Steadicam operator zoomed in on Rosalía's face in profile, she sang an extended melismatic phrase of the titular lyrics, modulating to E major and closing with a break in register, at which point a single tear fell down her cheek. Upon witnessing this, I audibly gasped (along with the crowd) and being so moved, began to well up myself as I leaned over to my friend and

whispered, “She’s *crying*.” In the heat of the moment, I was sure Rosalía had lost control. However, after the concert, when the emotions began to subside, I realized that I knew better. When I returned home, I scoured YouTube for performances of “De Plata” from this tour. I found that every single night, at the exact same moment in the song, the cameraman was poised to capture Rosalía’s performance of this single tear.

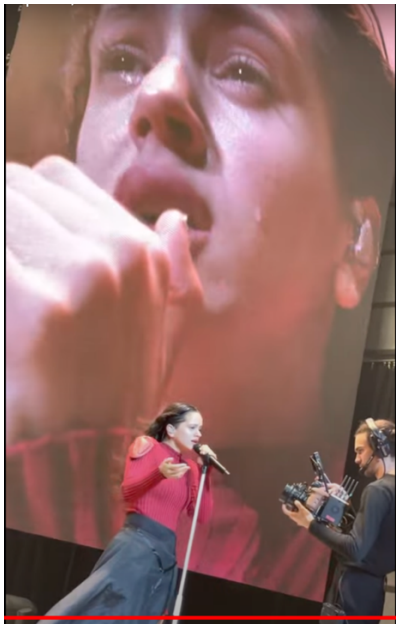

Figure 1. Rosalía performs “De Plata” in Washington, DC

There are different ways of interpreting the above anecdotes. One could be that these examples show how sad songs provoke listener connection and identification.[1] Another could be

[1] Oliver Whang, “Sad Songs Say So Much About Connection,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2023; see also Mario Attie-Picker, Tara Venkatesan, George E. Newman, and Joshua Knobe, “On the Value of Sad Music,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 58, no. 1 (2004): 46–65; Sandra Garrido, *Why Are We Attracted to Sad Music?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). For an influential analysis of the politics of audience identification, see Elin Diamond, “The Violence of ‘We’: Politicizing Identification,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (University of Michigan Press, 1992). For foundational texts on the psychology of identification, see Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (Hogarth Press, 1955); Jacques Lacan, *The Object Relation: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IV* (Polity Press, 2022).

that these scenes demonstrate how central the perception of authenticity is to the reception of popular music.[2] Yet, while the musical contexts of listener identification and performer authenticity are inevitably intertwined, and have been explored both on their own and in tandem by numerous scholars, their negative effects on female pop singers' work have not been sufficiently examined. In *Why Sad Songs?*, I show how the dynamic between lamenters and their audiences in musical performances of grief instills the premise that the vocalist sings truthfully about her own personal experience. Relatedly, if a vocalist fails to deliver in her performance, listeners tend to believe that the singer has misled them by feigning anguish. Technically speaking, there is an *inverse relation* that inheres in lament listening experiences; that the more expertly a singer performs a lament, the more she is thought to be singing "from the heart,"[3] rather than from a place of artistic forethought. Paradoxically, this means that, as the perceived excellence of a rendition of a sad song increases, audience perception of the lamenter's authorship decreases. Put another way, a female lamenter, precisely because of her skill in performing grief, instills the contradictory notion in her public that her act is effortlessly real.

[2] I use the term "authenticity" under Allan Moore's definition of *first-person authenticity*, which "arises when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance…represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience." "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002): 214. So "authenticity" here means the singer communicates her own personally felt emotions—and such emotions are *true* (unmediated). "Inauthenticity" means that these emotions are *false* (mediated). The ideology of authenticity central to popular music has long been detailed by popular music scholars such as Tim Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*: *Western Music and the World* (Duke University Press, 1997); Simon Frith, *Performing Rights: On the Value of Popular Music* (Harvard University Press, 1998); Simon Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (Routledge, 2007); Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *TDR* 50, no. 1 (2006); and Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (Routledge, 1992). For challenges to the notion of authenticity in popular culture, see Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, "Introduction: On Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music," in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, eds. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (University of California Press, 2000); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1995); Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1/2 (1993): 104–14. On the continued relevance of the concept of authenticity in rock music, see Keith Negus and Pete Astor, "Authenticity, Empathy, and the Creative Imagination," *Rock Music Studies* 9, no. 2 (2021): 157–73.

[3] Bridget Coulter, "'Singing from the Heart': Notions of Gendered Authenticity in Pop Music," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Stan Hawkins (Routledge, 2017).

Professional singers know that nothing could be further from the truth. As voice studies scholar and tenor John Potter puts it, "The thoughts of a singer in a particularly 'emotional' part of the music are likely to be in the order of 'Is this working? Have I judged the audience correctly? What do I need to do to capitalise on the effect I might be having?' Even if the singer is recreating an emotional state, the reality for the singer is that [they are] performing."[4] While listeners tend to believe that artists, particularly female artists, who sing sad songs must be chronicling their own personally felt suffering—that a well-executed lament is evidence of a vocalist's authenticity—this dissertation posits that the opposite is the case: a sad song is perceived as powerful precisely because the singer has expertly crafted a story for us that we only believe to be true.[5]

Through my positionality as a performer and listener of laments, subject to a plethora of (mis)identifications in both directions, as well as a scholar of women's sad songs, I rethink commonplace understandings of women's lament. I argue that we underestimate the craft of lamentation when we construe it as an outcome of a vocalist's personal testimony, rather than of her artistic calculation. Specifically, I examine albums of what I consider sad songs by Icelandic vocalist and composer Björk, Spanish artist Rosalía, and British Nigerian singer-songwriter Sade to challenge conventional understandings of women's lament and instead highlight pop lamenters' artistic agency and technical expertise.

Professional Mourning

[4] John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[5] See Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. Walter Herries Pollock (Chatto & Windus, 1883); William Archer, *Masks or Faces?: A Study in the Psychology of Acting* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1888). Richard Schechner notes that "in Euro-American theater (Stanislavski and after) much of the work of training and rehearsal makes performance behavior seem 'as if' it belongs to the performer." "Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed," *Kenyon Review* 3, no. 4 (1981): 84.

The central way I reorient established approaches to women's sad songs in popular music is through the concept of the professional mourner. Drawn from ethnographic and historical accounts of women's ritual lament practices, the archetype of a professional mourner is a woman employed to perform pain for grieving families outside of the direct circle of affected kin. The chief lamenter oversees ceremonial rituals of death and transition, as a steward to guide action that would otherwise devolve into chaos. Although such vocalists may draw on personal experience to conjure the necessary emotion for a dramatic scene, they do so from an authorial remove, in order to turn the mourning experience into art. The conceptual framework of the professional mourner offers us pause in witnessing lament, for while audience absorption in lament spectacle as a method of personal or collective emotional processing, or *catharsis*, is in many ways entirely appropriate,[6] we would err in using such experience to substantiate truth claims about the artist or her inner world, thereby undermining a lamenter's sense of artistic skill.

In thinking with the tool of the professional mourner, this dissertation revitalizes understandings of women's lament, by arguing that female pop singers act as experts in grief, performing on large scales our most difficult emotions, as a means of artistic expression as much as a mediation of collective understandings. Moreover, I propose that the pop lamenters I investigate in this dissertation utilize their empowered and informed position to express feminist points of view, through radical modes of musical and poetic expression that challenge and

[6]Aristotle's notion of *catharsis* from *Poetics* reads this kind of collective processing as an action that purges excessive emotion in order to restore an audience through heroic gestures and narratives of uplift, with an end to cohere societal aims. Laments, however, may do the opposite; reveling in tropes of depression, masochism, and suffering, which work to expose the underlying and fundamental lack of righteousness in a given society. For discussion of this kind of collective processing of alterity, see Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Zero Books, 2014); Joshua Javier Guzmán, "Notes on the Comedown," *Social Text* 32, no. 4 (121) (2014): 59–68. Through the voice specifically, see Shana Redmond, *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson* (Duke University Press, 2020); Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (Poseidon, 1993).

critique patriarchal narratives aimed to undermine female lamenters' artistry. At base, the professional mourner framework aims to revitalize the study of women's lament; a musical act central not only to the historical processing of grief, but to female creativity.

Trauma Performance

Returning to the scene with my father, the song of mine he was referring to was "Bottom Rung," the first track from my debut album *Good Evening* (2009). Lyrics obscured by smears of reverb I sang, "You get it all / Under the sun / Just like everyone / You get it all / It's no fun / At the bottom rung." In my repudiation of my father's interpretation of this tune lay the awareness that, in writing this music, I was channeling a pointillistic dissatisfaction and resentment, a general lament to fate. Yet now I wonder if my swift rejection of what he heard demonstrates how this song was in fact informed by the wound of long-standing fatherly neglect. This was difficult for me to admit, since, throughout my musical career, I have resisted using my life story as a theme in my artistic work, or as a marketing tool. I believed that sharing such information would not only cheapen the music, but would become glued to it, due to public thirst for information about pop musicians' lives. Yet lately I have noticed an incoherence in this thinking; while I have wished to be taken seriously as an artist by disavowing an accompanying diaristic narrative, on another level, I now acknowledge that my being situated within significant lineages of trauma born out of economic insecurity, racial and ethnic discrimination, sexual violence, and drug abuse, deeply influences my work. How then, does a female lamenter like myself—and perhaps the artists I study in this dissertation—maintain agency over my craft while also recognizing that part of my skill in performing laments is the channeling of a very familiar painful emotion?

To resolve this tension, I utilize the concept of *trauma performance*, that is, when a female lamenter summons personal or shared suffering in the process of artmaking—a speculative reconstruction of painful experience. On the face of it, this approach may appear controversial, for in trauma theory, the notion of performativity is a highly contested space, oscillating between contentious Freudian theories of subconscious confabulation and hard-line neuroscientific accounts of victim indubitability.[7] To think beyond this dichotomy, I look to lament scholar Rebecca Saunders, who, in her work on lament and trauma in modernity, highlights the role of the professional mourner: "Women skilled at lament performance and at evoking grief responses in others—[who] have been employed since antiquity…[and] readily testify to the necessity of focusing on personal pain in order to acquire the requisite emotion for performance."[8] What Saunders argues, and I accord with this line of thinking, is that such "deliberative concentration" in lament performance on one's historical encounters with suffering is "not unlike that deployed clinically to induce re-enactment of a traumatic scene."[9] Saunders's account echoes that of scholars of the ritual lament who describe lament scenes as meticulously calculated performances, not as spontaneous outbursts of anguish.[10] In this way, Saunders proposes that "lamentation is performative…It is quite possible that performativity…is conditioned by the nature of trauma itself."[11] In other words, by underscoring that the relationship between trauma and women's lament is mutually dependent, Saunders explains that

[7] My notion of performativity follows Schechner's concept of "twice performed behavior," in particular in his distinction between ritual performers who are transported rather than transformed ("Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed," 96).
[8] Rebecca Saunders, *Lamentation and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy, and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 46.
[9] Ibid., 47.
[10] Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).
[11] Saunders, *Lamentation and Modernity*, 46–47.

trauma calls upon the lament to make pain perceivable and the lament form calls upon the inherent performativity of traumatic recitation to turn it into art.

The theoretical orientation of trauma performance supports this project as it emphasizes the fundamental performativity of pain found in lament performance, over and above a mourner's personal experience of suffering. Trauma performance also allows that sensations tied to historical suffering are valuable in executing a well-performed lament, not because such feelings give the audience a raw picture of who the vocalist really is, but rather because these emotions can assist an artist in creating a moving performance.

Plaintive Vocality

In thinking about the *voicing* of trauma in lament performance, certain sonic markers are expected. In my case, while a handful of critics understood the project of my album *No Sun*, there were others that felt the sound of my voice was incongruous with the sorrowful narrative that accompanied the record. In their minds, I did not sound sad enough. In one lukewarm fan review, the author states that my vocals felt too subdued or controlled for music that chronicles suffering: "It's an elegant record, but for such an intimate document of one of the lowest points of a woman's life, I feel surprisingly little interiority."[12] Put in different terms, the commenter believes a female lamenter's vocality should demonstrate what they recognize as proper interiority, and that the amount of interiority expressed thereby determines musical worth.

But how is such interiority musically signified? I use the term *plaintive vocality* to designate vocal qualities that listeners assume to be musically indicative of a singer's personally felt suffering. Such characteristics are often used by listeners to corroborate a singer's emotional

[12] "*No Sun* by Nite Jewel," Rate Your Music, accessed March 5, 2025, https://rateyourmusic.com/release/album/nite-jewel/no-sun/.

authenticity and thus help determine a lament performance's success. I challenge the belief that vocality can verify a singer's personally felt experience. Rather, I contend that the specific quality that is heard as plaintive is not one overarching attribute, but a host of qualities that become ideologically attached to particular genres, differ from singer to singer, and change over time. For example, in pop music, this could at any point in time be the sound of roughness, creak, or whisper, and in ritual lament contexts, shrill timbres, expressive breathing, and stylized sobbing. Ultimately, the point I seek to convey is that plaintive vocality arises from vocal techniques and artistic choices that merely contain the possibility to determine how a lamenter actually feels.

Sometimes what is understood as plaintive may be present in a lament performance, and sometimes it may not be. This is because plaintive vocality is foremost a stylistic choice on the part of a lamenter to utilize vocal techniques that convey particular affects and formulate a musical point of view—one that may or may not have to do with their sense of self. Ultimately, I consider plaintive vocality as not a rigid projection of sonic expectations built on ideologies of authenticity but rather a conceptual orientation towards pop lamenters that is continuously mutable, open to modification depending on the musical and cultural context.

Sad Songs

The last key theoretical aim of this dissertation is to conceptualize an ontology of *sad songs* in popular music. To guide this process, I look to the formative definitions of women's lament in the ethnomusicological literature. While some lament scholars have taken a positivist approach to defining lament as a purely ritual practice, disavowing its significance as a wider musical

phenomenon in popular or art music,[13] others stretch the bounds of such narrow classifications. In my research, I draw from the understanding of lament proposed by poet and Greek literature scholar Gail Holst-Warhaft and ethnomusicologist Steven Feld. These authors formulate lament as: a woman-specific practice,[14] "a form…on the borders of speech and song," "a cultural expression of emotion," a composition or performance of an established and shared poetics, a musical form that "gives voice to metaphors of transition," and a form in which "tears become ideas," that is, in which a lamenter's emotional displays denote larger ethical, sociopolitical, or metaphysical constructs.[15] In line with this flexible conceptualization of lament, I also follow Saunders's formulation of lament as not a genre, but a "mode," "a manner, a disposition, a red thread woven through other texts and discourses."[16] Such a capacious definition allows for the merger of the study of lament ritual with the art tradition, a linkage of musical practices that have long worked in tandem to inform one another, exemplified by, as Saunders describes, "Greek tragedy, Arabic poetry, and Irish narrative, [which] for example, all draw on the lament tradition and influence it in turn."[17] The connection between lament in art music and ritual practice has also been foregrounded in musicological research that documents how Roman interpretations of Greek tragic texts from the eighth century BCE found renewal in scholastic contexts in medieval

[13] James M. Wilce, *Crying Shame: Metaculture, Modernity, and the Exaggerated Death of Lament* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani* (University of Chicago Press, 1991). For work specifically on the genre of lament as an oral folk tradition, see Lauri Honko, "The Lament: Problems of Genre, Structure and Reproduction," and Aili Nenola-Kallio, "Two Genres for Expressing Sorrow: Laments and Lyrical Songs in Ingria," both in *Genre, Structure and Reproduction in Oral Literature*, ed. Lauri Honko and Vilmos Voigt (Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980).
[14] For research that counters lament as women-specific, see Ann Suter, ed., *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2008). While Saunders points to a few studies of male laments in North Africa and the Arab world, she nonetheless argues that even in these traditions, women are largely viewed as holders of lament practice, despite the presence of male vocalists (*Lamentation and Modernity*, 46).
[15] Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (Routledge, 1992), 15–16, in conversation with Feld.
[16] Saunders, *Lamentation and Modernity*, 50.
[17] Ibid., 49. See also Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*. Alexiou has also detailed how women's laments in ancient practice existed as a mixture of classic and vernacular forms, with more traditional musical structures (e.g., AA, BB, CC, DD) framing improvised vocal declamation (*The Ritual Lament*, 131–32).

Europe, as well as in the neoclassicist revival of the Baroque period, with a variety of librettists and composers drawing from these classic texts.[18] Following these scholarly threads, I likewise bridge the gap between ethnomusicological and musicological understandings of lament by showing how in the global pop music landscape, lament divas engage in this very dialogue between art music and ritual. My conception of sad songs follows the elastic ontology of women's lament as defined by Holst-Warhaft and Feld, which is guided by a matrix of attributes that denote the fundamental function of this music as a shared processing of pain as well as an empowered mode of female artistic expression.

Literature Review

As I approach the study of women's lament from the consideration of how grief is expressed, mediated, and received through pop singers' voices, I build on scholarship in lament studies, trauma studies, and voice studies. As stated, my primary goal is to position the pop lamenter as a trained performer of sorrow, rather than a woman merely lamenting her own fate. For this reason, I focus first in this review on those ethnographic studies of women's lament that highlight the position of the female professional mourner. I show how scholars examine the professional role of the female lamenter in two principal ways: one, through a lamenter's clear professional, elite, or paid status, and two, through the elaborate performative nature of lament, which requires emotional and professional distance.[19]

[18] Jan M. Ziolkowski notes how there was a "widespread use of women's laments as a basis for school exercises" from the ninth to twelfth centuries. "Women's Lament and the Neuming of the Classics," in *Music and Medieval Manuscripts: Paleography and Performance*, ed. John Haines and Randall Rosenfeld (Routledge, 2004), 146. See also Leofranc Holford-Strevens, "'Her Eyes Became Two Spouts': Classical Antecedents of Renaissance Laments," *Early Music* 27, no. 3 (1999): 379–94.

[19] In this review, I primarily focus on lament studies of the Mediterranean, particularly in Greece; however, I also draw on studies of women's lament in Ireland, Russia, Finland, and Africa. Other significant studies not directly covered in this introduction, however pertinent to the themes of this dissertation, include: Lila Abu-Lughod, "Islam and the Gendered Discourses of Death," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1993): 187–205; Kofi V.

In her landmark study on ancient Greek laments, or *moirolói*, Margaret Alexiou traces the lament's origins to ancient ritual practice. Alexiou uses the term "professional mourner" to indicate women hired to sing arranged poetry (*thrênos*) as distinct from a mourner mother or wife, who would perform improvised wailing (*góos*) to accompany the soloist.[20] According to Alexiou, professional mourners were those women who acquired the unique skill set to execute the mourning ritual—a multistage musical-dance performance from wake to funeral procession to tomb.[21] Alexiou further outlines how these archaic lament practices have survived in modern communities. In Macedonia, for example, Alexiou notes that "lamentation in some areas was considered such a professional art that it was consciously cultivated among certain families, and the skill was handed down from mother to daughter."[22] Such a special or elite status for the

Agawu, "Music in the Funeral Traditions of the Akpafu," *Ethnomusicology* 32, no. 1 (1988): 75–105; Kamran Scot Aghaie, ed., *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam* (University of Texas Press, 2005); Susan Auerbach, "From Singing to Lamenting: Women's Musical Role in a Greek Village," in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Ellen Koskoff (University of Illinois Press, 1989); Catherine H. Berndt, "Expressions of Grief Among Aboriginal Women," *Oceania* 20, no. 3 (1950): 286–332; Jane Bowers, "Women's Lamenting Traditions: A Survey and Some Significant Questions," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 2 (1998): 125–46; Charles L. Briggs, "'Since I Am a Woman, I Will Chastise My Relatives': Gender, Reported Speech, and the (Re)Production of Social Relations in Warao Ritual Wailing," *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 2 (1992): 337–61; Steven Feld, "Wept Thoughts: The Voicing of Kaluli Memories," *Oral Tradition* 5 (1990): 241–66; Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Duke University Press, 1990); Barbara L. Hampton, "Music and Ritual Symbolism in the Ga Funeral," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 14 (1982): 75–105; Adrienne Kaeppler, "Poetics and Politics of Tongan Laments and Eulogies," *American Ethnologist* 30 (1993): 474–501; Marcello Sorce Keller, "Expressing, Communicating, Sharing and Representing Grief and Sorrow with Organised Sound (Musings in Eight Short Segments)," Colloquium "One Common Thread: The Musical World of Lament," April 20–22, 2011; Bledar Kondi, *Death and Ritual Crying: An Anthropological Approach to Albanian Funeral Customs* (Logos Verlag, 2012); Anne E. McLaren, *Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Judit Szitó, "Metaphors and Metonymies for Death and Grief in Hungarian Laments from the Upper-Tisza Region," in *Cultural Linguistics and (Re)conceptualized Tradition: Past in Present*, ed. Judit Baranyiné Kóczy and Veronika Szelid (Springer, 2024); Greg Urban, "Ritual Wailing in Amerindian Brazil," *American Anthropologist* 90, no. 2 (1988): 385–400.

[20] Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament*, 6; 132. Also in Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*.

[21] According to Alexiou, the wake (*próthesis*), a formal performance where the majority of lamenting would occur, was a scene that "must have resembled a dance, sometimes slow and solemn, sometimes wild and ecstatic" (*The Ritual Lament*, 6). At the final stage at the tomb, Alexiou indicates that dramatic choreography on the part of the lamenter incorporated self-flagellation, in which "the woman then lays her offerings on the tomb and begins her supplication, either kneeling down in earnest prayer with her right arm outstretched, or standing with the right arm in the same position and the left tearing her loosened hair" (ibid., 8).

[22] Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament*, 41.

lamenter and her craft is also underscored by historian Angela Bourke in her research on modern-day Irish funeral laments, or *caoineadh*. Bourke similarly explains that professional mourners are commonly hired to perform these laments and lead the ritual in the event that no one in the immediate family is able to perform (for lack of skill or emotional wherewithal). These professionals, according to Bourke, are paid in "salt, tobacco, whiskey, or occasionally in cash,"[23] and seen as performing "a social service."[24] Other scholars of modern ritual laments use terms like "lead" or "chief" lamenters to describe the female mourner's status. While in these studies there may be no record of paid mourners, such scholars nevertheless show that particular female lamenters seen to have the most technical prowess are the ones charged to oversee the performance of ordered lament, despite their lack of kinship status.[25]

The concept of professionalism is further shown by lament scholars in how a chief mourner often does not share a direct kin relation to the dead, and as a result, they do not experience the grief themselves directly. As a result, they have a sense of emotional detachment and professional distance in their performance that contributes to the lament's impact. In her study of the lament in Greek literature and folk culture, Gail Holst-Warhaft describes the process of how when the mourners, or *moirologhístres*, are able to perform a lament of someone they are not close to, they "will deliberately focus on some private suffering to acquire the necessary *ponos* [pain] for a performance."[26] Margarita Mazo also notes how in rural Russia, the comportment of the professional mourner in relation to their lament practice contrasts that of the amateur. While family members and villagers often resist documentation of their lament practice,

[23] Angela Bourke, "More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry," in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan Newlon Radner (University of Illinois Press, 1993), 162.
[24] Ibid., 166.
[25] See Seremetakis, *The Last Word*; Elizabeth Tolbert, "Women Cry with Words: Symbolization of Affect in the Karelian Lament," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 22 (1990): 80–105.
[26] Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*, 109.

professional lamenters, on the other hand, are "willing to lament on request and to be recorded. They can even be interrupted in the middle of a lament and then carry on lamenting without discontinuity in the verbal content, mood, or emotional involvement."[27] In the same vein, in Pamela Blakely's 1993 PhD dissertation on the funeral rituals of the Hemba people of Zaire, she details how chief mourner Katarina Musoga, who leads during a particular juncture in a *musuusa* funeral event, sings *originally composed* songs. Blakely notes that Musoga, as a professional artist of sorts, channels the kin relations that she does not actually share, adding that she feels "compassion" rather than the "anger and sorrow" of the directly affected families of the deceased.[28] According to Blakely, Musoga's successful performance of grief requires emotional distance, as typically laments also act as an important form of negotiation and reconciliation within the community.[29] Overall, these scholars demonstrate that while the lamenter must summon the emotion necessary to perform grief in a manner intelligible to the community, more often than not, they do not personally experience the same feelings of loss.

Artist Taryn Simon addresses the thorny role of emotion in lament practice in her performance installation work, *An Occupation of Loss* (New York, 2016). Simon commissioned a collection of over thirty professional mourners from around the world to exhibit their work within a semicircle of eleven large concrete towers inspired by Zoroastrian "Towers of Silence."[30] Simon's exhibition underlines the similarity yet versatility of global lament practice, as well as its inherent performativity. She says, "I was looking at the space that grief and loss

[27] Margarita Mazo, "Lament Made Visible: A Study of Paramusical Elements in Russian Lament," in *Themes and Variations: Writings on Music in Honor of Rulan Chao Pian*, ed. Bell Yung and Joseph S. C. Lam (Harvard University Press, 1994), 166.
[28] Pamela Blakely, "Performing Dangerous Thoughts: Women's Song-Dance Performance Events in a Hemba Funeral Ritual (Republic of Zaire)" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1993), 64.
[29] Ibid., 65.
[30] Included in the exhibition were laments originating from, for example, the Armenian Yazidi, Northern Albania, the Wayuu of the Guajira Peninsula, Epirus, Greece, and the Han Chinese.

generate and how it is performed, and that line between something that is scripted and authentic. Is there a space where one actually has individual emotion? Where are our emotions governed and part of a program and when are they liberated and something of our own?"[31]

Figure 2. Mourners inside one of Taryn Simon's monoliths

Simon's installation work illustrates, on a grand scale, the musical languages and professional skill sets that comprise a diverse array of lament performance, as well as the emotions such performances necessarily provoke in spectators. Like this project, hers also contains a central curiosity regarding the relationship between performativity and authenticity in lament practice.

While lament scholars commonly explore how lamenters hold a professional or at least elite status, underscored by the ability to effectively perform grief, an attendant concern of researchers is the paradoxical dynamic of power that frames lament practice, in which female

[31] "Taryn Simon's 'An Occupation of Loss,'" Park Avenue Armory, September 13, 2016, 2 min., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JM_1tKc55d8.

lamenters attain an empowered social position, yet within highly patriarchal societies. In the ancient tradition, scholars examine evidence that indicates how, in sixth century BCE, women's public mourning rituals were restricted by political leaders in Greece and Asia Minor due to their perceived ability to raise powerful sentiments in the public.[32] Greek and Roman studies scholar Nancy Sultan examines how repressive legislations against these rituals were enacted by ancient Athenian lawgivers, for example, by Solon, who "forbade women's performances of 'composed dirges,'" and Plato who remarks that "'ideal lawgivers' would prohibit public outcries at funeral processions."[33] Sultan goes on to say that "these decrees by men suggest highly that the women's laments contained language that was perceived as politically threatening, especially to the patriarchal democratic institutions of Athens."[34] In modern studies, a vestige of these ancient preconditions is examined as a lived experience of patriarchal villages in rural societies. In Anna Caraveli-Chaves's work on the female professional mourners of the Greek island of Dzermiathes, she formulates women's lament as communicative event and a tool for "critical and creative thought" that bonds a socially oppressed female subculture and reinforces "strategies for survival."[35] Caraveli-Chaves indicates that these lament rituals work not only to assist the community through mourning, but simultaneously bring to light the social hierarchies that unite subordinate female collectives by acting as a way to air social grievances.[36] Similarly, Elizabeth

[32] See Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament*. Also in Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*; Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning* (Cornell University Press, 1998).
[33] Nancy Sultan, "Private Speech, Public Pain: The Power of Women's Laments in Ancient Greek Poetry and Tragedy," in *Rediscovering the Muses: Women's Musical Traditions*, ed. Kimberly Marshall (Northeastern University Press, 1992), 11.
[34] Ibid. See also Saunders, in which she attests that "lamentation, in its femininity, is also thereby primitive, animalistic, a threatening inversion of *logos*: of the speech and reason which are the foundation of the *polis* and which distinguish one from the barbarian" (*Lamentation and Modernity*, 55).
[35] Anna Caraveli-Chaves, "Bridge Between Worlds: The Greek Women's Lament as Communicative Event," *Journal of American Folklore* 93, no. 368 (1980): 130.
[36] Ibid., 138. Similarly, Bourke notes how Irish women's lament rituals act as safe space to "transmit a rhetoric of resistance to male domination," by disguising messages that critique "men's violence and stinginess," discernable by a female subculture ("More in Anger," 161).

Tolbert in her study of the wedding and funeral laments, or *itkuvirsi*, of Eastern Finland and Soviet Karelia describes that while the lead lamenter maintains a privileged role in the community, nonetheless such laments also operate as "dissenting opinions" or social critique on the part of a subordinated female community.[37]

Somewhat by contrast, C. Nadia Seremetakis challenges what she sees as simplistic notions of agency dependent on a gender binarism common to many studies of women's laments. She allows that there is a gendered dynamic within lament practice in that women are seen as holders of the cycles of birth and death, and, in this way, women are viewed almost supernatural in their ability to oversee these transitions. And she also notes that some of women's laments are antagonistic to the men in the community and their political interests, or act as complaints regarding women's roles as second-class citizens.[38] However, she argues that within the overall picture of Maniat culture, women's roles are more fluid, wherein Maniat women are able to "code-switch" not only between public and private and urban and rural, but between subject and subjected.[39] While many feminist lament scholars tend to emphasize the empowered position of female ritual mourners within patriarchal societies, Seremetakis's study reminds us that not all laments should be seen as political thought-acts against male dominance as means of making sense of female agency.

The concern about a lamenter's agency and relative position of power in the ethnomusicological literature is also a point of inquiry in the musicological discourse on women's lament. Musicologists consider how the female archetype in opera, similar to the professional mourner—the tragic diva—performs painful feeling that is often reflective of

[37] Elizabeth Tolbert, "Magico-Religious Power and Gender in the Karelian Lament," in *Music, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Marcia Herndon and Susanne Ziegler (Florian Noetzel Verlag, 1990), 41.
[38] Seremetakis, *The Last Word*, 127.
[39] Ibid., 5.

patriarchal contexts of their lived experience. These authors ask whether the operatic lamenter expresses agency, or rather, exists as an object of communal relief or entertainment. Specifically, feminist opera debates surrounding women's lament performance raise questions regarding whether or not relishing the infliction of the tragic diva's suffering may be seen as regressive or an indoctrination of patriarchal ideals.[40] A scholar at the forefront of this discourse is Suzanne G. Cusick, who takes up the subject of power of female agency in her various works on Claudio Monteverdi and his *Lamento d'Arianna*.[41] In these articles, Cusick argues that famous musical laments of this period utilized particular musical techniques to express misogynistic cultural attitudes that objectified women and their voices in a dehumanizing way. Cusick posits the *Lamento d'Arianna* as the most prototypical: "virtually creating the lament as a recognizable genre of vocal chamber music and as a standard scene in opera."[42] She analyzes Federico Follino's account of the 1608 performance of *L'Arianna*, in which during the lament scene all the women supposedly wept, and proposes that this public display of emotion demonstrates an acknowledgment of the reality of oppressive social conditions for women, furthermore indicating how Monteverdi manipulated musical rhetoric to "[articulate] symbolically the permissible limits of female sexual choice."[43] Cusick argues that this piece exemplifies how women's lament of the seventeenth century functioned as an expression of patriarchal ideology, in which "female suffering—female castigation…became beautiful…[and as the lament] was gradually gendered feminine, the musical (and the literary) genre of the lament allowed the whole of early modern

[40] See Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
[41] On Monteverdi, see Suzanne G. Cusick, "'There Was Not One Lady Who Failed to Shed a Tear': Arianna's Lament and the Construction of Modern Womanhood," *Early Music* 22, no. 1 (1994); Suzanne G. Cusick, "Gendering Modern Music: Thoughts on the Monteverdi-Artusi Controversy," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46, no. 1 (1993); Suzanne G. Cusick, "Re-Voicing Arianna (and Laments): Two Women Respond," *Early Music* 27, no. 3 (1999).
[42] Cusick, "Arianna's Lament and the Construction of Modern Womanhood," 21.
[43] Ibid., 36.

society to displace the suffering of forced submission onto women."[44] In other words, through the symbol of Arianna, Cusick proposes that women's lament became a musical scene that functioned to undermine women's agency and further a chauvinistic culture. This important and controversial paper sparked a special issue on laments in *Early Music* featuring articles that directly responded to Cusick's claims.[45] These scholars critiqued Cusick in various ways: in situating the lament's patriarchal context historically,[46] in denying the authenticity of Follino's account,[47] and in drawing out the lineage of neoclassicist influence in the Baroque lament scene.[48] Nonetheless, Cusick continued to hold that women's laments necessarily perpetuated symbols of female pathology and denied female performers' autonomy. Cusick, in line with Susan McClary's critique of Monteverdi, went so far as to question the very ethics of using these musical constructions at all.[49]

Feminist preoccupation with lament scenes in opera studies has fixated on whether the portrayal of women in the genre is inherently regressive, contextually regressive, or not regressive. Some scholars argue that the portrayals are rather progressive—focusing on the glimmers of agency present in operatic performance despite such scenes of "feminine undoing" (per Catherine Clément). For example, Bonnie Gordon addresses Cusick's analysis of *L'Arianna*, arguing that "women struggle against the restrictive conditions within which they represent themselves, and by doing so produce a powerful cultural expression which in turn inspires patriarchal restraint. Even with their unfortunate ends, these stories do not simply deliver a litany

[44] Ibid., 37.
[45] Laments, *Early Music* 27, no. 3 (1999).
[46] Tim Carter, "Lamenting Ariadne?," *Early Music* 27, no. 3 (1999): 395–405.
[47] Anne MacNeil, "Weeping at the Water's Edge," *Early Music* 27, no. 3 (1999): 406–17.
[48] Holford-Strevens, "Classical Antecedents of Renaissance Laments," 379–94.
[49] See Cusick, "Re-Voicing Arianna (and Laments)"; McClary, *Feminine Endings*.

of silenced and raped women but rather present women who talk, or ultimately sing, back."[50] As such, Gordon posits women's lamentations as modes of resistance.[51] Mary Ann Smart summarizes Carolyn Abbate's multiple contentions in line with Gordon's view when she states that for Abbate, "opera is a genre that so displaces the authorial musical voice onto female characters and female singers that it largely reverses the conventional opposition of male (speaking) subject and female (observed) object."[52] For Abbate, composer dependence on the feminine voice signals female empowerment. Further discussions regarding opera singers' agency both on and off the stage have also been examined by way of the privilege of diva status, the ubiquity of arias distributed to star singers, and attendant economic privileges.[53] While scholars may fall on either side of the debate regarding opera's at least superficially misogynistic impulses as it relates to women's lament performances, this tension belies the fundamental nature of the operatic genre: "that its performers exercise power most effectively through performances of abject powerlessness."[54] In sum, these musicological studies consider whether one can assign a sense of agency to a tragic diva within such performances of feminine helplessness, grief, and demise.

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[50] Bonnie Gordon, *Monteverdi's Unruly Women: The Power of Song in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60.
[51] Ibid., 81.
[52] Mary Ann Smart, "Introduction," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 15.
[53] See ibid.; Peter Brooks, "Body and Voice in Melodrama and Opera," in Smart, *Siren Songs*; Roger Parker, "Elisabeth's Last Act," in Smart, *Siren Songs*; Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (W. W. Norton, 2012); Emily Wilbourne, "'Isabella Ringiovinita': Virginia Ramponi Andreini before 'Arianna,'" *Recercare* 19, no. 1/2 (2007): 47–71. See also Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, eds., *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Here, the authors examine the artistic expressions of the female courtesan, a somewhat parallel art form to women's lament in that it operates in "a complex marginality," which indicates "a dynamic of privilege and constraint that forces a rethinking of the gendering of power" (6). It is important to note, however, that such perceived modes of female empowerment must be taken simultaneously with the historical reality of women's secondary status socioculturally during the height of opera's influence. It would be unfitting to use the language of emancipatory feminism as equivalent to "marketplace" feminisms, that is, individual women's upward mobility in the service of broader commercial enterprise (Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* [PublicAffairs, 2016]).
[54] Heather Hadlock, "Opera and Gender Studies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 264.

To further unpack the performativity of grief in women's lament, I look to where theaters of emotional suffering have been historically studied, that is, in clinical therapeutic scenes and in psychoanalytic studies of trauma. In *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys demonstrates how the notion of performativity has divided trauma studies into two primary camps, between those scholars who hold that dramatization is a necessary aspect of a patient's recounting of traumatic events,[55] and those who believe that a patient's reproductions of trauma, in memories and narrative accounts, are veridical copies of traumatic experience.[56] This schism arose from a history in which clinical studies of trauma traditionally relied on female subjects,[57] and early Freudian models consistently focused on and were troubled by the degree of confabulation within female victims' testimony.[58] It was assumed by Sigmund Freud that a lack of complete truthfulness to recount scenes of trauma on the part of the victim was a necessary part of traumatic recitation; however, this view had the vexed consequence of "victim blaming," seen by later feminist trauma scholars as particularly geared towards questioning female victims of domestic trauma.[59] In the 1980s, the post-traumatic stress model concretized by psychoanalyst Bessel van der Kolk sought to find a way out of the issue of the unreliability of traumatic memory by promoting neurobiological verificationist models of trauma, based in the notion that

[55] See Sigmund Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria," in *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*; Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*; Sándor Ferenczi, *The Clinical Diary of Sándor Ferenczi* (Harvard University Press, 1995); Mikkel Borch-Jacobson, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford University Press, 1988).
[56] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (Penguin Books Limited, 2014).
[57] In her genealogy of trauma theory, Ruth Leys outlines how, beginning in the twentieth century at the dawn of trauma research, "the hysterical female epitomized the shattering effects of trauma on the mind." *Trauma: A Genealogy* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.
[58] I use the word *confabulation* here, known in psychoanalytic contexts as where deceit is not intended, as opposed to *fabrication*, in which there is an intention to mislead.
[59] Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Basic Books, 1992); Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," *American Imago* 48, no. 1 (1991): 119–33.

such memories could be measured by physical imprints on the brain and body.[60] This framework for understanding traumatic testimony, which currently dominates contemporary thinking, promotes the idea that a victim never engages in deceit, but rather that traumatic memory is fundamentally indubitable, formulated through victim narratives and flashbacks, which are understood as accurate replicas of past events. While this model for understanding traumatic testimony as always genuine and verifiable operates from the well-intentioned aim in psychological settings to assume that patients are never complicit with the violence they experience, it unfailingly creates a false binary between victim and perpetrator that denies unavoidable engagement in dramatic license.[61]

In engaging trauma theory, I propose that this deep-seated psychological boundary between victim and perpetrator in understanding traumatic testimony influences musical audiences to create a similarly false dichotomy in their minds between performer and author in contexts of musical lamentation—the former is purely emotive (pure, true), the latter, cognitive (dramatized, false). In this way, listeners may perceive a given lament scene as a literal reproduction of the vocalist's traumatic experience, or they may question the authenticity of a performance based on a vocalist's capacity for theatricality. Female lamenters, then, may regularly engage in forms of artifice in their work, but will often be gauged by audiences on account of the honesty of their portrayal, thrusting a lament performance into a moralistic frame in which the veracity, as opposed to the artfulness, of the performance, is overly valued.[62] But while pain communicated through the voice may trigger listener belief that the performer summons an authentic testimony of the self, I propose that any traumatic recitation must entail

[60] Bessel A. van der Kolk, ed., *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Psychological and Biological Sequelae* (American Psychiatric Press, 1984).
[61] Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, 299.
[62] See Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Cornell University Press, 2001).

forms of performative imitation of unspeakable events. Specifically, it is the creation and performance of laments in popular music that skirts this conceptual division in trauma studies, as a vocalist must always act from a position of simultaneous unrestricted emotionality *and* detachment, much like a professional mourner would in lament ritual.

Rebecca Saunders underscores the point that the powerful musical execution of grief within lament practice draws from the inherent performativity of trauma. In fact, she reiterates, lament and trauma are interdependent,

> The language of lamentation cannot simply record catastrophe, but must speculatively construct it. The traumatic moment is thus simultaneously phenomenal and rhetorical, recorded and produced by the language of lamentation; and the language of lamentation is simultaneously representational and performative, both a record, and the creation of the traumatic moment.[63]

Such "speculative construction" of painful experience—or perhaps the "artmaking of trauma"—is one way to best understand a lament performance as, at base, a trauma performance.

Despite the fecundity of utilizing the performative nature of trauma to better understand women's lament practice, it is rather the verificationist model of traumatic testimony that primarily influences modern understandings of a lamenter's artistry, demanding authenticity from vocalists at the expense of their sense of authorship. This dissertation responds to musicological scholarship that attempts to verify trauma as heard in the voice.[64] Such authors assert that pop musicians' voices construct traumatic experience for listeners by way of vocally sounding their autobiographical experience. While helpful inquiries into how trauma intersects

[63] Saunders, *Lamentation and Modernity*, 47.
[64] Mary Lee Greitzer, "Queer Responses to Sexual Trauma: The Voices of Tori Amos's 'Me and a Gun' and Lydia Lunch's *Daddy Dearest*," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 17 (2013): 1–26; Fred Everett Maus, "Sexuality, Trauma, and Dissociated Expression," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner, and Joseph Straus (Oxford University Press, 2015).

with studies on the voice, these accounts contrast the aim of this project, in that these authors attempt to verify their given subject's personal trauma through signs of plaintive vocality, rather than proceeding from the understanding of the fundamental performativity of pain and mutability of voice. This dissertation engages trauma theory to better understand the complexity of how spectacles of suffering have been historically analyzed in the field, which will assist in the study of performances of grief within the lament art form.

As stated, recent music scholarship that explores sad songs and trauma attempts to verify a performer's personal suffering as heard in the voice. I instead approach the intersection of lament and trauma from the perspective of plaintive vocality as a performative tool. I do this by engaging scholars in voice studies who highlight vocal technique, pedagogy, and organology in contrast to narratives of performer authenticity. In ethnomusicological lament literature that examines voice quality, some researchers construe plaintive vocality as a matter of technical skill or artistic style, while others fall prey to ideologies that construe these vocal attributes as indications of a singer's inner life or instinct. In the ancient tradition, scholars mention vocalizations of shrill shrieking, wailing, and stylized sobbing, expressed by the Greek word *leiono*—literally, "to melt down."[65] Audible breathing is also a characteristic of lament noted by scholars of the ancient ritual, such as Holst-Warhaft, who underlines the significance of intake of breath in lament performance. She proposes that "since soul and breath are synonymous in Greek culture (being out of breath, dying and losing one's soul are all conveyed by the single word *xepsyhisménos*), manipulations of breath in laments may carry additional emotional weight."[66] Similarly, in modern lament studies, we see numerous researchers using a variety of terminology

[65] Sultan, "Private Pain," 19. Also in Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," in *Glass, Irony and God* (A New Directions Book, 1995); Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament*.
[66] Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices*, 70.

to describe plaintive vocalities.[67] Mazo, for example, observes that a primary distinctive feature of Russian lament is voice quality and timbre, supplemented by pitch "articulation" and "temporal modulation" (vibrato). She situates these vocal procedures under the heading of "intoning," made up of "vocal gestures similar to natural sounds of weeping and crying: excited speech and exclamations, the apocope, trembling voice, audible breathing, rests filled with sobs, sighs, gasps, and so on."[68] She suggests that intoning is what makes lament culturally identifiable. Tolbert also describes the importance of timbral qualities in the Karelian lament, which are accompanied by what she calls "micro-tonal" techniques (shaking, vibrato, sliding) and "micro-rhythmic variations."[69] Similar to Mazo, Tolbert indicates that "cry breaks," "high-shrieking" falsetto, creaky voice, and audible inhalation are all important factors in lament performance.

While the above researchers construe plaintive vocalizations as matters of technical skill or style, some studies of lament practice fall prey to ideologies of plaintive vocality as indications of a vocalist's authenticity. This is true in Seremetakis's work, in which her belief about plaintive vocality relies on the fallacy that the more the execution of this vocal technique is done well, the more it is thought to reflect some pain the singer directly experiences. This is why she argues that "in [lament] rites, the vocalization and physical display of pains…achieve a formal status as biographical testimony and oral history."[70] Seremetakis links emotional authenticity to vocalizations of stylized weeping, shouting, and, in particular, screaming, which she links to a lamenter's "truth-claiming" or truth of experience.[71] Yet, Seremetakis finds herself

[67] In nearly every study on modern women's lament, there is some description of plaintive vocalities that relate to wailing, weeping, or crying with words. See note 19 for a selection.
[68] Mazo, "Lament Made Visible," 173.
[69] Tolbert, "Women Cry with Words," 80–105.
[70] Seremetakis, *The Last Word*, 5.
[71] Ibid., 119–20.

at odds with this theoretical orientation when she briefly describes the Maniat mourner who failed to scream: "She was one of those mourners who did not scream but displayed loss and tenderness for the dead with controlled movements and subdued tones. She sang in a low voice as if talking to a child who was sleeping."[72] In observing this mourner, who "displayed a depth that brought tears to my eyes," Seremetakis must concede that "women have different styles of mourning."[73] Despite her initial contention that lament must engage specific vocalizations that signify a lamenter's inner suffering, this mourner poses a challenge to that view, by showing how plaintive vocality in lament practice is more than a visceral outpouring, but rather, a performative technique that each lamenter may modify to suit their practice.

In popular music study on sad songs, plaintive vocality is more inexorably connected to emotional authenticity. In Laurie Stras's work on vocal damage, she observes that popular singing is characterized by the sound of "damage to the vocal tract."[74] Unlike classical singing, where the ideal is a smooth and controlled vocal character absent of aberration, pop singing is idealized as "disrupted," identified by timbral language like roughness, husk, creak, and whisper.[75] Stras proposes that in pop music, the sound of vocal damage is utilized by singers to express particular states of feeling, and thereby convey a sense of authenticity for listeners (i.e., the truth of the singer's personal emotion).[76] In fact, for Stras, the damaged voice serves as a physical manifestation of a singer's personal trauma or adversity.[77] Although it is clear that Stras

[72] Ibid., 109.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Laurie Stras, "Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect," in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Joseph Straus and Neil Lerner (Routledge, 2006), 174.
[75] For more on such vocal timbres from a psychoacoustic perspective, see Jody Kreiman and Diana Sidtis, eds., *Foundations of Voice Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Voice Production and Perception* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). Kreiman outlines how "breathy voice has been associated with intimacy and sadness…and creak has also been associated with 'victim voice' that communicates desperation and neediness" (322).
[76] Stras, "Organ of the Soul," 174.
[77] Ibid., 176.

believes that such testimony on the part of the vocalist is performed by way of stylistic choices, she simultaneously posits the timbre of damage as a ratifying factor for listeners in ascertaining whether a pop singer expresses authentic emotion. Put differently, vocal damage acts as a sonic mirror of a vocalist's inner states.[78]

Such linkage between plaintive vocality and a singer's personal emotion is problematized by Nina Sun Eidsheim, in which she questions listeners' fundamental belief that they can utilize timbral identifications in the voice as a means to constitute a vocalizer's essence, or in my formulation, authenticity.[79] In her study of Billie Holiday, Eidsheim tracks how Holiday was speciously constructed as an archetypal Black tragic female figure who supposedly recounted her personal tragedy through the sound of her rough and degraded voice.[80] Eidsheim attributes this in part to erroneous listener preconception of *the autobiographical voice*. According to Eidsheim, "Under this interpretation, the specific meaning derived from the voice depends on alignment between autobiography and timbre. While there is no doubt that the physical voice is affected by material and emotional life circumstance, [*autobiographical voice*] is a direct projection of particular kinds of [victimized] circumstances…onto vocal timbre."[81] Eidsheim argues that listeners enact such projections because timbre is considered stable and possible to know a priori. As a result, listeners may assume that vocal timbre can serve as proof of a singer's personal suffering, and consequently can be utilized to determine whether a pop singer's performance is

[78] For more on "damaged" or non-normative vocalities and authenticity, see Diane Pecknold, "'These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice': Valuing and Vilifying the New Girl Voice," in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music*, ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (Routledge, 2016); Jessica A. Holmes, "Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023): 785–829; Licia Fiol-Matta, *The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music* (Duke University Press, 2017).
[79] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), 154.
[80] Ibid., 157.
[81] Ibid., 156.

properly executed. However, for Eidsheim, vocality is a learned and enculturated process, dependent more on listener perception than on a performer's selfhood.[82] Extending Eidsheim's formulation, I argue that while the commonplace understanding of plaintive vocality is that such sonic markers act as authenticating mechanisms of a lamenter's true self, they are in fact vocal techniques that are culturally mitigated, mutable, and stylistically associated with types of sad songs as well as the types of women that sing them.

Methodology

This dissertation methodologically engages archival research, musical and audiovisual analysis, as well as practice-based research. Using practice-based methods to inform my collection of archival data and bolster my analysis proves critical to this study, as my positionality as a performer-composer of sad songs within the public arena proves distinctive when investigating lament performance and the attendant techniques used by lamenters in the practice of singing, songwriting, and production. Thus far in the field of lament study, women's lament has been predominantly analyzed by scholars who have observed and documented from outside of the experience of direct practice.

I also utilize archives of published criticism in periodicals, online commentary in the form of audience reception, as well as published artist interviews and album liner notes. In collecting data from online and print journalism as well as online fan discourse, I am able to locate receptive patterns within critical and audience response. By examining artist interviews and liner notes that accompany each album's release, I can trace each lamenter's creative thought processes in the making of their work. Such research helps to underscore the labor that each

[82] See also Katherine Meizel, "A Powerful Voice: Investigating Vocality and Identity," *Voice and Speech Review* 7, no. 1 (2001): 267–74.

lamenter underwent in the making of their albums, the network of actors involved, as well as what each artist chose to share with their audiences about their creative practice. Because of my position as a professional recording artist within the music industry and a subject of public discourse, I am able to use my direct experience in this professional realm as a way to inform, order, and analyze this archival data.

Finally, I employ in-depth music analysis, using a blend of Western tonal theory, jazz harmony, voice analysis, lyric analysis, as well as examination of production and engineering techniques, which I compliment with visual interpretations of accompanying film clips, music videos, and concert videos. This analysis is deepened through a practice-based lens. My analysis of vocal technique, for example, is informed by my pursuit of online vocal pedagogy in the genres in which my case studies practice. In my study of flamenco, for example, I have taken classes with flamenco pedagogues and studied the art form through online tutorials, in order to better understand the techniques used by Rosalía. Practice-based methods also afford me the understanding of what collaboration looks like in a professional recording studio environment. For many outside of the pop music industry, the making and recording of a commercially released album is an opaque process, however, in my case, it is an environment in which I am intimately familiar. In my study of Björk, I am able to extrapolate my own knowledge from professional studio environments with my own team of engineers, producers, and instrumentalists in order to more fully comprehend her working process. I am also able to use my experience making a number of music and performance videos as a way to recognize visual coding, choreographic details, and the aims of art direction embedded in my case studies' visual oeuvre. This multimethod approach allows me to deepen my understanding of each lamenter's

work by engaging multiple points of investigation which together help to reveal layers of meaning that might otherwise remain obscured.

Chapter Overview

Each chapter in this dissertation conceptually builds on the previous, illustrating a particular theoretical concept central to this research that then works to inform the following chapter. As stated, this is done by analyzing misinterpretations that pervade reception specific to each case study, and highlighting each pop lamenter's professional mourning practices that, in different ways, act as interventions into this discourse and forms of feminist communication. For each chapter, I trace the historical lineages of genre and style particular to each artist's album in order to demonstrate where the work resides within specific musical cultures. For instance, I present historical discussions of tragic opera, smooth jazz, and flamenco, among others, to better understand in which communities these artists emerged and with which musical languages they engaged. Each chapter also relies on a selection of bespoke theoretical scholarship guided by the concept of women's lament and curated to address the specificity of each lamenter's work.

In chapter 1, I examine the film, music, and surrounding reception of Lars von Trier's tragic opera–inspired film *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), in which Björk starred and wrote the music. I compare this work to Björk's counter-text, *Selmasongs*, the separate soundtrack album she crafted in response to losing creative control over the film's music. This chapter on Björk demonstrates how a tragic character that a lamenter portrays can be easily collapsed with her selfhood. While Björk sought to be seen as a composer and method actor, director Lars von Trier and many in the press alternatively cast her as an amateur and an emotive vessel, indistinguishable from the tragic protagonist of Selma. Von Trier's public characterization of

Björk, and the resultant critical responses, not only show how deeply lodged authenticity is to the reception of pop lamenters' work, but also how patriarchal forces may wield this very notion to undermine female artists' craft. By contrast, I employ the theoretical framework of trauma performance alongside both historical and music theoretical analysis to show how in her protest statement of *Selmasongs*, Björk contested von Trier's chauvinistic vision, specifically through engagement with the folk lament art form of the lullaby.

Chapter 2 features Rosalía's 2018 *nuevo flamenco* album *El mal querer*. Through examination of this album, I build on the notion of trauma performance, similarly critiquing the reductive patriarchal ideology of authenticity central to flamenco and stressing the performativity of the pain of lament. However, I add to this, further investigation into plaintive vocality and the controversial role it can play in lament practice. I show how historically in flamenco plaintive vocality has been posited as an authenticating mechanism of a performer's personal suffering tied to the legacy of the Gitano community of Andalusia. For Rosalía, however, as an outsider to this culture, plaintive vocality of flamenco operated instead as a set of techniques learned in music conservatory, which she adapted into her personalized flamenco-esque style. As a result of her global success and depiction in the media as a resuscitator of the art form, a heated conflict emerged in Spain as she was seen by flamenco purists as contrived, and her vocality, as diluted or bastardized. While acknowledging Rosalía's privileged position, I nonetheless utilize historical materials and recent developments in scientific flamencology on the voice to show how criticisms of Rosalía's work largely stem from an ideology of authenticity deeply tied to chauvinistic constructs of flamenco and Spain at large. On *El mal querer*, Rosalía artistically addresses Spanish patriarchy, using the lament as a feminist statement against the chauvinism of flamenco, and thereby contesting its ideology of authenticity.

Finally, in the third chapter on Sade, I add to this theoretical context the role that genre bias plays in definition and reception of sad songs. I analyze two separate albums by Sade (1984 and 2000) and show how critical preconceptions in the media—built on ideologies of plaintive vocality—led to Sade being typecast as either a vacant sex symbol or a victim of suffering, despite her deployment of sorrow songs that were agentic and political in nature. I propose that operating in the background to assess Sade's lamentations were genre prejudices based in racist and misogynistic impulses. This chapter is primarily concerned with showing how Sade's work expands current definitions of what sad songs can be, imploring the reader to consider how delimiting contours of lament practice via unspoken preconditions related to genre can easily fall into narrow-mindedness. Specifically, in this chapter, I employ Black feminist theoretical frameworks, such as Uri McMillan's theory of the "avatar"[83] and Amber Jamilla Musser's analytic of masochism,[84] to better comprehend the nuanced affective signs that Sade employs to both address and bond with her collectives as well as express artistic agency.

[83] Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York University Press, 2015).
[84] Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York University Press, 2014).

Chapter 1: Whose Pain?: Björk as Selma in Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*

> Even when art produces the sensation of having presented something "as it really is," it does so by means of…a complicated procedure one could describe as using artifice to strip artifice of artifice.
>
> —Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty* (2011)

Content warning: This chapter includes still images from a fictional scene of an execution.

Dancer in the Dark (2000) is independent filmmaker Lars von Trier's last installment of what he has called the "Golden Heart Trilogy," inspired by a Danish fable that presents the female martyr "in the most extreme form."[85] This archetype fascinated von Trier enough to create three films—*Breaking the Waves* (1996)*, The Idiots* (1998), and *Dancer*—each focusing on the drawn-out demise of a saintlike female lead. Björk served as von Trier's muse for *Dancer,* the sole musical melodrama of the set. He originally conceived of the idea for Björk's involvement in the film after seeing the Spike Jonze–directed video for her breakout single, "It's Oh So Quiet" (1995), which draws its influence from American musical theater.[86] At first, Björk was to only compose for the film, but von Trier persuaded her that the only way to fully realize the music would be for her to star in the role of protagonist Selma herself.[87] The unusual entanglement of superstar Björk as composer and diva for the musical film under authority of von Trier fostered a complex web of dueling aims in the film, its music, and its hypertexts.

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[85] John Rockwell, "Von Trier and Wagner, A Bond Sealed in Emotion," *New York Times*, April 8, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/08/movies/film-von-trier-and-wagner-a-bond-sealed-in-emotion.html.
[86] Lori Reese, "Björk Explains the Conflict over 'Selmasongs,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, October 31, 2000, https://ew.com/article/2000/10/31/bjork-explains-conflict-over-selmasongs/.
[87] Björk, "Why She Decided to Act," Webchat, June 22, archived December 22, 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20071222180117/http://www.bjork.com/facts/about/right.php?id=629. Quoted in Pascal Rudolph, "Björk on the Gallows: Performance, Persona, and Authenticity in Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*," *Journal of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (2020): 27.

Critical reviews and the cult of fandom around *Dancer* almost unilaterally extol the film's power to conjure intense sadness. A weeping spectatorship was, self-admittedly, von Trier's central directorial motivation,[88] which he achieved through the merging of Björk with the character of Selma, using various artistic and promotional tactics. Von Trier benefitted from this collapse, as it discarded the *mimetic* layers inherent in Björk's performance, giving the film more emotional impact through a stronger sense of audience identification with the central character—to see Björk, the beloved superstar, as an innocent victim of brutal circumstance is a special atrocity for the viewer. Von Trier capitalized on particular aesthetic constructs in order to realize this effect: through the casting of pop star Björk, knowing her performance could be read as a presentation of her authentic self;[89] by drawing on the narrative and musical tradition of opera, its tragic heroine and emotive laments, which frame the female vocalist as a carrier of passions; and in delivering statements to the press that undermined Björk's artistry.

Björk attempted to influence public perception about her performance through interviews as well as through the release of a self-standing soundtrack album, *Selmasongs*, for which she negotiated complete creative control. On the album, Björk offered a distinct vision for Selma, evinced by changes in the vocalists, lyrics, and track listing, which produced markedly different versions of *Dancer*'s main laments. For these songs, Björk supplemented the stylistic confines of tragic opera with the art form of the lullaby and omitted the final lamentation piece set to Selma's hanging. By utilizing a music characterized by maternal knowledge as opposed to feminine demise and by leaving out Selma's excruciating death lament, Björk attempted to divert von Trier's dogged pursuit of fatalistic female martyrdom. Additionally, these alterations to the

[88] Lars von Trier, "DANCER IN THE DARK - Interview Lars von Trier," CloserTV: A Behind the Scenes Channel, August 23, 2018, 10 min., 21 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzZHFVxs5HA.
[89] This is the primary thrust of Rudolph's argument in "Björk on the Gallows."

soundtrack had the effect of highlighting Björk's position as the film's composer-librettist, thereby artistically distancing herself from the Selma character. She pursued this line in interviews as well, in which she framed her role in *Dancer* as not merely an outlet for von Trier's machinations, but rather as essential in crafting the film's overall narrative effect. Björk's alternative accounts in both the press and on *Selmasongs* were meant to elevate her studied performance of Selma and emphasize her authoritative musical role, so that audiences could better understand her performance as a deliberate portrayal of Selma's painful story, as opposed to a window into her own lived experience.

Despite Björk's efforts to maintain her autonomy as composer-librettist of *Dancer*, audiences principally followed von Trier's narrative, which denied her co-authorship and undermined her artistry. Such audience response, I propose, is not solely due to von Trier's manipulative tactics, but is also informed by the context of how audiences tend to perceive women's laments in popular music as visceral presentations of a performer's personal experience. As stated in the introduction, although the lament is an art form historically associated with professional mourners employed to carry and perform the grief of others, contemporary audiences tend to read successful performances of sad songs in popular music as authentic—an echo of a vocalist's inner life as opposed to a product of her artistry. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely because of a female vocalist's expertise in performing laments that audiences assume she delivers a raw performance of her own personal sadness. My aim in this chapter is to show how Björk found herself caught in this bind; as the impact of her sad songs increased, audience perception of her artistic authority decreased. In this way, this case study will demonstrate the problematic centrality of authenticity to the reception of women's laments

in popular music, and how patriarchal figures may attempt to manipulate such expectations in a way that damages a lamenter's artistry.

First, I track how von Trier manipulated *Dancer*'s public discourse with the intention to overshadow Björk's agency, and how she worked against this. Second, I outline how the context of the pop musical drama, within the lineage of tragic opera, set the seamless context for von Trier to stage a reductive portrayal of both Björk and the character of Selma. Alternatively, through close reading and musical analysis, I demonstrate how Björk's alterations to *Dancer*'s music on her standalone soundtrack *Selmasongs* exhibited a sense of artistic empowerment through a distinctly feminist counterpoint. In this way, I show how Björk, as *Dancer*'s composer-librettist, utilized her independent soundtrack as a means to rewrite von Trier's narrative and enact her authorship. Finally, I account for how, despite Björk's compelling counterevidence, von Trier's elision of her role as co-author dominated public perception. I do this by contextualizing preconceptions of the female lamenting voice at work in this case study, drawing from scholarship on women's vocality as well as the history of female testimony.

The Battle for Selma

Set in Washington State in the 1960s, the martyr story of *Dancer* follows Björk as Czech immigrant Selma Ježková, who, due to a hereditary disease, is gradually losing her eyesight. She works at a hazardous factory job in order to raise money for her twelve-year-old son Gene's (played by Vladica Kostic) eye operation, so he does not fall victim to her fate. Amid these bleak conditions, Selma finds joy in musical theater. Throughout the film, the drab diurnal narrative is interspliced with song; these are the moments when the world opens up and Selma is able to escape to the fantasy of music and live the life of the theater of her dreams. In musical number

"Cvalda," Selma hears the imposing machinery at the automobile parts factory where she works take on the rhythmic regularity of a mechanized percussion section. As the rhythm coalesces, Selma sings ebulliently, "Clatter, crash, clack!" and invites her coworkers to dance. Singing to her friend and coworker Kathy (played by Catherine Deneuve), Selma insists, "It's music! / Now dance!" Her words are then accompanied by a celesta playing a whole-tone scale in C major, inviting associations with childlike dreaming and imagination.

Despite Selma's ability to make the best of a grim situation, things start to unravel, as she loses her job due to her eye condition. One evening, she retreats to her trailer that she rents from her neighbor, local policeman Bill Houston, who, unexpectedly confesses to her that he is deeply in debt. Inspired by his vulnerability, Selma admits her blindness and how she has been saving money for her son's operation. Armed with this knowledge and aware of Selma's inability to see him, Bill pretends to leave her room, only to stay and witness where Selma hides her savings in order to steal it. When Selma later confronts him, he pleads with her to put him out of his misery and take back her money, to which, shockingly, she does, shooting Bill with his own gun and then running to the doctor to pay for Gene's surgery. Selma's life continues to devolve; due to her excessive virtue, she refuses to tell the truth of what happened so as not to betray Bill's confidence nor reveal her selflessness, thus leaving herself to be convicted of the crime of murder and sentenced to death. In the end, when Selma is sent to the gallows, the music becomes entirely diegetic, her strained singing mapped to the colorless drama as the rope is wrapped around her neck—the melody cuts as the noose snaps. Though the narrative contains contrasting worlds of the real and the musical, offering Selma a degree of depth to her life, her existence otherwise charts a teleological path in which a "golden-hearted" woman is tortured and sacrificed by a ruthless world.

In an interview after *Dancer*'s release, von Trier was asked about his motivation to create such a film: "To take things as seriously as you do in an opera," he answered, "Some years ago, people really cried at operas…I would love to feel that much for someone who's been killed with a cardboard sword."[90] Von Trier's goal of inducing weeping through musical drama was furthered by *Dancer*'s public discourse, in which audiences' consensus around the film's profound emotionality coincided with Björk's seeming authenticity. In a review by Edward Guthmann, he remarked, "Bjork [*sic*], who had never acted before, is extraordinary as Selma—not in spite of her inexperience, but because of it. She has none of the calculated shtick of a professional, and gives us a defenseless, spontaneous, and impeccably honest performance."[91] Critics tended to inaccurately pin Björk's performance of Selma as powerful due to her lack of acting experience, despite the fact that she had acted before, in the films *Glerbrot* (1987), *The Juniper Tree* (1990), as well as in a cameo in the 1994 Robert Altman film *Ready to Wear*.[92]

Musicologist Pascal Rudolph primarily attributes public perception of Björk's performance in *Dancer* as raw to strong audience expectations of authenticity that accompany a pop star's status. He draws from performance theorist Philip Auslander's concept of "musical personae," and describes how musicians uniquely perform a persona of personal identity—"a person's representation of the self within a discursive domain of music."[93] So, while Björk presents to audiences a construction of the real person Björk Guðmundsdóttir—a mediated presentation of her artist identity—audiences may nonetheless identify with what they believe is

[90] Von Trier, "Interview Lars von Trier," 2018.
[91] Edward Guthmann, "Bjork Dazzling in 'Dancer' / Von Trier Creates Musical Tragedy," *SFGate*, March 23, 2001, https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Bjork-Dazzling-in-Dancer-Von-Trier-creates-2939147.php.
[92] There is evidence to support that this rhetoric has influenced fan reception of Björk's performance in *Dancer*. See, for example, a recent thread on r/bjork, "How could Björk give such an amazing, stunning, deep, complex, realistic performance in 'Dancer in The Dark' as the lead actress with not much previous experience in making a movie or acting in this way?" accessed March 5, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/bjork/s/G1rn8f8in0.
[93] Auslander, "Musical Personae," 102.

her true personhood. Rudolph's article seeks to clarify that, from his point of view, "Björk's Selma *was* a performance," however, one "that seems to undermine its status as a performance due to its construction."[94] I expand on Rudolph's claim that Björk's performance in itself assumed an authentic construction by highlighting the insidiousness of von Trier's tactics to undermine Björk's performance as crafted. For the way in which Björk's acting chops were negated, coupled with the general lack of attention to her role as the film's composer, cannot be attributed to notions of musical personae alone. There was a concerted effort on the part of von Trier to undercut Björk's craft, found in promotional interviews for *Dancer*.

In an interview with von Trier that accompanied *Dancer*'s release, he places himself in a ventriloquist-like relation to Björk, asserting that she "says the lines I have written without knowing how."[95] He further contends that Björk's performance of Selma was "felt, and not acted."[96] In an interview with *The Guardian* he went even further to say, "Björk is not an actor. What was a surprise for me is that she seemed like a professional but she really isn't."[97] Von Trier's rhetoric became glued to reporting not only by journalists but by scholars as well, such as in Linda Badley's monograph, *Lars von Trier* (2011), in which she describes Björk's portrayal of Selma as "hysterical nonacting."[98] Von Trier's language is also found in Björk scholar Nicola Dibben's 2009 biography, where she says that "Björk's method of acting [in *Dancer*] meant that her performance was 'felt' rather than constructed."[99] In her semi-autoethnographic,

[94] Rudolph, "Björk on the Gallows," 35 (my emphasis).
[95] Von Trier, "Interview Lars von Trier," 2018.
[96] Ibid. Such rhetoric was also perpetuated by cast members. At a press conference in Cannes, co-star Catherine Deneuve said of Björk, "she cannot really act, she can only feel." Fiachra Gibbons, "Cannes Clashes Mirror Björk's Film Set Flare-Up," *Guardian*, May 17, 2000, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2000/may/18/artsfeatures4.
[97] Gibbons, "Cannes Clashes Mirror Björk's Film Set Flare-Up," 2000. Björk has discussed how the hierarchical dynamics between herself and von Trier in many ways mirrored the colonial history between Denmark and Iceland, perhaps contributing to their conflicted relationship. Evelyn McDonnell, *Army of She: Icelandic, Iconoclastic, Irrepressible Björk* (Random House, 2001), 20.
[98] Linda Badley, *Lars von Trier* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), 35.
[99] Nicola Dibben, *Björk* (Equinox, 2009), 15.

experimental biography of Björk, *Army of She*, journalist Evelyn McDonnell alleges that such talking points principally spread by way of *Dancer*'s press kit, in which such quotes by von Trier were circulated.[100]

By contrast, Björk's accounts of playing the role of Selma differed significantly from von Trier's. In several interviews that she conducted after the release of *Dancer*, she describes playing Selma, and creating music for the film, as a profoundly empathetic yet calculated observer. Björk is careful to clarify that while she felt for Selma's suffering and was inspired by it, it was nonetheless a pain not her own.[101] In these interviews, Björk emphasizes how her dual role as composer and actor allowed her the opposite of naïveté, rather, an ability to understand Selma in a more nuanced manner than von Trier.[102] In this sense, Björk portrayed her process as not a matter of instinct, but rather as a deliberate method of artistic preparation and intention.[103] McDonnell underlines Björk's position, "Selma is not Björk. There are obvious stylized traits Björk developed for the role, such as pushing up her glasses, feeling for objects she can't see."[104] Like Björk's description of how she understood Selma without becoming her, McDonnell describes this as, "one oddball's empathy for another."[105]

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[100] McDonnell, *Army of She*, 47. This makes sense, as it is standard practice in promotional campaigns accompanying film and music that the press may uncritically rely on and lift from press kits to compose reviews and articles, leading to multiple authors utilizing near-identical language.
[101] "'Dancer in the Dark': Björk Interview," *Hollywood.com*, September 25, 2000. In "Björk on the Gallows," Rudolph highlights statements from Björk that seem to undermine her own acting abilities (28). Despite Björk's self-effacing nature, we must remain skeptical, as there is more evidence to support Björk's fierce dedication to the preparation for the role of Selma as well as to composing the music for *Dancer* (see McDonnell, *Army of She*).
[102] "[Björk] believed she knew the character [of Selma] better than [von Trier] did, that 'he felt she was quite a silly woman and a stupid victim, martyr for sure.' I felt she had a lot of depth and she might not be an intellectual, but I think she was very wise." John Clark, "An Anti-Musical's Anti-Star," *Los Angeles Times*, September 10, 2000, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-sep-10-ca-18438-story.html.
[103] Björk's approach to the Selma character draws from what is known as "Method acting," based on the principles of Russian director Konstantin Stanislavski, which allows an actor to "authentically experience the emotions and psychology of [a] character while maintaining control over the results." Isaac Butler, *The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act* (Bloomsbury, 2022), xiv.
[104] McDonnell, *Army of She*, 75.
[105] Ibid.

How Björk's and von Trier's readings could have produced such disparate accounts of Björk's performance of Selma could be explained by returning to von Trier's central motivation: to make audiences cry. Aware of the reductive nature of his position, Björk attempted to disrupt von Trier's narrative, not only in counterclaims in the press, but notably, in the struggle over the music for *Dancer*, where the power dynamics and conflicting visions between Björk and von Trier are acute. Unlike in her past work in which she only collaborated on with poet Sjón on lyric writing, with *Dancer*'s music, Björk allowed contributions from von Trier. The collaboration was not smooth; halfway through the production, Björk left the set due to her compositions being cut and altered by von Trier and set to picture without her consent.[106] To secure her return, von Trier was obliged to sign a contract giving Björk complete creative control of the official soundtrack, *Selmasongs: Music from the Motion Picture "Dancer in the Dark."* On *Selmasongs*, Björk made a series of modifications in order to amend Selma's fate.

In a 2000 interview with Ann Powers in *The New York Times*, Björk explained that her intention regarding changing aspects of *Dancer*'s music for the album *Selmasongs* had to do with seeing Selma differently than von Trier: "For Selma, her ears stood for fantasy. So I decided it would be more complete if the record was just how she would like things to be, not how they are…It would be more true to Selma to have it be her dream come true."[107] Outside of central laments "I've Seen It All" and "Scatterheart," we can see Björk's differing perspective particularly evidenced by the omission of "The Next to Last Song," the diegetic piece set to Selma's hanging. A clue to this exclusion in *Selmasongs* can be found in a separate interview, in which Björk indicates she was against the final sacrifice of Selma. "We had different ideas about

[106] Reese, "Björk Explains the Conflict over 'Selmasongs,'" 2000.
[107] Ann Powers, "Making a Tragedy with a Happy Ending," *New York Times*, September 17, 2000, https://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/17/movies/film-making-a-tragedy-with-a-happy-ending.html.

who Selma really was," she says, "I wanted her to be more of an artistic character but Lars, who is a complete fanatic, wants his roles to suffer, especially the female ones. I couldn't really accept that…All the time he just wanted more and more dreadful things to happen to her and in the end she is even executed. I thought that was a bit too simple, a bit too easy."[108] While von Trier's impetus for the music was to motivate the drama in order to fulfill the narrative in a one-way path to Selma's ultimate sacrifice, Björk composed her music with the intention of giving Selma an unrestricted future.

The conflict between von Trier and Björk does not end there, but goes further to demonstrate the particularly gendered power dynamics embedded within these exchanges. After the release of *Dancer* in 2000, much was made about Björk being "difficult" on the production set. Rumors such as her "eating her blouse" in defiance of von Trier's directions were run by the press, and perpetuated by von Trier.[109] Such false accusations were meant to equivocate legitimate forms of disobedience on Björk's part with her supposed insolence, such as taking control of *Dancer*'s soundtrack, being framed as diva behavior. However, in 2017, it came to light that the reality of life on set with von Trier might have been closer to the opposite. In the spirit of #MeToo, Björk recounted in a 2017 Facebook post her experience of being sexually harassed by a Danish film director, later learned to be von Trier on the set of *Dancer in the Dark*.[110] Von Trier denied her accusations, to which Björk responded with even more sordid detail.[111] Here, Björk refuted the stories of her being difficult and argued that it was instead she who was harassed. She further claimed that rumors were fed to the public by von Trier's team in

[108] Marcel Anders, "Björk Speaks Out About the Making of 'Dancer in the Dark,'" *Zero*, January 1, 2000, https://www.bjork.fr/article1140.
[109] "Björk 'Eats Blouse' in Movie Protest," *Guardian*, May 5, 2000, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2000/may/05/news3.
[110] Björk, Facebook, October 15, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/bjork/posts/10155777444371460.
[111] Ibid.

order to drum up press for the film and make her appear unhinged. Later, an internal investigation by the Danish government exposed a disturbing culture of sexual harassment and abuse endemic to von Trier's production company, Zentropa.[112] This context reveals how both the working dynamic and the creative conflict between Björk and von Trier existed within a structure of patriarchal control.

In what follows, I further examine the power struggle between Björk and von Trier by looking at how their differing artistic aims played out in *Dancer*'s music. I first analyze the film version of *Dancer*'s music, overseen by von Trier, which draws from the tradition of tragic opera, and second, I look to Björk's separate soundtrack album, *Selmasongs*, which utilizes tropes from the lullaby, or as I term it, maternal lament.[113] I will show how the lament lineages embedded within these two bodies of work can be interpreted as indicators of von Trier's and Björk's conflicting artistic objectives. I analyze how the narrative and musical conventions of each lament lineage—and the women who sing them—uncover a gendered power struggle underlying *Dancer* and *Selmasongs*. Considering these two lineages side by side will allow us to see Björk's musical moves as means to deter her merger with Selma, a method to position herself as the film's co-author, and means to showcase the complexity of Selma's situation from an artistic distance. In contrast, von Trier's operatic troping affects the opposite—to situate Björk as

[112] Anne Mette Lundtofte, "The Dark Side of Zentropa's Provocative Workplace Culture," *New Yorker*, December 19, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-dark-side-of-zentropas-provocative-workplace-culture.

[113] As Luisa Del Giudice points out, a central lullaby type is one in which the mother "laments her condition or the human condition" (Luisa Del Giudice, "Ninna-nanna Nonsense? Fears, Dreams, and Falling in the Italian Lullaby," *Oral Tradition* 3 [1998]: 271). Similarly, Margaret B. McDowell addresses how lullabies act as vehicles for communicating a mother's "resentment or anxiety." She states, "the folk lullaby uninhibitingly expresses the complexities of a love that cannot be disassociated from tension, anxiety, and depression. Paradoxically the songs which purport to soothe and cheer an irritable baby provide release for the mother" (Margaret B. McDowell, "Folk Lullabies: Songs of Anger, Love, and Fear," *Women's Lullabies* 5, no. 2 [1997]: 205-206).

a spectacular conveyer of emotive song, a vessel for Selma's fate, and a marionette for his vision.

Von Trier's Opera Debt

Von Trier constructed the world of *Dancer* in order to incite his audiences to weep for the demise of his saintly protagonist by way of music, drama, and text; partaking of a lineage of spectacular female death and suffering, raised to canonic heights through the opera tradition. To operate within this tradition ensured von Trier a certain dramatic effect, demonstrating, as Lauren Berlant has described, "the agency of *genre* to provide the logic of rescue."[114] That is, von Trier's narrative motivator of the victimized female archetype furthered normative constructs of submissive and fragile femininity, thereby ensuring a heightened degree of emotional impact.

In his statements about *Dancer*'s relation to opera, von Trier cited his forebears, whose works comprise a tradition where the capacity of the unique relationship between music and words to inspire intense emotion is regarded as the art form's driving force.[115] This is particularly true of the operatic lament, which, as stated in the introduction, became a standard showcase piece for lead sopranos and tenors in the beginning of the seventeenth century. Not long after, however, the genre of lament fell out of fashion and was subsumed into aria form, meant to delineate more general dramatic action of the protagonist at specific moments in the narrative, marking significant turning points, for example, towards madness or death.[116] By the nineteenth century, musical displays of suffering became calcified into climaxes of feminine demise in

[114] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2008), 18–19.
[115] Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2012).
[116] Ibid., 61.

particular, epitomized in popular consciousness by Giacomo Puccini. Such narratives of lamentation common to tragic opera were meant to promote *cathartic* reactions in audiences in order to provide a sense of tension, release, and restoration. The mainstreaming of grand, tragic opera also meant that standard narratives were invoked as the industry formalized, with classic tales of betrayal, murder, sacrifice, sin, war, etc., often through a historical or mythological lens.[117] These plots rarely wavered, until a gradual interest in realism in the arts found its way to opera, most notably with Puccini's narratives of everyday people in urban life, typified by *La bohème*, first performed in 1896.[118] Verismo was concerned with the inner lives of poor, marginalized characters, which tended to link the genre with depictions of conditions of brutality.[119] Such inescapable socio-economic contexts made central heroines even more pitiable, as female leads could not be faulted for sins of adultery, political betrayal, deceit, or like mechanisms made to justify the operatic femicides of the past.

With *Dancer*, von Trier mirrors Puccini's *La bohème*. Both paint a picture of a virtuous and naïve woman—a vaguely exotic lover of the arts—who is victimized by a battle with fatal illness and impoverishment. The melodramas center on the female protagonist's story of suffering, as the rest of the characters encircle her, either ignorant of or implicated in her anguish.[120] And in the final climactic death scenes of *Dancer* and *La bohème*, lines meant to be sung to music become entirely diegetic, or in Rodolfo's case, spoken, and dramatically break with musical accompaniment, bringing about a shocking sense of realism in the instance of the

[117] Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera*, 61.
[118] See Leon Botstein, "Music, Language, and Meaning in Opera: Puccini and His Contemporaries," in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, ed. Arman Schwartz and Emanuele Senici (Princeton University Press, 2016).
[119] Julian Budden, *Puccini: His Life and Works* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 178.
[120] Significantly, it is the men in *La bohème* who are portrayed as the foolish idealists that fail to rescue Mimì; a male archetype Puccini was known to reuse in other operas. Emanuele Senici, "Introduction: Puccini, His World, and Ours," in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, 11. This resonates with the male characters in *Dancer*, such as Bill the policeman and love interest Jeff, who each further Selma's suffering due to self-centered interests.

heroine's tragic ending. In *Dancer*, this scene occurs accompanied by "The Next to Last Song," sung a cappella during Selma's execution. At first hysterical and sobbing, Selma is prepared for the gallows in the hall of the jail before a small seated audience. She starts to calm as the sound of a heartbeat pulses in the background, singing diegetically to herself the romantic melody of the film's D-flat major overture, "This isn't the last song there's no violin / The choir is quiet and no one takes a spin." As Selma then begins to wordlessly sing the refrain, her voice abruptly stops and the rope snaps, the camera cutting to wide frame, settling on her bound and swinging body in silence, and carrying the film to its devastating close (**Figure 3**). This lament heightens the brutal slaying of Selma and functions as it would in a tragic opera, bringing about a profound emotional climax through a potent staging of a death lament as a dramatic finale. The key factor in the logic of verismo tragic opera is that the salvation of our female lead remains unendingly elusive, transforming audience experience into an anxious witnessing, which in the final moment of deliverance of her fate, causes us to weep.

Figure 3. Selma's execution scene

By contrast, *Dancer*'s main "aria" "I've Seen It All" is almost sentimental, inspired by classical romantic music traditions.[121] One can also hear overlap with nineteenth-century opera, with a number of marked similarities to Puccini's work, for example, Björk's utilization of urban soundscapes in her compositional framework, with the sound of trains providing the rhythmic backbone. Puccini is known for the technique of incorporating soundscapes to create sonic textures, in his integration of city clamor into the musical fabric of his operas, accentuating the noise of urban life as a part of the ambience of his orchestral bed.[122] In both composers' cases, the din of urbanity is utilized in the music to emphasize characters' societal position and bring a sense of social realism to the drama. "I've Seen It All" also bears resemblance to *La bohème*'s "Sì, mi chiamano Mimì," in how both arias serve to portray the female protagonist's matter-of-fact resignation to social misfortune. "I've Seen It All" begins within a scene in which Selma's love interest Jeff (played by Peter Stormare) becomes aware of Selma's blindness. "You can't see, can you?" he asks, as a train passes by on the bridge, "What is there to see?" says Selma. As the train's clacking turns into the rhythmic accompaniment for Selma's initial lines, the duet takes shape as a bittersweet lament, and in climactic moments of both arias, an overwhelming swell of romantic orchestration—in both instances by hanging on the subdominant—is positioned alongside ecstatic, and in Selma's case, wordless, lyricism, to emphasize a profound sentimentality. As in "Mimì," Selma in the end returns to the original refrain, while Jeff continues to express sympathy for the circumstance of her dwindling eyesight, to which Selma fatalistically replies each time, "I've seen it all." While seeming to take on the call-and-response

[121] In recounting the creation of "I've Seen It All" via her Instagram, Björk remembers, "at the time I was listening nonstop to 'pavane pour infante defunte' by Ravel. I got deeply inspired by the mood of it, the majestic grand humility is enormous!" @bjork, October 9, 2021.
[122] Arman Schwartz, *Puccini's Soundscapes: Realism and Modernity in Italian Opera* (Olschki, 2016).

structure of a "love duet," Selma's lament, similar to Mimì's, rather operates as an indication of the protagonist's submission to her fate and instills a "damsel in distress" logic at the heart of the melodrama.

The narrative of pity and rescue at the heart of the operatic lament is essential to the progression of *Dancer*'s story and its emotional impact. Furthermore, by positioning Björk as a kind of tragic opera figure, von Trier capitalized on particular ideologies related to the opera diva and her voice. For in the public imagination, the opera singer is consistently collapsed with the victimized persona she portrays, and her voice is perceived as a vessel for extreme dramatic effect infused with an alchemical formula devised by the composer and librettist.[123] Further, the opera diva is often assigned an uncanny, ineffable quality that idealizes the mysteriousness of her vocal power. We can see this line of thinking in opera literature meant to venerate the diva and center listeners' emotional attachment to her, however unintentionally sidelining the material realities of her craft.[124] The 1981 film *Diva*, directed by Jean-Jacques Beineix, explores this para-social paradigm through the story of fan-obsessive Jules (played by Frédéric Andréi), who illegally tapes a performance of opera singer Cynthia Hawkins (played by Wilhelmenia Fernandez, an opera singer herself), a diva who has long refused to be recorded. Hawkins rarely speaks throughout the film and is depicted as an enigmatic icon. At the end, she says to Jules, "I am not a diva, I am just a singer," emphasizing her humanity and her craft, and thereby breaking the spell of fandom that seeks to abstract her from the realities of her labor. Here, we see a shrewd portrait of an opera lover so consumed by the feelings surrounding their fandom that

[123] See Hadlock, "Opera and Gender Studies," 2012.
[124] See Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. Arthur Denner (Oxford University Press, 2008); Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 1993; Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 505–36.

their emotional investments overwhelm and violate the diva's practical undertakings, thereby obscuring her sense of agency.

For von Trier, the muddying of the diva's skill set is an advantage to the operatic frame. To motivate his audiences to "really cry" at his film, "to take things as seriously" as they once did in such foundational musical dramas, he culled from opera's tried and tested narrative methods and cultural discourse. Specifically, he drew from the tragic formula of the demise of the faultless female martyr, popularized by Puccini, and capitalized on the objectification of the opera diva in order to provoke audience catharsis.

Björk's Maternal Laments

For the film version of *Dancer*'s music, Björk, employed as von Trier's composer, followed his directorial vision of the dramatic portrayal of feminine helplessness.[125] However, by exercising her star power and securing control of the release of *Selmasongs*, Björk was able to provide a counternarrative to von Trier's through a number of alterations to *Dancer*'s central laments. Björk intended *Selmasongs* to not simply be "a soundtrack to the film, but rather…the realization of Selma's dream"[126]—a dream to create a better world for her son. Moreover, Björk's ability to shift the themes of *Dancer*'s music meant that she could rewrite not only Selma's future, but her own. For the release of the soundtrack highlighted her role as the film's composer, with the power to re-record and reimagine elements seemingly locked to picture. In other words, by

[125] A musical film composer-librettist (as opposed to a composer of a film score who is understood to write music to underscore predetermined film images) is traditionally considered a partner or co-author of a work. Richard Traubner, "Film Musical," *Grove Music*, 2001. Because of this, I analyze the music of *Selmasongs* within the context of von Trier denying Björk her position as an equal partner in the creation of filmic content, so much so that she felt it necessary to create a self-standing musical soundtrack to convey her vision for the film and re-instantiate her authorship.
[126] Björk, quoted in McDonnell, *Army of She*, 75.

extracting Selma from a one-dimensional position of a helpless victim, Björk could remove herself from that narrative as well.

At their core, both *Dancer* and *Selmasongs* are formulated by a series of laments that mark pivotal points in the drama and set up the emotion of the film. The songs "I've Seen It All," "Scatterheart," and "The Next to Last Song" act as significant signposts of the arc of Selma's fate and are noteworthy for their differences between the versions released on *Selmasongs* and the versions contained within the film. Such alterations and omissions help to distinguish the authorial ambitions of Björk and von Trier and reveal the divergent function of lament under each of their direction. As aforesaid, a primary conflict between Björk and von Trier concerned the ending of the film, specifically the end credits. Von Trier wished for the credits to roll in silence, making "The Next to Last Song," Selma's execution lament, the final musical piece of the film. However, Björk fought to have "New World"—the life-affirming and lyric-driven version of the film's E-flat major overture—to close the picture.[127] That way, instead of the memory of Selma's hanging, the audience could be left with an uplifting sentiment. On *Selmasongs*, Björk went even further with her utopian vision for Selma by omitting "The Next to Last Song" from the tracklisting altogether. Through this exclusion, Björk put forth a story of female anguish that did not require certain death. In its place Björk placed "New World," a song in which Selma marvels at the future; Björk sings, "If living is seeing / I'm holding my breath / In wonder, I wonder / What happens next? / A new world, a new day to see" over a triumphant brass section alongside electronic percussion.

Some changes Björk made to *Dancer*'s music were otherwise subtle. On "I've Seen It All," for example, she commissioned Radiohead front man Thom Yorke to replace Stormare and

[127] Dibben, *Björk*, 170.

then, with the assistance of producer Mark Bell, re-recorded the exchange between Selma and Jeff. Björk delegated Yorke, in his dulcet tone, to take on several of Selma's lines, as she took on a few of Jeff's, with the two singing in harmony for the main refrain, as opposed to Björk alone. These changes offer an indeterminate sense of who pities whom and give a sense of inter-continuity as well as ambiguity between the two characters that diverges from Selma's unequivocal fatalism in the film version. No longer encircling the cliché of a woman in unfortunate circumstance, the album version of this lament instead poses existential questions outside of a stereotypically gendered framework.

On "Scatterheart," we see pronounced changes that communicate nuanced maternal understandings, rather than feminine demise, in which the ominous death knell of the film version is reformulated as a lullaby for Selma's son. The song begins with the sound of the repeated clicks of a needle rotating on a turntable. Similar to "Cvalda" and "I've Seen It All," Björk takes a mechanized sound from the outside world and turns it into a backing rhythm (here, in 3/4 time). In this instance, Björk samples near microscopic tones and meticulously places them in time. This production technique—referred to by her as "microbeats"—was central not only to the making of *Dancer*'s music, but also to her album *Vespertine* (2001) for which she was producing work simultaneously on her laptop.[128] On "Scatterheart," the rhythmic clicks of the turntable are then accompanied by a music-box sample in G-sharp Dorian,[129] giving a dreamlike feeling as Björk sings, "Black night is falling / The sun is gone to bed / The innocent are dreaming / As you should, sleepy head." This opening section gives the listener an initial

[128] Dibben, *Björk*, 79. Also in Björk, host, *Sonic Symbolism*, podcast, season 1, episode 4, "Vespertine," Mailchimp, September 8, 2022, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/vespertine/id1641171534?i=1000578800520.
[129] This could either be a music-box recording that is chopped up or a music-box sound re-created through MIDI. Björk has said during her work on *Vespertine* that she composed her music-box melodies in Sibelius (music notation software), which she then "carved" into an oversized music box she had specially made for the recording process. Still, she at times reverted back to the MIDI software or blended the two music-box sounds in order to produce a unique digital-analog texture. *Sonic Symbolism*, "Vespertine," 2022.

sense of being lulled to sleep, but quickly shifts into a pulsing, dark descent to F-sharp Dorian, with a groove of scattered electronic percussion, walking sub-bass, and a string arrangement.

In the film version of *Dancer*'s music, the lullaby turns into a recounting of the murder of neighbor and policeman Bill. Björk sings to a resurrected Bill alongside wife, Linda, "I killed your man," to which they respond, "You are forgiven / They'll take your money / Run for your boy." Selma's son Gene sings the repeated refrain: "You just did what you had to do," a line that provides a summation of the plot; that Selma had to murder Bill in order to pay for Gene's operation. Similar to the function of recitative in opera, this song's function in the film version is to move the storyline along, despite the awkwardness of lyrical phrasing. Björk attributed such inelegance to von Trier's contribution to the libretto, "I felt that Selma has got a lot of poetry in her…Lars wanted the lyrics to be more like, 'pass me the salt' and 'call the police.'"[130] The clumsiness of this musical number reflects the strained collaboration between Björk and von Trier—her need to acquiesce to musical ideas she did not agree with due to the hierarchal stance of the director-composer relationship.

In the *Selmasongs* version of "Scatterheart," the descent to F-sharp Dorian out of the music-box melody takes on a different shape: instead of an appeal to the dead, it is a motherly call for comfort. Björk altered the lyrics and re-recorded the entirety of the voice parts with her own voice. In the verses, instead of her conversation with Bill, she sings to her son Gene, "All the love above / I send into you / Comfort and protection / I know the future / I'd love to read you the way / Just to make it easier on you." Additionally, in the chorus, Björk sings as opposed to Gene, "You are gonna have to find out for yourself." In the film version, due to Kostic's wavering pitch, this line exists in an ambiguous tonal area somewhere between F-sharp minor

[130] Powers, "Making a Tragedy with a Happy Ending," 2000.

and F-sharp Dorian, and gives a sense of uneasiness. However here, Björk decisively sings as Selma in F-sharp Dorian—a mother strongly delivering a message of consolation to her son. While in the film version, "Scatterheart" functions to advance the drama and portray Selma as victim of circumstance, on *Selmasongs*, Björk modifies the music to posit Selma as a wise maternal figure.

By using tropes of maternal lamentation, Björk complicates von Trier's patriarchal logic of female submissiveness. As a long-ritual practice, the maternal lament, or lullaby, has allowed women to say what is otherwise unsayable, and has been characterized by scholars as a distinctly female art, "a vehicle for expressing…a feminine worldview."[131] The lullaby is a song for putting children to sleep, in private spaces where men are sometimes prohibited, due to either engrained cultural practices, or more severely, restrictions on women's public expressions.[132] In some cases, scholars regard lulling the child as somewhat incidental to the function of the music, as the lullaby strongly appears as a mode for women to express a complex matrix of emotions such as maternal love and angst, the realities of female hardship, and the mother's attendant stoicism. For this reason, women's studies scholar Margaret B. McDowell characterizes lullabies as "work songs for mothers."[133] Björk's use of the maternal lament functions in two ways: first, it allows for expression of a multitude of emotions beyond simple dejection, as the lullaby is a mode of both emotional release and endurance; second, it offers the character of Selma a sense of agency, for her lullaby intends to comfort her child in a time of hardship, indicating a position of maternal empowerment.

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[131] Luisa Del Giudice, "Ninna-nanna Nonsense? Fears, Dreams, and Falling in the Italian Lullaby," *Oral Tradition* 3 (1998): 271.
[132] Sara Manasseh, "A Song to Heal Your Wounds: Traditional Lullabies of the Jews of Iraq," *Musica Judaica* 12 (1991): 5.
[133] Margaret B. McDowell, "Folk Lullabies: Songs of Anger, Love, and Fear," *Women's Lullabies* 5, no. 2 (1997): 210.

Attuning ourselves to Björk's musical alterations—her refining of melodic ideas, commissioning and recording new vocalists, rewriting lyrics, and discarding of certain tracks altogether, helps us understand the minutiae of what she had to practically undertake to ensure these changes were committed to record. Furthermore, in order to make *Selmasongs* a reality, Björk had to stage a protest on the set of von Trier's film, knowing that this would not make her popular with her cast and crew and would leave her vulnerable to accusations of misbehavior by von Trier and his public. Yet, for Björk, to be able to implement these alterations to *Dancer*'s narrative was worth the sacrifice if it meant communicating her vision for Selma and taking back her authority over the film's music. Additionally, Björk's modifications had the effect of highlighting her role as *Dancer*'s composer-librettist, thereby delineating herself as an agent distinct from Selma, in charge of sculpting an alternative version of the film's narrative. In this way, *Selmasongs* acted for Björk as a creative act of artistic self-preservation.

Nonetheless, despite Björk's efforts and strength of her counterevidence, audiences found themselves in an interpretive bind when the two artistic perspectives between Björk and von Trier collided in the public realm. In the minds of spectators, Björk as a victimized and tragic conveyer of sadness and Björk as an empowered artist could not both be true. I propose that the former characterization, which critics and audiences predominantly chose to believe, is largely informed by both enculturated understandings of female voices and their artistic limitations, as well as psychocultural beliefs about testimonial recounting by female victims of trauma.

Women's Voices, Voicing Trauma

As outlined in the introduction, audience expectations of women's lament performances are informed by two major interpretative components: the sound of the female voice, and the voicing

of suffering, or as I see it, trauma. Scholars of women's vocality in ancient Greek lament practice have analyzed the historical perception of female lament performance as a threat to political order, due to lamenters' seemingly supernatural ability to raise powerful sentiments in the public by convening with the dead. Poet and classicist Anne Carson has further addressed how ancient philosophers even mapped certain vocalities to women in order to limit their liberty. She examines the gendered nature of ancient ritual shriek referred to as *ololyga*: "Aristotle tells us that the high-pitched voice of the female is one evidence of her evil disposition…We will find the ancients continually at pains to associate [the voice] under a general rubric of gender."[134] Feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero argues more broadly that, at bottom, prelinguistic voice (*phōnē*) in ancient Greece was mapped to the female gender with philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle organizing the conception of *logos* (language) around the constraining of *phōnē* as a mirror to the patriarchal order.[135] According to these scholars, unhinged or emotional vocalities were seen to exemplify the ineffable nature of the feminine. I view contemporary audiences as bringing this historical baggage with them in their listening practices. Like Homer's sirens, women's voices are heard as otherworldly, wild, even nefarious. In the case of Björk, the widely held perception within critical and scholarly discourse and within her fandom that her voice is untamed or untouched by artifice can be examined according to this historical and ideological context.[136]

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[134] Carson, "The Gender of Sound," 119.

[135] Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford University Press, 2005).

[136] Some interpretations of Björk's vocality as raw and authentic are also insidiously linked to her being read as ambiguously raced. According to Dibben and McDonnell, Björk was pejoratively called "China girl" in her youth; racialized commentary that carried through to early journalism about her work in which she was, for example, described as a "cross-eyed chanteuse" and an "elfin woman-child" (McDonnell, *Army of She*, 21). The link between Björk's seemingly raced characteristics and her authenticity is also found in a review of *Dancer* in *Slate* when David Edelstein asserts, "With her Asiatic-masklike features and untraceable accent…she makes you believe this character's queer wavelength might actually be real." "*Dancer in the Dark* Review," *Slate*, September 29, 2000. For more on how performative techniques, especially vocal timbre, can be problematically linked to racial essence, see Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*.

Björk scholar Nicola Dibben describes Björk's vocality as principally distinguished by her rapidly changing range of timbres, extended vocal techniques such as growls and shrieks, and expressive breathing; vocal attributes that the author considers "central to perceptions of [Björk] as…authentic…because they suggest untutored, anti-commercial and intense emotional expression."[137] Björk's accent adds to this sense of authenticity, where "mangled pronunciation suggest child-like naivete and an exoticism heightened by the rolled 'r's which characterize her Icelandic accent,"[138] and, further, her singing in non-lexical vocables also has "the effect on listeners of…authentic emotional expression."[139] Vocal instructor Hugo Kerth moreover notes how because Icelandic is a more consonant language, Björk's accent emphasizes more glottal stops and bursts of air, which leads to amplified articulatory sensations, dynamics in volume, and an increased ability to "belt," that is, reach high pitches with a bright chest or mixed range tone, which adds to heightened emotional expressivity.[140] Dibben summarizes that Björk's singing goes against the display of "normative" vocal virtuosity, a vocality that might otherwise suggest emotional distance. She argues, "Both Maria Carey [*sic*] and Christina Aguilera have huge vocal ranges…and use vocal effects such as the whistle register…and melismatic singing…but their vocal display has been criticized by listeners who believe it emphasizes the performance at the expense of the emotions believed to have inspired it."[141] Perhaps one of these listeners herself, Dibben links Björk's idiosyncratic vocal techniques to genuineness (and, seemingly, lack of market impulse). Carey and Aguilera, on the other hand, are read by Dibben as inauthentic due to

[137] Dibben, *Björk*, 109.
[138] Ibid., 102.
[139] Ibid., 103.
[140] Hugo Kerth, "Björk Vocal Analysis: Vocal Lessons Online Ep. 13," New York Vocal Coaching, August 28, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5swjBgYeU8.
[141] Dibben, *Björk*, 106.

their singing styles that demonstrate vocal control.[142] Here we see that the ideological "sound of the feminine" as untrained assigns musical worth through the guise of the real. What Dibben fails to acknowledge is that for all these singers, their deliberate stylistic choices—including Björk's "alternative" ones—are key tactics they each employ to communicate their artistic visions, and likely, achieve commercial success within their respective genres.

The sense of emotional authenticity linked to Björk and her singing is also supported by discourse on her experience with vocal damage. In 2012, Björk had to cancel a series of tour dates surrounding the release of her album *Biophilia* (2012) due to a vocal surgery to remove a polyp from her vocal cords.[143] She admitted that while the surgery was successful, it changed her voice to a certain degree, returning her ability to reach high notes while also adding "deep notes" to her range.[144] Classically trained vocalist and vocal hygiene coach Zach Ansley, in one of his most widely watched videos on his YouTube channel, analyzes Björk's vocal performance of "Human Behavior" at the Royal Opera House in London in 2002 and postulates how her damage might have occurred. He offers that while Björk utilizes proper techniques in some respects, for example, her excellent control of registers and placement, he argues that her cutting, raspy belts—one of the vocal attributes she is most known for—are achieved by way of closing her vocal tract, letting pressure build up, and then releasing when reopening—quite literally smashing her vocal cords together. He says that what we hear as a rasp is the residual vibration of the folds, which is "about as destructive as it gets."[145] Ansley attests that this vocal styling is

[142] Significant, but out of the scope of this chapter, is also the fact that Carey and Aguilera both draw from Black vernacular traditions. I will address the nature of racial bias as it pertains to genre in chapter 3.
[143] James C. McKinley Jr., "Bjork Undergoes Throat Surgery," *New York Times*, November 22, 2012, https://archive.nytimes.com/artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/22/bjork-undergoes-throat-surgery/.
[144] Michael Martin, "Björk Talk: The Avant-Pop Queen on Festivals, Technology and How to Get Old," *Time Out*, April 30, 2015, https://www.timeout.com/music/bjoerk-talk-the-avant-pop-queen-on-festivals-technology-and-how-to-get-old.
[145] Zach Ansley, "Vocal Coach ANALYZES Björk [Vocal Health discussion]!" Zach's Vocal Analysis, January 2, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezNA6fOiIhI.

what most likely caused Björk's damage and led to her surgery. Such is at once a negative consequence of an unhealthy technique and the aspect of her vocality that appears to provoke listener response that reads Björk as emotionally authentic. For example, the top comment by @brentalanadamlandgrave7635 with over five hundred upvotes on the original video of Björk's performance that Ansley analyzes reads, "Her sense of singing and phrasing is very innocent, almost childlike. it's raw and emotive, even primal." And on Ansley's analysis video, commenter @inyangbassey722 remarks, "I had no idea she had damage. I respect her ASTOUNDING AUTHENTICITY though! My God she inspires. But sad she hurt herself."[146] In these fan responses, Björk's vocality inspires listeners to assign legitimizing language to her, in some cases in the form of infantilization or primitivizing. Vocal damage in particular, as Laurie Stras has outlined, is a marker for audiences of vocalists' authenticity due to the reality of bodily harm to the voice—when, in Stras's words, a singer's "own flesh speaks its history wordlessly through the voice itself."[147] In Björk's case, her vocal damage indicates real-life suffering, or, trauma, which inspires audience identification and empathy. To extend this analysis of Björk's vocality to her reception in *Dancer*, we can see how perceptions of her voice as untamed or even impaired could be utilized to authenticate her suffering and collapse it with Selma's experience.

As mentioned in the introduction, by looking to the field of trauma theory we can better understand how hearing women's voicings of trauma psychologically compels listeners to construct the performer as genuine. In Björk's case, the suffering, or trauma, she performed through Selma inevitably triggered listener belief that she summoned an authentic testimony of the self. As aforesaid, this is due to the predominant cultural understanding of trauma that frames victim testimony about traumatic events as veridical; their retold memories are literal copies of

[146] Ibid.
[147] Stras, "Organ of the Soul," 176.

these unspeakable incidents. Thus, when listeners hear the sound of the female voice concomitantly with the voicing of pain, as in women's performances of sad songs, they tend to perceive the performer as conveying unmediated emotions and testimonies about real events. This mainstreaming understanding of trauma, which is tethered to the deep psychological need to read all voicings of pain as "true," has deeply problematic implications for interpreting women's artmaking. In fact, these presumptions on the part of audiences have the unintended consequence of turning the female lamenter's excellence at her art form—in doing the very thing she has been hired to do—into a means to defang her as an artist. If we look at the commonsense perception around Björk in *Dancer*, we can see that it is in part due to our conditioning by this model of traumatic testimony that we collapse her into Selma's victimhood, instead of reading her as an actor who utilizes Selma's suffering from a place of objective distance in order to create art—what I'm calling a *trauma performance*. In fact, a trauma performance is not unlike a performance of a ritual lament by a professional mourner, where she must call on profound emotions to perform an anguish she may not necessarily feel personally, through highly affecting vocal techniques.[148]

In *Dancer*, audiences heard Björk's vocal performance as a discharge of her personal anguish, which consequently collapsed her story with the emotional life of Selma and therefore prevented Björk's individuated artistic authorship. In this way, Björk was stuck; for the more moving and powerful her performance was, the more her audiences' understanding of her labor

[148] Trauma as heard through the voice—vocal qualities that audiences assume to be indicative of a singer's personally felt suffering—is what I will address in the next chapter as *plaintive vocality*. While listeners may believe such vocality can corroborate a singer's inner world, I instead defend it as a matter of vocal techniques and artistic choices that singers utilize to communicate anguish. Such vocal stylings, I argue, only hold a prospect to identify a lamenter's unmediated experience. In this, I follow Eidsheim, who argues that "hearing a vocal timbre as though it summarizes a person's life story" is a result of such a story being mistakenly "understood as the *a priori* nature of that voice (and that person) rather than as an interpretation that is dependent on a given context" (*Race of Sound*, 154).

was compromised. In other words, it is precisely because of Björk's artistic expertise that the force of her lament performance in *Dancer*, alongside von Trier's exploitative maneuvers, in fact worked to deprive her of artistic agency.

Conclusion

In a review of *Dancer* in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2000, critic Kenneth Turan says of the film,

> Lars von Trier's "Dancer in the Dark"…is so frustrating in its fakery, so deeply irritating in its pretentions…where pervasive inauthenticity is meant to be taken as a mark of transcendent genuineness, where every shameless contrivance, every cynical manipulation, every frame of carefully calculated clumsiness—awkward writing, bungled acting, intentionally ugly cinematography…is intended as further proof of an honesty and profundity that is supposed to make us grateful.

And yet, he adds,

> If further complications are needed, ponder the following: This movie, which worships preposterousness and considers the false to be true, nevertheless contains a remarkable performance by Icelandic pop diva Björk. Playing a factory worker with more woes than Job, she is, against all reason and expectation, honest and genuine. Go figure that one out.[149]

Turan's double use of "honesty"—indicating von Trier's contrivances and Björk's achievements—shows just how contentious the notion of veracity is to audiences witnessing portrayals of painful experience. Perhaps even more significantly, however, is that Turan's assessment shows how Björk was utilized as a means by which von Trier could achieve emotional authenticity, given his unconventional filmmaking methods.[150] To wit, Björk's role

[149] Kenneth Turan, "Missteps for 'Dancer in the Dark,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 2000, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-oct-06-ca-32001-story.html.

[150] Von Trier's intentional exposure of the artifice of filmmaking that Turan so vehemently despises is a central tenet of his Dogme 95 movement, a film collective of which von Trier is considered to be one of the founders. One of the central aspects of this movement's punk ethos is to avoid a high-gloss Hollywood style, taking pains to present

was indispensable; the film's provocation of tragic response would not have been possible without her casting and her music. Furthermore, Turan's remarks exemplify why it was crucial for von Trier to deny Björk's co-authorship, for this tactic more effectively led audiences to buy into the raw, untutored narrative surrounding her portrayal. Whether *Dancer* was to critics' taste was a nonissue, for if von Trier could successfully deflect Björk's artistry, he could achieve the emotional impact he so desired.

On the other hand, perhaps von Trier's motives weren't entirely malicious. In an interview with the *Evening Standard* in 2001, Björk hypothesized that von Trier's artistic choices may have been acts of self-sabotage. Specifically, she describes arguing with von Trier over his desire to close the film in silence, believing that his desire to leave audiences dejected was intentionally self-defeating. She says, "I think it was fear, if you ask me. I think it is some sort of minority complex. You are an artist and you should believe in your work and let it stand for what it is. You don't need to put extra pain and suffering in there just so that the critics will say, 'This is art.'"[151] Perhaps it was a mix of the two: a fear of failure mixed with a fear of the feminine. The need to martyr a woman so as to not look deeper. Either way, Björk was sacrificed for his vision.

Turan asks us to "figure out" how, amid a film of such conceit, Björk's performance could appear to us as verifiably genuine. This chapter has offered an explanation: that the female lamenter, precisely because of her expertise in performing grief, inculcates the paradoxical notion in her audiences that her performance is natural and authentic. In the case of *Dancer*, the texts Björk worked with further contributed to the assumption that she had to be experiencing the

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neorealist, verité cinema, which intentionally reveals, through low-cost cinematography and unusual staging, the at times awkward contract established between screen and viewer (see Badley, *Lars von Trier*).

[151] Björk, quoted in Dibben, *Björk*, 198. Originally in "About & About: Dancer in the Dark," *Evening Standard*, August 15, 2001.

tragedy herself in order to create a spectacle so affecting. Von Trier, in his narrative and aesthetic devices and statements to the public, exploited deep-seated preconceptions about the female lamenting voice, which worked to deny Björk her authorship.

Lamenters like Björk imbue their performances with emotion in ways that help audiences process their own pain. However, there is a dangerous assumption that through these emotional responses one can uncover a personal or genuine vocalist, superseding a singer's carefully crafted and deliberately shared artistry. For the lament art form is not necessarily about the personal grief of the singer, no matter how affecting their performance appears to be. And while introspection is a valuable and unavoidable component of a lamenter's process of creation, nonetheless, to regard a lamenter's artistry as primarily a product of life is a specious assumption that undercuts her craft. By attending to the full text that Björk offered—her music, her compositional alterations, her public statements—I have recast her role in *Dancer* as not just a vessel for emotive song, but rather as a professional mourner and artistic author, who co-created an affecting narrative that worked to mediate painful feeling in audiences and, on *Selmasongs*, propose feminist understandings. While listeners, and even directors such as von Trier, may mishear or misconstrue women's laments as expressions of pain alone, reducing singers to mere victims of feeling, the case study of *Dancer* and *Selmasongs* shows us how the musical lament as a technique deployed by Björk, enacted a decisive agency, despite clear evidence of social constraint.

Chapter 2: Plaintive Voices, Flamenco Laments, and the Case of Rosalía

> It is in large part according to the sounds people make that we judge them sane or insane, male or female, good, evil, trustworthy, depressive, marriageable, moribund, likely or unlikely to make war on us, little better than animals, inspired by God.
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> —Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound" (1995)

The music video opens with a wide-angle shot of the most iconic image of La Mancha, Spain—four windmills in a row at dawn. A chopped and heavily Auto-Tuned vocal melisma sounds out in the background, awash in reverb. Cut to Rosalía Vila Tobella, mononymously known as Rosalía, inside one of the mills, trapped in engine oil, and clothed in a red gown with braids adorned across her forehead. She begins to sing the opening line of "DE AQUÍ NO SALES (Capítulo 4: Disputa)," which narrates a quarrel between a jealous husband and his young bride in the style of a flamenco *siguiriyas*, a traditional lament song form.[152] The lyrics describe the pained love relation: "It's hurting me more / Than it's hurting you / With the back of my hand / I make it clear to you."[153] Here, Rosalía sings from the perspective of the husband, who, enraged, exerts physical control over the bride. The lead vocals are loud and aggressive, while the background vocal loop imitates a kind of repetitive, wordless weeping. This vocal pairing suggests the dynamic of the abusive relationship at the heart of Rosalía's album *El mal querer*.

Released in 2018, *El mal querer* (bad love) is a flamenco pop concept album about female repression and deliverance. Rosalía developed this work as her bachelor's thesis at the

[152] Like "DE AQUÍ NO SALES," flamenco siguiriyas are typically sung in Phrygian mode in a 12-beat meter (*compás*). Rosalía has attested that this song is a siguiriyas, however, in her master's thesis, Victoria Katherine Driggs notes that she blends this with a *pregón* by Gabriel Macandé entitled "Mis caramelos." "*El mal querer*: Merging Flamenco with a Postmodern 'Universe' of Meanings" (master's thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, 2021), 114. The melody is similar, and the intertextuality is also present, as one lyric in "DE AQUÍ" is "te vendo…caramelos" (I sell you…candies). *Pregónes* were traditionally cries sung by street vendors in Andalusia when hawking goods. Sandie Holguín, *Flamenco Nation: The Construction of National Spanish Identity* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 50.

[153] "Mucho más a mí me duele / De lo que ti te está doliendo / Con el revés de la mano / Yo te lo dejo bien claro." All Spanish has been translated by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

prestigious La Escola Superior de Música de Cataluña (ESMUC), where she studied *cante* (flamenco singing) under renowned professor José Miguel Vizcaya Cerro "El Chiqui de la Línea."[154] Here, she drew from the thirteenth-century Occitan-language text *Le Roman de Flamenca*, a story of an ill-fated partnership in which a man confines his wife in a tower due to suspicions of adultery. Rosalía crafted *El mal querer* in parallel with this text, presented in chapters, each with a theme related to this doomed relationship, exploring notions of power struggle and gender violence. She chose this narrative to reflect the tribulations of the feminine position and to question illusions of progress. As she describes it: "It's the story of a woman who married a man who becomes consumed with jealousy, and he goes crazy and imprisons her. And it got me thinking, almost anthropologically: Centuries later, have we altered the ways in which we love and relate to other people, or are we still acting in the same ways?"[155]

While *El mal querer* is not the first album to popularize flamenco tropes within a contemporary pop style, it is the first album written, produced, and performed by a Catalan woman to hybridize traditional flamenco and experimental pop within an explicitly feminist framework. Given this context, and its wide global reach, the album generated a significant amount of controversy. In particular, in Spain and the flamenco diaspora, the legitimacy of Rosalía's work was questioned, ensnared in an enduring and highly polarized debate regarding the ontological status of flamenco; as a global and hybridized national Spanish commodity on one hand, and as a sacred patrimonial entity of Andalusia on the other.[156] Her unorthodox use of

[154] Rosalía studied with El Chiqui at Taller de Músics before following him to ESMUC.
[155] Philip Sherburne, "Get to Know Rosalía, the Spanish Singer Giving Flamenco's Age-Old Sound a Bracingly Modern Twist," *Pitchfork*, September 18, 2018, https://pitchfork.com/features/rising/get-to-know-rosalia-the-spanish-singer-giving-flamencos-age-old-sound-a-bracingly-modern-twist/.
[156] See William Washabaugh, *Flamenco and National Identity in Spain* (Ashgate Publishing, 2016); Holguín, *Flamenco Nation*, 2019. Both authors outline the long-standing dialectic regarding flamenco's status as an art object, a debate still operating in contemporary Spain. Washabaugh succinctly characterizes the tension: "Ironically, one and the same cultural object has been conscripted into patrimonial service in two polar opposite interests…to

the art form and her Catalan heritage led her to be both idealized as a symbol of national Spanish pride, and vilified as an emblem of Northern Spanish imperialism.[157]

At the heart of this historical tension is the stance of flamenco as a lament art form, carrying with it an ideology of authenticity exemplified by the saying: "Hay que pasar fatigas para cantar bien" (One must have suffered to sing well). This tenet requires that flamenco singers draw on personal experiences of marginalization, particularly of poverty, when singing flamenco.[158] A further principle held by many practitioners of the art form is that a vocalist ideally must have some proximity to the oppressed experience of the Gitano[159] from whom flamenco is thought to have originated. This standard of authenticity crystallized in the early twentieth century when flamenco purists, such as Manuel de Falla and Federico García Lorca, who sought to rescue flamenco from the threat of mass commercialization, developed a theoretical basis with which to define authentic flamenco singing. Their conceptual touchstone was the notion of *duende*, roughly, "soul," in which a *cantaora*'s proficiency in performing laments is defined by her heartfelt delivery of a raw emotion tied to the experience of the suffering Gitano.[160]

In cante, the presence of duende is verified through a matrix of vocal criteria, such as, in flamenco scholar Peter Manuel's words, "raspy vocal timbre, sobbing-like falsetto breaks, and a generally strenuous, impassioned, and histrionic vocal style."[161] Primarily, however, duende is

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emphasize the unity of all Spaniards on the one hand, and…to mark the distinctiveness of Andalusians on the other" (28).

[157] Divided reception of Rosalía has been thoroughly detailed by Peter Manuel in "The Rosalía Polemic: Defining Genre Boundaries and Legitimacy in Flamenco," *Ethnomusicology* 65, no. 1 (2021): 32–61.

[158] Peter Manuel, "Authenticity, Universality, and Expression in Song: The Case of Flamenco," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 19 (2021).

[159] Spanish Roma. Literally translates in English to "Gypsy," which I will only utilize when referring to the stereotypes that accompany this usage.

[160] Federico García Lorca, "Duende: Play and Theory," in *Finding Duende*, trans. Christopher Maurer (University of Chicago Press, 2024).

[161] Peter Manuel, "Andalusian, Gypsy, and Class Identity in the Contemporary Flamenco Complex," *Ethnomusicology* 33, no. 1 (1989): 55.

confirmed through the sound of vocal damage thought to be indicative of personally experienced emotional suffering—what I have earlier called *plaintive vocality*.[162] This vocal sound of suffering connects a flamenco singers' personal lamentations to the communal adversity specific to the Andalusian condition; a requisite positionality for the art form. Due to the gatekeeping nature of this precept, *payos* (non-Gitanos), who perform flamenco, such as Rosalía, are generally regarded with suspicion by flamenco traditionalists and must be rigorously evaluated according to such musical codes.

Criticisms of Rosalía primarily encircle her "defective" vocality.[163] Her detractors indicate that she not only fails to produce technically, but, in this, that she lacks duende. In other words, Rosalía's voice is thought to reveal a lack of emotional authenticity and a dearth of lived experience, which is seen as an affront to the pathos-laden flamenco art form from which she borrows, leading some of her critics to contend that she commits moral offense by cosplaying as a cantaora, co-opting Andalusian suffering to serve her artistic and commercial aims. Those who disparage Rosalía wield such determinations of plaintive vocality to negatively assess her—they utilize a group of sonic indicators as a seeming disclosure of her inner emotional world. However, what Rosalía's work will show is that performing the plaintive vocalities characteristic of flamenco is not a sign of duende, but rather, is a technical and artistic choice.

From my analysis of Björk in chapter 1, I found that audience perception that the emotive force of a lament performance must come from a female vocalist's inner anguish is a specious and demeaning assumption that inversely affects her sense of artistic agency. Now, Rosalía's

[162] As discussed in the introduction in my analysis of the work of Laurie Stras, the sound of vocal damage is integral for listener recognition of authenticity in popular music. Extending Stras's formulation, I conceived of plaintive vocality to indicate vocal qualities listeners link to performers' personal suffering exhibited specifically in the art form of women's lament.
[163] This is a central concern of Manuel's "The Rosalía Polemic," 2021.

artistic vision, compositional ability, and vocal expertise will show us that the notion that plaintive vocality can serve as a verification of a singer's authenticity is flawed and potentially damaging to flamenco singers' craft.

In this chapter, I examine how critiques within purist flamenco circles regarding Rosalía's failure to deliver duende and her lack of emotional authenticity are regressive, opposed to recognition of female agency, and contingent on a patriarchal celebration of and fixation on female suffering that originates from the ideologies of *machismo* (the assumption of male dominance over women linked to traditional gender roles) and *marianismo* (the belief in female domesticity and chastity) lodged deeply in Spanish politics and religious life. Instead of being led by these reductive modes of evaluation, I analyze Rosalía's *El mal querer* through the lens of the historical art form of women's lament, in which a singer acts as a professional mourner, who may channel the plight of others to voice social critique. If we read Rosalía through the lens of professional mourning, we see that she reconceives flamenco laments to both carry and expose the painful experience of women living within a *machista* (sexist) culture, and to clear a path for a female persona that may be otherwise difficult to realize within the flamenco genre.

In what follows, I outline the Rosalía controversy by examining a song from *El mal querer* that inflamed public reception. I detail how the controversial nature of this song stemmed from claims of Rosalía engaging in cultural appropriation, yet, on another level, I show that this song's provocation was a result of Rosalía challenging essentialized notions of flamenco vocality. I then present a technical discussion of cante flamenco and analyze the differences between traditional cante and Rosalía's singing style. I demonstrate that although the distinction between these two vocal approaches is technical and stylistic, still some listeners are conditioned to believe that the difference is a matter of emotional authenticity. I argue that this latter

perception is inexorably bound up with the reductive female martyr archetype, reflective of a regressive gender ideology central to flamenco, forged by the turn-of-the-century Spanish avant-garde.

To understand the patriarchal history of flamenco, I analyze the art form's sociopolitical role in Spain. In line with various feminist histories of flamenco, I show how flamenco women were consistently seen to stand in for the Spanish nation both culturally and symbolically, leading intellectual, political, and religious leaders to circumscribe women's expressions in flamenco to fit misogynistic precepts underwritten by the Catholic Church. In contemporary Spain, such precepts are still at work, and reflected by audience uproar in the face of Rosalía's defiance of the given boundaries for women in flamenco. I will show how Rosalía's transgression on *El mal querer* is not just elision of traditional cante, but a subversion of reductive female archetypes fundamental to flamenco and Spanish culture. In the end, by way of analysis of her poetic, musical, and visual techniques on *El mal querer*, I consider how Rosalía critiques these gender ideologies, by mourning for female victims of violence, and also empowering them—pushing the limits of the flamenco genre and Spanish gender politics.

Rosalía, *El yeli*, and an Outrage

Rosalía had already made a name for herself in Spain, having released the more traditional, *nuevo flamenco* album *Los Ángeles* in 2017 to critical acclaim. She gained wide global recognition, however, in 2018 with the release of the first singles from *El mal querer*, which also played on traditional flamenco, this time filtered through a more overtly pop lens, and accompanied by heavily symbolic music videos. The third single released from the album, "DI MI NOMBRE (Capítulo 8: Éxtasis)," is a *tango* played with *palmas* (hand claps) alongside a

play on an Andalusian cadence in Eb Phrygian (a common harmonic and rhythmic flamenco language),[164] and narrativizes sexual intimacy with a video inspired by the painting *La maja vestida* by Francisco Goya (1800–1807).[165] For a *cante chico* style song such as this, romantic subject matter is not uncommon,[166] and the lyrics structured in *coplas* (stanzas) in octosyllabic quatrain are also in line with flamenco practice. Where the song deviates from flamenco is the timbral universe, such as the chords played on synthesizer in a style akin to reggaeton, and the sub-808 kick drum hits.[167] Nonetheless, the fact that "DI MI NOMBRE" blends flamenco with a pop sound is not in itself significant. What sparked controversy was the choral refrain. After a verse and pre-chorus, with full instrumentation and Rosalía's natural vocals, the song breaks down to just synth, palmas, and voice. Here, Rosalía chants softly, her vocals processed with reverb and heavy Auto-Tune: "Ay alí yali ya," seemingly using this wordless refrain to express the height of ecstasy. Rosalía claimed to borrow this vocal melody from the recording, *Tangos de Málaga* (1958), by Enriqueta Reyes Porras, known as La Repompa de Málaga, a renowned cantaora.[168] However, due to Auto-Tune obfuscating the clarity of the lyrics, many listeners

[164] An "Andalusian cadence" is a progression of Am G F E in E Phrygian, influenced by Spanish folk modality in combination with a descending tetrachord derivation from Western art music, in which Am G F E would occur in an A minor tonality (Peter Manuel, "Evolution and Structure in Flamenco Harmony," *Current Musicology,* 42 (1986): 49).

[165] *Majo/maja* is a term that emerged in eighteenth-century Spain to denote working-class Spaniards who rejected the hegemony of French aristocracy in favor of a Spanish nationalism, expressed in flamboyant dress and distinctly Spanish tastes in music and dance. Rosalía's invocation of the Goya painting here could suggest Spanish pride, but also a certain kind of sexual promiscuity or freedom associated with maja women. For more on *majismo*, see Holguín, *Flamenco Nation*; Elisabeth Le Guin, *The Tonadilla in Performance: Lyric Comedy in Enlightenment Spain* (University of California Press, 2014).

[166] *Cante chicos* encompass a set of flamenco *palos* (song forms) primarily for festive purposes, such as tangos and *alegrías*, that are often in 4-beat meter as opposed to 12. This is in contrast to *cante jondo*, which includes graver lament song forms, such as siguiriyas and *soléas*. See Peter Manuel, "Composition, Authorship, and Ownership in Flamenco, Past and Present," *Ethnomusicology* 54, no. 1 (2010): 106–35.

[167] Referring to a Roland TR-808 drum machine; the low frequency (sub) kick drum sound from this sampler is a common signifier of the hip-hop subgenre of trap.

[168] https://twitter.com/rosalia/status/1057314644849815553 (@rosalía, October 30, 2018). It is important to note that the flamenco art form is built on the practice of borrowing *estilos* (stock melodies) from a set of songs passed through oral tradition. Estilos are commonly named after a particular vocalist or locale and are reiterated in performance (and on recordings) with either the same or new text (Manuel, "Composition, Authorship, and

heard Rosalía sing "yeli yeli," known as *el yeli*, a ritual Gitano wedding chant. Her use of this chant was taken as an offense to the Gitano community, who consider el yeli to be sacred, leading many of its members to speak out on social media, and on blogs.[169] These remarks, along with comments defending Rosalía on social media, plus Rosalía's own statement on Twitter, were then picked up by journalists, inspiring headlines such as "Rosalía Generates Controversy with Her Latest Song, 'Di mi nombre,' Due to Gypsy Customs."[170] This article outlined the public debate (mostly on Twitter) regarding whether Rosalía had committed an ethical violation by singing this refrain. For some listeners, particularly those from the Gitano community, Rosalía had clearly engaged in an immoral act of appropriation, while for others, mostly fans of Rosalía, she had done no wrong.[171]

It is a fact that Rosalía invoked el yeli, despite her handwringing.[172] For, "DI MI NOMBRE" contains deliberate nuptial allusions. For one, the choral melody mirrors how el yeli is traditionally sung and is similar to another chant in a preceding chapter on *El mal querer* dedicated explicitly to the notion of the couple's wedding.[173] Secondly, Rosalía seems to connote

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Ownership," 107). In this case, *Tangos de Málaga* was originally associated with another cantaora from Málaga named La Pirula (see https://www.flamencologia.org/la-pirula/).

[169] One of Rosalía's foremost critics, Gitana activist Noelia Cortés, had a particularly strident take in a post on flamenco blog *Peineta Revuelta*, in which she presents Rosalía's use of el yeli as a clear example of unethical borrowing and cultural appropriation. Cortés's critique is in line with the mission statement of this site, which is to defend flamenco as an art form emerging from and belonging to the Gitano community. "Por supuesto que es Yeli lo que cantas, Rosalía," *Peineta Revuelta*, November 3, 2018, https://peinetarevuelta.wordpress.com/2018/11/03/por-supuesto-que-es-yeli-lo-que-cantas-rosalia/.

[170] "Rosalía genera polémica con su ultima cancion, 'Di mi nombre,' por costumbres gitanas," *20 Minutos*, October 30, 2018, https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/3479392/0/rosalia-polemica-di-mi-nombre-yeli-yali-gitanos/.

[171] The comments defending Rosalía on Twitter during this time are numerous, but to give one example, from user @lkinhocuspocus, "She sings flamenco and flamenco is originally from Gitano people. OBVIOUSLY SHE IS GOING TO USE EXPRESSIONS THEY USE" (October 30, 2018).

[172] Some believe Rosalía borrowed from the La Repompa recording without fully understanding the context. For while it does sounds as if La Repompa sings "yali ali," several other cantaoras who have recorded this same estilo sing "yeli," for example, Las Migas, a flamenco quartet based in Barcelona and whose members, like Rosalía, studied at ESMUC. According to Cortés, those "in the know" understand each instance of these tango recordings as having one and the same ritual wedding chant and further, they are aware of the fact that in the context of these tangos, yeli is always sung ("Por supuesto que es Yeli lo que cantas, Rosalía," 2018).

[173] "QUE NO SALGA LA LUNA (Capítulo 2: Boda)."

the loss of virginity when she invokes a metaphor of hair breaking,[174] alongside the imagery of her laying on a bed, dressed in white, against a backdrop appearing to reference female genitalia (**Figure 4**). These significations tie to el yeli, which in Gitano wedding rituals, is traditionally sung after the *prueba del pañuelo*—a test to verify the bride's virginity by breaking her hymen with a white handkerchief. While in this day and age, el yeli may be sung at a wedding ceremony without this test taking place, the chant is nonetheless linked to a bride's purity.

Figure 4. Video still from "DI MI NOMBRE"

Essentially, el yeli is a ritual lament that marks a young girl's passage into womanhood. This is in line with the historical function of women's lamentations at weddings, which is to signal parting and transition. While such an event is celebratory, it is also marked by feelings of grief over the bride's exit from the familial unit and her loss of innocence. As anthropologist Sarah

[174] Carlos Morales Gálvez, "El mal querer (2018) de Rosalía: Semiótica del videoclip 'Di mi nombre (Cap. VIII: Éxtasis),'" *Popular Music Research Today: Revista Online de Divulgación Musicológica* 2, no. 1 (2020): 13. The lyrics read: "Y átame con tu Cabello / A la esquina de tu cama / Que aunque el cabello se rompa / Haré ver que estoy atada" (And tie me with your hair / To the corner of the bed / And even if the hair breaks / I will pretend that I'm tied).

Weiss puts it, "It is even possible to make an emotional connection between the departure of a loved one caused by marriage and the more permanent departure generated by the death."[175] Bearing in mind this undercurrent of mourning when thinking about bridal laments, we can see how a chant like el yeli could attain a kind of sanctified position for the Gitano community.

Considering this context, it appears that the contentiousness around Rosalía singing el yeli had primarily to do with cultural appropriation, the fact that her co-optation of this chant from an outsider position ended up degrading its significance. In her undergraduate thesis on Rosalía's use of Gitano stereotypes, María Guadalupe Benzal Alía contends that Rosalía's deployment of el yeli on "DI MI NOMBRE" is trite, and in this way, casts Gitano wedding traditions as backward.[176] Peter Manuel is in line with this take, arguing that Rosalía at times presents tropes from Gitano culture in a hackneyed manner.[177] While these critiques may seek to address the thorny issues of Rosalía's privilege as a Northern Spaniard who attended conservatory, flamenco's circulation as a commodity, and the distributive channels of labor at the heart of the cultivation of the flamenco art form, they fail to address these issues directly, instead focusing their critiques on Rosalía's performance practice. In turn, their critiques end up inconsistent when we consider flamenco's performative customs. For despite its seemingly sacred status, el yeli is a vocal refrain commonly sung in flamenco, particularly within the tango

[175] Sarah Weiss, *Ritual Soundings: Women Performers and World Religions* (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 27.
[176] María Guadalupe Benzal Alía, "Análisis intercultural del álbum musical de Rosalía Vila, 'El Mal Querer' y el consecuente rechazo de la comunidad gitana Española" (undergraduate thesis, Universidad de Comillas, 2019), 36–37.
[177] Manuel, "The Rosalía Polemic," 58. An example that supports this is Rosalía's performance at the MTV Europe Music Awards, in which she is said to have musically directed a live version of "DI MI NOMBRE" as a response to criticism of her use of el yeli. Although the performance isn't particularly offensive, the concept is a bit one-dimensional. In it, she wears an outfit akin to a Roma belly-dancing costume and surrounds herself with a throng of local Andalusian women, who all sing el yeli while doing *floreo* (flamenco hand movements). In a live review, *El mundo* described it positively as an oversized flamenco tablao, but I read the performance as reactionary to her critics, and as a result, a bit of a characterization. "Rosalía, su 'yeli, yeli' y el espectacular tablao flamenco que la coronó en los MTV Europa," *El mundo*, November 4, 2019, https://elmundo.es/cultura/musica/2019/11/04/5dbfef7afdddff89248b45f3.html.

palo,[178] and in flamenco pop.[179] Moreover, since its inception, flamenco as a commercial art form and Spanish tourist attraction has been rife with clichés drawn from Gitano culture as a part of standard practice.[180] So, one could say that troping in this way is expected of those who perform flamenco. Manuel supports this point when he states that, while Rosalía has been heavily criticized for her presentation of Gitano stereotypes on *El mal querer*—such as her use of *caló* (Gitano dialect)—such is a customary practice in traditional flamenco by both Gitanos and payos alike.[181] Manuel then qualifies that the reason Rosalía's staging of such tropes is offensive for many is because particular songs of hers are "not" flamenco.[182] Yet, this appears untenable in the case of "DI MI NOMBRE," which, as evidenced by its musical language, is uncontroversially nuevo flamenco or flamenco pop.[183] To summarize, Rosalía's detractors have claimed that the offense of "DI MI NOMBRE" lies in the fact that this song is an example of unethical musical borrowing and stereotyping, however, as discussed, borrowing of *estilos* and

[178] Deborah González-Jurado, "Música popular, flamenco y fusiones musicales en España: Una visión general desde el siglo XIX. Propuesta de mini-curso teórico-práctico Año académico 2022-2023 1 - Material pedagógico," University of Málaga, 2023, 13.
[179] A few examples of pop artists who have sung el yeli in their work are the Gipsy Kings, Amaia, and Las Migas.
[180] According to Holguín, there is an inexorable connection between the development of the flamenco art form and its incorporation of Gitano stereotypes. This is evidenced by how, from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, Spanish conservative elites sought to distance flamenco from Spanish national identity due to its reductive presentation of Andalusian culture, what was thought to convey a kind of Spanish "backwardness" to a wider global audience. However, as Holguín points out, while such tropes of Southern Spanish culture maintained as part and parcel of the art form, national perception about flamenco ultimately shifted in a positive direction due to it becoming a necessary component of the Spanish economy that could stimulate tourism after the Spanish Civil War (*Flamenco Nation*, 9).
[181] Manuel, "The Rosalía Polemic," 49. As flamenco scholar and sociologist Lucía Serrano Montero points out, part of formal training in *cante* is to learn "oscuridad de diccion (acentuada en el cante gitano), ligada al habla andaluz" (obscurity of diction [accented in Gitano singing], linked to Andalusian speech). "La técnica vocal en el cante flamenco: Su relación con el canto clásico y el canto popular," *La Madruga* 19 (2022): 58.
[182] Manuel, "The Rosalía Polemic," 49. One of Manuel's primary concerns is how those in the flamenco community stylistically classify Rosalía's music against traditional flamenco. Washabaugh, however, has criticized this very approach—what he calls the "style-definition" of flamenco—wherein particular features such as estilos, compás, instrumentation, etc. are used as a supposedly impartial means to define flamenco. Washabaugh argues that this definition is limiting and gives a "false objectivity of what flamenco is or is not" (*Flamenco and National Identity*, 56).
[183] For example, on fan aggregate site rateyourmusic.com, which is considered the prime online encyclopedic source for classifying music releases, "DI MI NOMBRE" is categorized as flamenco pop. "Di mi nombre (Cap.8: Éxtasis)," Rate Your Music, accessed March 5, 2025, https://rateyourmusic.com/release/single/rosalia/di-mi-nombre-cap_8-extasis/.

deployment of Gitano clichés is not only common in flamenco, it is a widely accepted and integral aspect of the art form's practice. What is truly being interrogated, then, is the authenticity of Rosalía's vocality. In other words, what made Rosalía's "DI MI NOMBRE" so inflammatory was not the fact *that* she sang this chant, but *how*.

How did Rosalía sing el yeli in a way that provoked listeners to believe that she had committed such an enormous transgression? Answer: in a distinctly soft, semi-breathy timbre, drenched in robotic vocal processing. In the final chorus of "DI MI NOMBRE," flamenco stalwarts Las Negris join in for supporting vocals with traditional flamenco vocal execution marked by loud dynamics, a natural and rough timbre, and *jaleos* (vocal shouts). Rosalía doesn't just contrast this classic sound in her version of el yeli, but through her idiosyncratic delivery and her use of Auto-Tune, she simultaneously celebrates and subverts this traditional rendition.[184] On "DI MI NOMBRE," Rosalía sings el yeli in a way that comments on purity of vocality, which thereby mirrors a critique of virginal purity, exemplified by the fact that the song's subject is female sexual desire. The destabilization of the standardized feminine is a continual theme on *El mal querer*, wherein Rosalía does not utilize flamenco tropes just as an homage (as she did on *Los Ángeles*), but as a fundamental agitation to listener expectations of cante and thereby the female lamenting voice.[185]

[184] Rosalía discusses in a response video to Jaime Altozano's analysis of *El mal querer*, how it is important to dispel the prejudice that singers use Auto-Tune simply to correct bad singing. In this video, she states that capable singers will use Auto-Tune because it is a way to think about voice in a "radical" way that can lead to discoveries of "new textures of sound." "Rosalía explains the creating process of her album EL MAL QUERER," NyD Entretenimiento, November 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jinrRF5BaU8&t=523s.

[185] A further interpretation of Rosalía's use of Auto-Tune here could be that her deployment of an Auto-Tuned "cyborg" voice works to exceed binaristic gender constructs. See Sasha Geffen, "SOFT MACHINES: Women, Cyborgs, and Electronic Music," in *Glitter Up the Dark: How Pop Music Broke the Binary* (University of Texas Press, 2020), 84–102. For more on the Auto-tune effect (TATE), emotion, and gender see Catherine Provenzano, "Making Voices: The Gendering of Pitch Correction and The Auto-Tune Effect in Contemporary Pop Music," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 2 (June 2019): 63–84.

While the public controversy surrounding "DI MI NOMBRE" appeared to hone in on claims of cultural appropriation, looking more closely, the conflict is reflective of traditional views about the appropriate sonic context for female vocal expression within flamenco. Rosalía caused equal parts admiration and alarm, for she eschewed the plaintive vocality that was both consciously and unconsciously expected by listeners. In doing so, she destabilized traditional flamenco standards about singing and about femininity. To investigate Rosalía's vocal approach further, I next examine the specific technical differences between Rosalía's singing and traditional cante.

Learning to Sing Sadness

It is typical of a flamenco song like "DI MI NOMBRE," despite its festive style and racy subject matter, to feature a wedding lament as its central refrain, for even the genre's celebratory songs belie an undercurrent of sadness. The utmost tragic style of flamenco vocal song, however, is *cante jondo*, or "deep song," and denotes a collection of palos like siguiriyas and *soleás*, which are laments by definition. Cante jondo has maintained a singular place in the flamenco repertoire due to two interlocking factors: one, its historic uncoupling from commercialized forms of flamenco, and two, its connection to states of suffering tied to the Andalusian condition. Cante jondo was formally established as flamenco per se in 1922 at the singing competition Concurso de Cante Jondo in Granada, overseen by Manuel de Falla, Federico García Lorca, and other members of the Spanish avant-garde.[186] The organizers planned the event in an effort to codify

[186] While the superior position of *cante jondo* was formally established at the Concurso, its privileged status first emerged from turn-of-the-century Spanish scholarship whose authors, such as the highly influential father of Andalusian regional autonomy Blas Infante, sought to establish flamenco as "the voice of Andalusian tragedy" (Holguín, *Flamenco Nation*, 134). While Infante did not explicitly segregate cante jondo from other forms of flamenco, he did note its significance as a "repository of pain carried across generations" (ibid., 142).

cante jondo as the only legitimate flamenco art form, and thereby rescue flamenco from what they saw as a degrading influx of commercialism and mass culture.[187] In so doing, these thinkers arbitrarily "[restricted] the wide palette of flamenco forms to a narrow range of music that evoked pain, sorrow, and seriousness,"[188] by conceiving of the art form as a sonic conduit of the collective anguish of the Gitano people.

It was at the Concurso that Lorca established the key principle of duende, as mentioned, a soulful quality a vocalist must produce in order to perform authentic cante. He further honed this idea in the influential essay "Juego y teoría del duende" (1933), where he defined the term as a vocalist's personal expression of existential anguish, through a case study of revered cantaora La Niña de los Peines (Pastora Pavón). In this essay, Lorca offers that Pavón's vocalizations are so moving because she "robs herself of her skill…so that duende might appear."[189] In this way, Lorca posits that duende cannot come about through training, but rather must emerge from the performer's innate instinct to faithfully embody suffering.[190] Lorca does not propose any specific sonic character to duende, rather, his abstract theory rests on the "natural" acquisition and expression of cante, a supposition that has had a lasting effect on flamenco ideology.[191]

Many years later, scholar and *cantaor* Antonio Mairena (alongside Ricardo Molina), influenced by Lorca and the avant-garde purists, produced *Mundo y formas del cante flamenco* (1963)—an ultimate reference text on flamenco art form and the first to create a voice type

[187] This anti-commercial impulse brings us back to the persistent dialectic of flamenco ontology; its existence as both an authentic, patrimonial object of Andalusia and a national commercial art form. See Manuel, "The Rosalía Polemic," 6.
[188] Holguín, *Flamenco Nation*, 172.
[189] "La Niña de los Peines…tuvo que empobrecer de facultades…que su duende viniera." Lorca, "Duende," 53.
[190] The ideology of duende is parallel to Roland Barthes's "grain" (1977), which has since its entry into musicological discourse, been an irresistible reference point for those wishing to locate genuine emotionality in voice. Similar to duende, the "grain" framework does not denote anything sonically specific, but generally refers to a particular vocalist who is able to deny themselves their intellectual faculties in order to conjure the authentic passions relative to the genre in which they operate.
[191] Loren Chuse, *The Cantaoras: Music, Gender, and Identity in Flamenco Song* (Routledge, 2003), 46.

taxonomy. The project of these authors was in line with the predominant theoretical approach to flamenco singing; to historically reconstruct the songs of cante jondo as cries of Gitano "persecution and poverty,"[192] and through this lens, outline a set of rules for performance practice. The authors formulate the art form as an existential philosophy of the Gitano people, and chart a taxonomy of five distinct vocal types that arise from this ontological condition: *voz afillá*, *redonda*, *natural*, *facíl*, and *falsete*, each attached to a particular legacy Gitano performer who embodies struggle. But, similar to Lorca, while Mairena and Molina rely on poetic description of how these vocalists sing,[193] there is little formal direction on how to achieve such timbres, reliant as this theory is on the organic absorption of cante practice through oral tradition. Resultantly, the rules for cante performance drawn from the aforementioned texts are not technical or pedagogical, but ideological—they are used as a means to circumscribe certain singers from others. As flamencologist and prominent vocal pedagogue Alba Guerrero puts it, "[Mairena and Molina's] classification does not reflect medical, scientific, or pedagogical criteria, but was the first one published and was considered valid. This has been a problem because it fuels the belief that one type of voice for singing flamenco is better than another, maintaining a romantic myth in the collective imagination."[194] Mairena and Molina's bias is clear, as they state that those educated in conservatory cannot sing cante, as their voices with "cleanliness, transparency, and purity constitute inadmissible defects in the art of flamenco."[195]

[192] Manuel, "The Rosalía Polemic," 6.
[193] "La voz redonda…es dulce, pastosa, y viril" (The round voice…is sweet, doughy, and virile). Antonio Mairena and Ricardo Molina, *Mundo y formas del cante flamenco* (Revista de Occidente, 1963), 82.
[194] "Esta clasificación no responde a criterios médicos, científicos o pedagógicos pero fue la primera publicada y se tomó por válida. Esto ha supuesto un problema ya que alimenta la creencia de que para cantar flamenco es mejor un tipo de voz que otra, manteniedo el mito romántico en el imaginario colectivo." Alba Guerrero, "Clasificacíon de las voces flamencas," *Cante Flamenco Global*, accessed March 5, 2025, https://www.canteflamencoglobal.com/clasificacion-de-las-voces-flamencas/.
[195] Mairena and Molina, *Mundo y formas*, 82.

In other words, the sound of vocal control is a demarcation of artificiality,[196] while the admissible vocal character that confirms a cantaora's authenticity is one linked to the state of being in pain: hoarse, rough, ragged—in a word, damaged. This has been a self-sustaining belief in flamenco practice, for the ideology of authenticity that shames pursuit of formal training has long contributed to vocal injury among singers, as many practitioners learn to sing cante informally, without training in technique, and often starting with highly complex songs.[197] In addition, although flamenco has been institutionalized in the educational system across Spain, and in particular in Andalusia,[198] still, cante has longed relied on the refinement of the preexisting taxonomy of voice types[199] until a burgeoning interest in vocal pedagogy in flamenco scholarship in the 2010s.[200]

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[196] Mairena and Molina use Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna* as an example of such artificiality, saying that in performance of this work, the audience is always aware that they are "complices en una ficción" (complicit in a fiction). The laments of cante, on the other hand, are received by audiences as real, authentic, and autobiographical (ibid., 78).

[197] Rocío Márquez Limón, "La técnica vocal en el flamenco: Fisionomía y tipologías" (PhD diss., Universidad de Sevilla, 2017), 6–7. Montero notes that the stigma of vocal training in flamenco due to its relationship to inauthenticity is also evidenced by the lack of texts on vocal technique in the vast scholarship in flamenco, which alternatively features immense technical information on flamenco guitar and dance. Montero, "La técnica vocal," 50.

[198] The development of flamenco as a mandatory part of Andalusian education has its roots in the history of the pursuit of regional political autonomy since the 1980s. Teaching flamenco in primary and secondary schools was seen by lawmakers during this time as a way to maintain the notion that flamenco existed as a patrimonial object of Andalusian identity. Washabaugh, *Flamenco and National Identity*, 215–17. While flamenco is no longer a mandatory part of early education in Southern Spain, Washabaugh indicates that this could shift considering flamenco's official designation by UNESCO in 2010 as part of Spain's intangible cultural heritage, centering the art form as emerging from the "heartland" of Andalusia.

[199] Guerrero outlines a brief history of scholarship on vocal taxonomy, noting that most proceeds without regard to vocal technique. However, she notes that recent studies in flamenco voice have been valuable in their being scientifically motivated, such as work by Mónica Miralles and Alba Guerrero, "Timbres y colores, consideraciones técnicas y ornamentación en el cante flamenco," *Revista Logopèdia: Revista del Col·legi de Logopedes de Catalunya* 32 (2017): 28–33; Rócio Márquez Limón, "La técnica vocal en el flamenco"; and Belén Vega Rus, "La voz en el cante flamenco. Propuesta de clasificación y análisis tímbrico" (master's thesis, Universidad de Córdoba, 2018). Guerrero, "Clasificacíon de las voces flamencas." Also see Montero, "La técnica vocal," 60.

[200] Alba Guerrero Manzano, "Sistema de tipificación de recursos vocales en el cante flamenco. Práctica de seis ornamentos, efectos, ataques y vibratos" (master's thesis, ESMUC, 2018), 30. According to Guerrero, the emergent field of scientific flamencology has supported this scholarly interest as well as the influence of the methods of Professor José Miguel Vizcaya Cerro "El Chiqui de la Línea" of ESMUC. Vizcaya Cerro's students have produced integral work on flamenco vocal technique. See Cristina López Gómez, *Criterios para la transcripción manual de la colección de tonás* (Music Technology Group MTG, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2013); Mariola Membrives, "La técnica vocal en el cante flamenco. Búsquedas," *Alboreá, Revista del Instituto Andaluz de Flamenco* 38 (2017): 76–

As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, the sound of vocal damage that listeners tend to associate with a singer's personal suffering is what I am calling plaintive vocality. The myth in cante is that the sound of plaintive vocality is causally linked to injury. While it is true that this vocal sound can happen alongside the lack of knowledge of proper vocal care, this is not always the case. For while the sound of vocal damage, or plaintive vocality, has come to be associated in flamenco with authenticity and lack of formal training, it is nonetheless a sound that is objectively produced through a vocal technical process achieved by particular methods of singing. And at present, it is a vocal sound that is now widely taught as a component of flamenco pedagogy across Spain.

A prominent figure in this milieu is vocal pedagogue Alba Guerrero—once an instructor of Rosalía's at Taller de Músics.[201] She has produced several papers on the topic of cante technique, one of which was her master's thesis (2018), and she has an online presence as a vocal pedagogue on YouTube, as well as through her website, through which she hosts webinars, online master classes, and individual lessons.[202] Guerrero's pedagogical method follows a discrete system for understanding and executing cante. She identifies a five-pronged approach for singing flamenco: memorizing preexisting melodies, employing "vocal resources" (such as ornaments and extended vocal techniques), understanding meter or rhythmic feel, utilizing dynamics, and establishing a distinct vocal timbre (**Figure 5**).

80; Alba Guerrero Manzano, "La técnica vocal en el cante flamenco," Actas Congreso Investigación y Flamenco INFLA 2011 (Universidad de Sevilla, 2011). As mentioned, Rosalía also happens to be one of his alumnae.

[201] Guerrero was also the instructor of up-and-coming Gitana flamenco fusion singer María José Llergo, who released her debut album *ULTRABELLEZA* in 2023. While Llergo features only one flamenco style song on this album, her vocal style is still influenced by the decorative elements of cante. Further, the ideology of flamenco authenticity is present on this album, for example, on track "Superpoder" when Llergo sings, "Aprendí a llorar cantando / Aprendí a cantar llorando" (I learned how to cry by singing / I learned how to sing by crying).

[202] Guerrero's YouTube channels are Cante Flamenco Tech and Método Alba Guerrero – Cante Flamenco. Her website is https://www.canteflamencoglobal.com/.

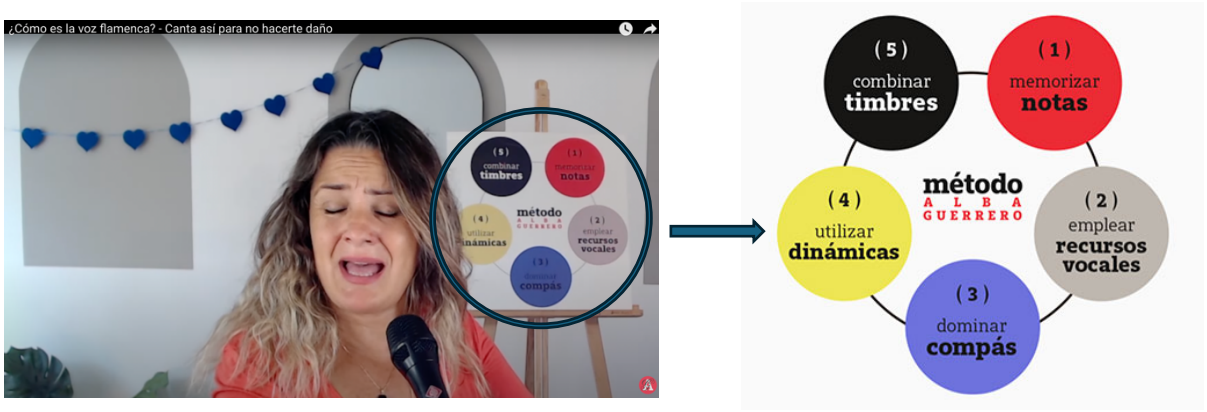

Figure 5. Método Alba Guerrero

Of particular importance for this study is her description of timbre, or what in flamenco is referred to as *metal* (metal); roughly, the amplitude and amount of harmonics or microtonalities present in the voice.[203] For Guerrero, many sub-timbres contribute to the metal of the voice, such as *timbre llorado*, *timbre susurrado*, *timbre nasal*, *timbre rajo*, and, confusingly also, *timbre metálico*. In several videos, Guerrero outlines how these timbres mimic extreme emotion through projecting or belting, adding noise to, adding resonance to, and "dirtying" or "distorting" the voice.[204] For example, timbre metálico, which is equivalent to the English term "twang" in vocal pedagogy, occurs when the aryepiglottic muscles are activated to partially close the epiglottis, which we normally open while singing and close when swallowing. The result is a distorted timbre, akin to a baby's cries. With timbre rajo, a singer's false cords are activated, which similarly create an obstacle for the voice, resulting in a "dirtied" sound. Timbre llorado is achieved by tilting the thyroid cartilage, creating a bittersweet weeping sound. And while Guerrero uses performances by legendary cantaoras to exemplify these timbres, such as a

[203] Guerrero Manzano, "La técnica vocal en el cante flamenco," 7. Montero, "La técnica vocal," 58.
[204] "¿Cómo es la voz flamenca? – Cante así para no hacerte daño" (2023), "Las cuerdas vocales en el flamenco – Cómo funciona la voz flamenca" (2022), "Ejercicio para añadir flamencura con el timbre susurrado" (2023), and more. Alba Guerrero, Método Alba Guerrero – Cante Flamenco, https://www.youtube.com/@MetodoAlbaGuerrero.

tarantas by Pastora Pavón, in contrast to Mairena and Molina, she does not portray Pavón as exuding personally experienced anguish, but rather as a singer who utilizes particular vocal techniques to convey heightened, and tragic, emotion. Put in the terms of this dissertation, Guerrero understands the plaintive vocality of flamenco, particularly techniques of timbre (metal), as a means of conveying intense affects within performance practice, not as an unfiltered expression of personal angst.

Seeing as Rosalía was a student of Guerrero, we can consider what techniques she may or may not have retained from Guerrero's pedagogy. Thinking back on "DI MI NOMBRE," I observe that Rosalía adopted the practice of memorizing Phrygian modal melodies drawn from preexisting estilos; of using vocal resources such as melismas, extended techniques of *jípio* and *quejío*, upper and lower mordents, and blown attacks; of singing dynamically in terms of registration and amplitude; as well as of maintaining the distinct rhythmic feel of particular compás. However, what is unique to Rosalía's vocal style is she does not employ many of the typical timbres that contribute to the metal of the voice.[205] It could be that she chose not to employ metal in an effort to avoid potential harm to her voice,[206] however, additionally, it was a deliberate stylistic choice.

There is no doubt that Rosalía's vocal singing style is more "open" than traditional cante, both metaphorically and anatomically speaking, as it is devoid of the quintessential distorted timbres that arise from creating anatomical obstacles in the larynx. In this way, Rosalía's singing

[205] That said, Rosalía does frequently employ the sound of timbre susurrado, which Guerrero explains is a typical timbre used in flamenco pop, such as by Niña Pastori. Alba Guerrero, "Ejercicio para añadir flamencura con el timbre susurrado – Gana flamencura," Método Alba Guerrero – Cante Flamenco, September 6, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fwfk051ecRM.

[206] Before entering formal education in cante at Taller de Músics, Rosalía had sustained vocal damage by singing flamenco without proper training, for which she sought medical care and had to undergo a year of vocal rehabilitation. Marcela Valdes, "Rosalía's Incredible Journey from Flamenco to Megastardom," *New York Times*, October 8, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/08/magazine/rosalia-flamenco.html.

is more akin to pop singing in that the space between her soft palette and tongue, her epiglottis, and her false cords—all of this area is kept open and the tongue is relaxed, to create a "cleaner" sound. In addition, another major difference in Rosalía's vocal style is that she does not practice typical flamenco vibrato, which tends to have a slow oscillation and wide pitch modulation. Guerrero mentions in an interview with vocal coach Susana Vega that she and Rosalía worked frequently on instituting her rapid vibrato in their time together at Taller de Músics, as Rosalía preferred this style because it enhanced her ability to do highly decorated melismas.[207] In addition to all of this, Rosalía herself has stated that she intended to be a global pop singer, fusing eclectic influences across flamenco and Latin and western pop.[208]

What the preceding analysis of flamenco vocal technique shows is that the difference between the plaintive vocality of flamenco and Rosalía's vocalizations is anatomical, technical, and, foremost, a difference in chosen artistic style. However, for those ascribed to the ideology of flamenco authenticity (duende), Rosalía's vocal performance is defective on a deeper level—under this model, she not only falls short mechanically, but her faulty execution devoid of typical timbral markers verifies her lack of a core expression of authentic anguish.

Let us take a look at how the invisible perils of duende affect public reception of Rosalía's music. Peter Manuel examines how in Spain—particularly in traditionalist flamenco circles—assessments of Rosalía tend to depend on listener perception of (1) "the ability to sing

[207] Alba Guerrero, "Técnica vocal en el cante flamenco. Entrevista a Alba Guerrero," Método Alba Guerrero – Cante Flamenco, April 28, 2020, https://youtube.com/watch?v=zNFvH8lYqFw&t=442s).
[208] "I have so much respect for tradition – that's why I decided to spend 10 years of my life focused on studying flamenco. But at the same time, the more I grew up, the more I knew myself – and I think that approaching things from [a point of] orthodoxy is not as fun," she says. "Freedom is a priority for me. I didn't see music in a compartmentalised way." Shaad D'Souza, "'Female energy has an erotic superiority': Spanish Pop Superstar Rosalía on Bomb Threats, Backlash and Breaking Tradition," *Guardian*, December 8, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/dec/08/female-energy-has-an-erotic-superiority-spanish-pop-superstar-rosalia.

traditional flamenco" and (2) "the presence of intangible expressiveness [duende]."[209] To demonstrate this, Manuel does not examine Rosalía's concurrent recordings, such as *El mal querer*, nor does he examine live performances of those songs, but instead he focuses on an impromptu performance of Rosalía's at Tablao Flamenco Cordobes in Barcelona in 2019, uploaded to YouTube. He examines responses to this video from various commenters who are critical of Rosalía's "mediocre singing" that lacks "certain constitutive features" of cante.[210] For these listeners, Manuel explains, "[Rosalía's] bulerías lack the intense expressivity (*pellizco*, quejío, duende) that flamenco…should convey," and therefore "by singing in this defective manner she is disrespecting the art form."[211] While Manuel qualifies that "this particular criticism would not be directed at, for example, an aged Gitano amateur who sang soulfully…no matter how poor was his intonation and how ruined was his voice."[212] In fact, for the listeners that Manuel features in this article (and it appears for Manuel himself[213]) the presence of soul (duende) is precisely verified by poor intonation and ruination of the voice (plaintive vocality), which, as we have learned, is not some mystical element, but rather, in flamenco, additional harmonics and microtonalities (metal) that occur from anatomical obstacles produced in the larynx, added noise, and the like. Nonetheless, we see that because Rosalía fails to deliver these characteristic timbres, which are viewed as denotations of duende*,* her singing is thereby regarded as fundamentally deficient.

Rosalía's position as a fusion pop singer who claims to not perform traditional flamenco clearly renders her an outsider in a context such as Tablao Cordobes, making this particular case

[209] Manuel, "The Rosalía Polemic," 55.
[210] Ibid., 46.
[211] Ibid., 47.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Manuel describes Rosalía's singing as "rather ordinary" and "arguably weak" (ibid., 41, 44).

study somewhat of a straw man method of inquiry. But sidestepping that concern, let us consider what these critiques of Rosalía's performance hinge on in wielding duende to assess her. I have outlined how duende relies on a flamenco singer "robbing" herself of a kind of conscious skill. Elsewhere, Lorca portrays Pavón as "crazed, torn like a medieval mourner…[singing] without voice…but…with duende."[214] *Without voice but with duende.* The presumption here is that something on the part of the singer is "stolen," "forgotten," so that the soulful element can present itself; a notion that proves so crucial to the listeners Manuel features, who likewise prize a sense of natural instinct.[215] The problem with this view is that it portrays a cantaora as not an artist, but a vessel. It is not just that the theory of duende is narrow minded, it is also damaging, as it relies on the reductive assumption that the powerful affects produced by flamenco singing must be a result of the singer's own personally experienced suffering, over and above their artistic intent.[216] Furthermore, as I will argue, it is a perspective opposed to recognition of female agency, informed by patriarchal constructs deeply lodged within flamenco practice, and reflective of an underlying culture of machismo. Such constructs permeate reception of Rosalía's music, particularly in Spain.

"El flamenco es machista. Pero como todo."

In an interview in *El mundo* with Luis Alemany in August 2017, Rosalía is prompted to comment on flamenco's chauvinistic tendencies. She describes the art form as "a man's world,"

[214] "La Niña de los Peines se levantó como una loca, tronchada igual que una llorona medieval…y sentó a cantar sin voz…pero…con duende" (Lorca, "Duende," 53).
[215] "Para buscar al duende, no hay mapa ni ejercicio" (Seeking duende, there is neither map nor discipline). Ibid., 50.
[216] Rosalía herself appears opposed to this view, given her recent funding of a $15,000 singing scholarship at ESMUC, which covers full tuition and living expenses for one candidate in order to, in the words of the college, "foster the link between **talent and training**" [emphasis in the original]. "Nueva Beca de Cante Flamenco en la ESMUC Impulsada por ROSALÍA," ESMUC, August 2, 2024, https://www.esmuc.cat/es/nova-beca-de-cante-flamenco-a-lesmuc-impulsada-per-rosalia/.

and elaborates, "but the world is made for and by men. Of course flamenco is machista. Like everything else."[217] As a matter of course, this clickbait-worthy quote was made the headline of the article, leading dozens of readers to take to the comments section to ridicule Rosalía:

> Machista, machista, machista. A tree is machista, a mailbox is machista, bread is machista. We are all machistas.
>
> The only widespread machistas in this society are the feminists.
>
> Why don't the feminazis…leave us men the fuck alone??
>
> Poor feminists full of hate, envy, and ignorance.[218]

Such comments exemplify the sexist culture to which Rosalía entered as a public figure and highlight the underlying misogyny at work in Spanish life, despite widely held notions that Spain has moved beyond its regressive Francoist past. At the time of this interview, the far-right Spanish party Vox was gathering steam, and, in 2019, won seats in parliament for the first time. At the forefront of their campaign were direct attacks to women's rights, such as a strong anti-abortion stance as well as a desire to repeal the 2004 Spanish law protecting women from domestic violence. In fact, Vox's Andalusian leader, Francisco Serrano, popularized the "feminazi" rhetoric.[219] Rosalía's statements, then, are not just about the regressive gender

[217] "Un mundo de hombres…pero es que el mundo el que está ha hecho por y para los hombres. Claro que el flamenco es machista. Pero como lo es todo." Luis Alemany, "Rosalía: 'El flamenco es machista. Pero como todo,'" *El mundo*, August 15, 2017, https://www.elmundo.es/cultura/musica/2017/08/15/59917837468aeb862c8b45bb.html.
[218] "El árbol es machista, el buzón es machista, el pan es machista. Todos somos machistas." / "Los únicos machistas generalizados de esta sociedad son los feministas." / "Porque las feminazis…nos dejan de una puñetera vez a los hombres en paz??" / "Pobres feministas llenas de odio, envidia e ignorancia."
[219] Sam Jones, "Far Right Breakthrough in Andalucía Send Shockwave Through Spanish Politics," *Guardian*, December 9, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/09/far-right-andalucia-seville-vox-party-shockwave-spanish-politics.

dynamics within the art form of flamenco (its themes and its performance practices),[220] but also within Spanish culture more broadly. These two threads of gender politics within flamenco and the Spanish nation are also powerfully intertwined, as the flamenco performer (the "Spanish Gypsy") has been historically coded as female, and consistently positioned, for better or for worse, as nationally emblematic.[221] In other words, Spanish political anxieties, in being consistently mapped to the regulation of women's bodies during both the Restoration period (1875–1931) and under the authoritarian Francoist government (1937–75), were projected onto flamenco and the women who performed it. Such projections were at base influenced by principles of machismo and marianismo, both inherent to the ideologies of the Spanish Catholic Church.

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of the *antiflamenquismo* movement, composed of not only the "left-leaning intellectuals" of the Concurso, but also the Catholic Church and its conservative allies who saw commercial flamenco and its performance contexts as dangerously popular, overtly erotic, and morally corrupt, fueling the idea that flamenco served as a symbol of Spanish imperial decline.[222] *Cafés cantantes* were particularly problematic, as

[220] For more on machismo and regressive gender dynamics within flamenco performance practice, see Washabaugh, *Flamenco*; Manuel, "Andalusian, Gypsy, and Class Identity"; Chuse, *The Cantaoras*.
[221] Holguín, *Flamenco Nation*, 20–22. The "Spanish Gypsy" was also exoticized by flamenco audiences during this time period and fetishized by Lorca as racially Black in his duende essay when he describes the sounds of cante jondo as "sonidos negros" (black sounds). I am reminded of Farah Jasmine Griffin's "When Malindy Sings," in her proposal that for the "literate male poet," the sound of authenticity is embodied in the form of the Black woman's lamentations. As she argues, "The spectacle of the black woman's voice at times of crisis as well as the myth of the black woman's voice as the source of and represented by black male creativity are both evidence of this attempt to channel the power and subversive potential of the music." "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (Columbia University Press, 2004). Additionally and importantly, the question of race in reference to the Gitano people is a highly contested space in both flamenco studies and Spanish cultural studies. While there is consensus that Gitanos comprise an ethnic minority in Spain, there is less agreement regarding whether they can be considered raced, specifically as Black. See Lou Charnon-Deutsch, *The Spanish Gypsy: The History of a European Obsession* (Penn State University Press, 2004); Joshua Goode, *Impurity of Blood: Defining Race in Spain, 1870–1930* (Louisiana State University Press, 2009); K. Meira Goldberg, *Sonidos Negros: On the Blackness of Flamenco* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
[222] Holguín, *Flamenco Nation*, 22, 65–66, 88.

these were the locales highly sought after by foreign tourists where all manner of debased behavior might occur, featuring female singers, dancers, and "women of uncertain moral status."[223] Decrees to outlaw cafés cantantes thereby aligned with the need to protect young women's purity, as "a women's mere presence in a bar or taverna brought into question her reputation, in the gender-separated and strongly machista cultural terrain of southern Spain. Good women belonged at home."[224] The position of the intellectual avant-garde with respect to flamenco was to rescue the art form from debased commercialization, disentangle flamenco women from the position of the sensual dancer, and thereby elevate the art form to a highbrow status through the archetype of the female mother-martyr of cante jondo. This way flamenco could better represent Spanish culture and uplift its global status. The unfortunate consequence of this crusade was that the *antiflamenquistas* objectified female flamenco singers through the romantic idea of the suffering cantaora, a reductive and mirror-image archetype drawn from the Madonna/Whore complex central to the Catholic Church and Andalusian social life.[225] The female cantaora, while dislodged from the erotic, was nonetheless stereotyped as a holder of the domestic realm.

After the Spanish Civil War, Francisco Franco mobilized the religious sentiments of the Catholic Church with his fascist campaign, nearly obliterating all of women's rights and legal protections gained in the Second Republic (1931–36), enacting policies that discouraged women from participating in the workforce or receiving education. Under the Franco regime, the image of a patriarchal family served as a symbol for a unified state. As a result, "more than merely

[223] Ibid., 66. See also Chuse, *The Cantaoras*, 62.
[224] Chuse, *The Cantaoras*, 86.
[225] The Madonna/Whore dichotomy is also a hallmark of flamenco poetics. As Chuse describes it, female depictions in flamenco "range from glorification to extreme misogyny…[revealing] strong roots in patriarchal gitano social order, in deep-seated beliefs about women that stem from Spanish Catholicism, as well as pervading influences of romanticism" (ibid., 231).

discriminating against women, *franquista* practices virtually annihilated women. To be a woman in Franco's Spain was to be a mother, one who operates within the realm of the private, and who therefore has *no* standing—not just less standing—in the public sphere."[226] Simultaneously, overly simplified forms of flamenco and Andalusian folk culture were wielded for propagandist purposes and to stimulate the tourist economy. Known as *nacionalflamenquismo*, the art form was depoliticized, sanitized, and male dominated.[227] This form of flamenco also ironically relied heavily on female objectification, with flamenco women positioned at the forefront of advertisements, heralded for their beauty. Such portrayals were a reassertion of the female veneration/degradation complex, as flamenco women served as sensuous objects—the exception to the rule for women in Spanish daily life who had to remain pious, domestic, and obedient. While dissident artists such as Antonio Mairena once again attempted to liberate flamenco from its nationalist facsimiles, his work nonetheless furthered the nostalgic and regressive archetype of the suffering Gitano from years prior. And while in cante flamenco, such archetypes are seen as positive aspects of the genre and even reasons for the art form's power, they are constructs that are nonetheless preceded by a legacy that has inversely negative effects on cantaoras' agency.

Returning to Rosalía's interview in *El mundo*, both she and Alemany remark on the paradox of how flamenco has produced highly prized cantaoras, despite the fact of the genre's underlying machismo. Another way to frame this is that flamenco women are venerated as spectacles, yet not treated as equals in practice. In less than a year following this interview, Rosalía launched *El mal querer*, and in it addressed the chauvinism central to both flamenco and Spanish culture. She did this not by featuring herself as yet another spectacular cantaora, but by

[226] William Washabaugh, *Flamenco: Passion, Politics and Popular Culture* (Berg Publishers, s1996), 110.
[227] Ibid., 111.

positioning herself as an artistic agent and author, narrativizing and critiquing sexist culture from the inside. On *El mal querer*, through a deft fusion of flamenco and pop, she exposes and mourns for the experience of women amid repressive social conditions, specifically, in a scene of domestic violence.

Gender and Power in *El mal querer*

As discussed, *El mal querer* is a concept album, structured in chapters, that tells the story of a woman who will live a tragedy at the hands of her male partner. As a whole, the album works as a commentary on gendered power dynamics, through adaptations of flamenco laments. We start with "MALAMENTE (Capítulo 1: Augurio)," which illustrates the notion of a bad omen within a play on an Andalusian cadence in a 4-beat tango compás. This progresses to "QUE NO SALGA LA LUNA (Capítulo 2: Boda)," an up-tempo wedding lament in the style of a *bulerías*. Bulerías is a fast, festive palo that operates with a certain degree of pathos. It is a song form that is typically sung in a 12-beat meter in E Phrygian alongside variations in E major, accompanied by poetic themes of love and loss as well as an antiphonal structure in which guitar and/or a chorus will accent or echo particular words and phrases to underscore the emotion. Rosalía draws out these contrasts typical of bulerías with poetic themes of dark and light, life and death, and by playing the role of both husband and wife, also reflected in the song's artwork (**Figure 6**), inspired by *The Two Fridas* (1939) by Frida Kahlo.

Figure 6. “QUE NO SALGA LA LUNA” artwork

In “QUE NO SALGA,” the wedding portends impending doom. Rosalía sings from the perspective of both male and female characters, making their thoughts visible—she exposes the bride’s naïveté and the dark side of the groom’s desire. The song opens with a sample of a traditional bulerías recording, “Mi cante por bulerías” (1960) by La Paquera de Jerez, featuring just a one-bar loop of the opening guitar riff, which rotates on a pair of ominous-sounding chords, Dm/F and E. Rosalía begins to sing “Ay ali ali ali ya” in E Phrygian as palmas enter, and then, as the verse begins, the high-end frequencies filter out, creating a muffled, darkened bed to accompany Rosalía’s voice. She sings:

Groom: “How lucky I was the day I found her.”

Bride: "I was at knifepoint against the wall."[228]

The musical atmosphere is continuously foreboding, which Rosalía poetically supports by toying with the idea of illumination. The bride's eyes are shining so bright that the moon does not even need to rise to light the way ("Que no salga la luna que no tiene pa' que" and "Con tus ojitos, prima / Yo me alumbraré"). Also shining are the sharp blades that catch the light, serving as metaphors for the husband's insatiable longing to capture his bride ("Como las hojas de un cuchillo / Brillaban los sacais suyos"). The diamond ring the bride wears also sparkles, a symbol of her naïve distraction from her impending fate ("¡Cómo brilla! Diamantes").

During the bridge, the death knell of the partnership is most pointedly expressed. In this section, the emotion shifts as Rosalía takes us to E major and the guitar loop stops. Here, she sings with the female chorus about the bride's beauty, and how she looks like a queen. But just as fast as the bridge comes, it evaporates, as we descend back to E Phrygian, the guitar sample reenters, and the perspective shifts to the husband. Rosalía sings, "Whether she wants it or not, she's going to be with me until she dies."[229]

Rosalía continues with themes of love and fatalism throughout the album, but most starkly transforms them on "DE AQUÍ NO SALES (Capítulo 4: Disputa)," a revenge lament. As mentioned, the song records the physical violence the female protagonist suffers at the hands of her husband. After the initial stark vocal section chronicling this scene, there is the sound of an explosion, and a beat enters with palmas and a distorted kick drum—a play on bulerías, wherein

[228] "Que suerte la que yo tuve / El día que la encontré / La señal estuvo a punto de navaja / Sobre la pared." Translation unknown. *Nueve Sevillas*, directed by Pedro G. Romero and Gonzalo García Pelayo (Magnética Cine, 2020).
[229] "Quiera o no quiera, quiera, ella no quiera, va estar conmigo ella hasta que se muera." Translation unknown. *Nueve Sevillas*, 2020.

Rosalía, with the assistance of Pablo Díaz-Reixa (known as El Guincho) who co-produced the entirety of the album, inverts the traditional schema to a count of 3/4 followed by 6/8.

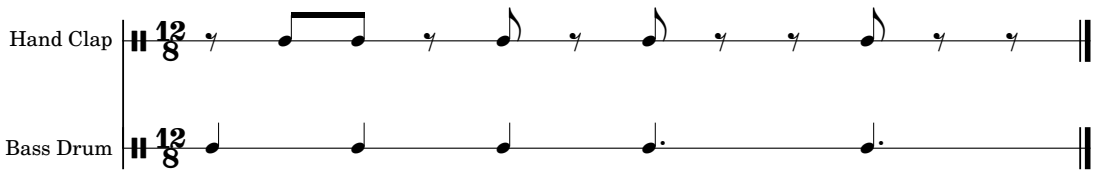

Figure 7. "DE AQUÍ NO SALES" rhythmic pattern

As the drums build, we hear chops of Rosalía's voice in various registers alongside *gritos* (shouts), suggesting the bride's defiance; like the nymph Echo, devoid of language, however, rhythmic and unrelenting. In the video we see Rosalía emboldened, hopping on a flaming motorcycle, dancing with hard-edged choreography, and speeding along an expressway with her entourage. With this audiovisual spectacle, Rosalía not only challenges the role of women in flamenco as purely sensual or victimized, but further confronts female roles more broadly, in that these scenes signal that our protagonist is able to deliver retribution for what assails her.

As the album further progresses, Rosalía emphasizes that all is not lost for our main character. The bride continues to gain agency despite her circumstance, taking back power to construct her own reality. Overall, on *El mal querer*, Rosalía uses flamenco's tropes of lamentation not to express her own personal anguish, but to mourn for women who have suffered at the hands of gender violence, and to offer potential for self-realization.

Conclusion

In 2022, Rosalía released her third album *MOTOMAMI*, a commentary on fame, at times interspliced with feminist sloganeering, and influenced by reggaeton, Neoperreo, and other Latin and alternative pop genres. The album also signaled Rosalía's departure from nuevo flamenco, in a move to solidify herself as a global pop star. She nonetheless chose to include one flamenco track, "Bulerías," her first time ever "daring to name" a song after a flamenco palo.[230] This nomenclature signified an attempt to point directly towards flamenco; a metacommentary on the community, the art form, and Rosalía's place within it. While on *El mal querer*, flamenco laments were utilized to critique and comment on the nature of female positionality, on "Bulerías," Rosalía uses flamenco to create, essentially, a "diss track." "Bulerías" features four different flamenco estilos, however, with new lyrics in which Rosalía responds to her "haters": "And although they may curse me behind my back" and "I'm just as much of a cantaora when I'm wearing a Versace tracksuit."[231] The track swings through dramatic filter sweeps of a palmas sample with over-the-top formant and pitch shifts and comically heavy use of Auto-Tune, as she protests, "Get out of my way / Get out of my way."[232] From this track, one gets the sense that Rosalía has been wounded by her detractors' commentary, especially that of flamenco traditionalists. The bitterness (and pride) is palpable, and sounds out through her voice, which takes plaintive vocality and stretches it to the point of parody, however, without a punch line. While the track shows her command over cante technique, in the end, it fails to deliver a fully realized message. Instead, Rosalía extracts from the flamenco art form in order to deliver what is at base a subtweet. And although she may have the power and the platform to take aim at her

[230] Rosalía, "Rosalía & Motomami: The Full Interview," Jaime Altozano, April 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSGlJ00w8Zw&t=2116s.
[231] "Y aunque a mí me maldigan a mis espalda'" and "Yo soy igual de cantaora con un chándal de Versace."
[232] "Quítate / Quítate."

enemies using the very form of communication that they value most, the question is, should she do so?

"Bulerías" illuminates how the relationship between Rosalía and those from whom she derives her inspiration is a power dynamic that is enabled by the complexity of identity and by the condition of subordination. In *Flamenco Deep Song*, Timothy Mitchell questions how flamenco laments, which have long acted as an expression of trauma for the marginalized community of Southern Spain, can be reconceived as an aesthetics for the more fortunate.[233] As we see with Rosalía, an artist can be capable of using a lament art form such as flamenco with intriguing results, but they can also use it with the power to harm. In this way, Rosalía's work acts as a kind of agency, one with "two faces," as anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner has described, wherein subjects express intentionality through pursuit of their creative projects, while at the same time, exercising such work within structures of domination. She writes,

> In one field of meaning, "agency" is about intentionality and the pursuit of (culturally defined) projects. In the other field of meaning, agency is about power, about acting within relations of social inequality, asymmetry, and force. In fact, "agency" is never merely one or the other. Its two "faces"—as (the pursuit of) "projects" or as (the exercise of or against) "power"—either blend or bleed into one another…power itself is double-edged, operating from above as domination and from below as resistance.[234]

In the end, it is clear that one must be attuned to the ethical dilemma that presents itself in carefully attending to the full picture Rosalía offers, and in deconstructing the ideologies central to flamenco. For, the more we uphold Rosalía's artistry and highlight her position as a professional mourner, the more we risk neglecting the custodians of the flamenco art form who

[233] Timothy Mitchell, *Flamenco Deep Song* (Yale University Press, 1994), 216.
[234] Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Duke University Press, 2006), 139.

are overshadowed and possibly disempowered by her vision. In this way, we see that although the ideology of duende central to flamenco that exalts plaintive vocalities as measures of authentic experience may be erroneous, it nevertheless serves a purpose for flamenco purists who wish to guard against outside takeover and trivialization of the genre. At the same time, another risk posed to flamenco singers if the ideology of duende persists is that, in maintaining this philosophy, artistic agency is rescinded from those who require it most; the cantaoras of Andalusia. Perhaps the power that cantaoras have been gleaning from personal experienced suffering is worth re-evaluating. If anything, the preceding analysis offers that female vocalists need not obtain their power from felt proximity or personal narrative, but from the execution and expression of their craft.

Chapter 3: "King of Sorrow": Sade's Quiet Protest

> Popular culture…is an arena that is *profoundly* mythic…It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time.
>
> —Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" (1993)

"What is she mourning?" asks journalist Ekow Eshun in his profile of Helen Folasade Adu, the British-Nigerian artist known as Sade.[235] Eshun remarks that while on previous albums, "Sade has never more than hinted at unrest beneath the smooth patina of her music," by contrast, her new album *Lovers Rock* (2000), "bubbles with restless discontent."[236] Sade had been on hiatus for eight years, a time of intense speculation regarding her personal life. Notoriously tight-lipped, she tended not to reveal intimate matters. Still, Eshun could not help wonder about Sade's private tumult, going as far to attribute the prevalence of sad songs on her long-awaited fifth album, *Lovers Rock*, to events that transpired in her life. Perhaps the somber tone of the album, he surmises, "has to do with what's happened [to her] in the [past] eight years."[237] Overall, the tendency to explicate the apparent gravity of this album through fragmentary readings of Sade's past was a common thread in critical response.[238]

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[235] "Sade" also refers to Adu and her band, including instrumentalists Paul Denman, Andrew Hale, and Stuart Matthewman. I will be using the name to refer to Adu's artistic moniker alone.
[236] Ekow Eshun, "Sade's Complex Relationship with Fame Can Still Teach Us Something, 15 Years Later," *Fader*, January 16, 2015, https://www.thefader.com/2015/01/16/sade-lovers-rock-cover-story-interview.
[237] Ibid.
[238] "Experience—she is now divorced, with a young daughter…resonates throughout her new CD." Teresa Wiltz, "Deeper Sade in 'Lovers Rock,'" *Washington Post*, November 15, 2000, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2000/11/15/deeper-sade-in-lovers-rock/14a47cb9-b0b9-4d5a-b162-447a5a68d899/. Also in a retrospective review of *Lovers Rock* in 2020 by Hanif Abdurraqib: "An album that is drenched in mourning, in an almost predetermined condition of grief. More than any Sade album before it, *Lovers Rock* is sonically sparse, and plays more like a memoir than a piece of music." "*Lovers Rock* Turns 20," *Stereogum*, November 13, 2020, https://www.stereogum.com/2106825/sade-lovers-rock/reviews/the-anniversary/.

The sound of grief exhibited on *Lovers Rock* was a frequent talking point for journalists, for since her debut album *Diamond Life* (1984), Sade had been alternatively viewed as a glamor queen, whose voice served as a conduit for detached sensuality. Such perceptions of Sade are found in reviews of her early work, both positive and negative. In two complimentary reviews by Stephen Holden of *The New York Times*, he observes: "Sade…sings with a vibratoless alto [with] cool, seductive insouciance"; and "[Sade]…possesses…a silky pop-soul voice…[and] has been unofficially anointed the ice goddess of dispassionate torch music."[239] In "rock-ist" magazine *Creem*, journalists link Sade's vocal quality with a lack of depth; John Mendelssohn remarks that "while her intonation's nearly flawless…You get the feeling she'd come across more expressive (if not so infinitely cool, in the imperturbable sense) if she threw in a hint of vibrato every 16 bars or so," while similarly, Richard C. Walls attests that "Sade projects a stunningly exotic image but her voice, breathy but generally devoid of much inflection, is ordinary."[240] In the early stages of her career, journalists tended to view Sade as lacking what they saw as proper emotional interiority, reflected in her subdued vocality. When critics were particularly disapproving, they critiqued her for being inauthentic.

On *Lovers Rock*, something changed—critics sensed definitive vulnerability and sorrow. But how? After all, Sade had been long accused of diverting emotion at every turn, and, in her scant interviews, was always demure and brief. In examining the public reception of *Lovers Rock*, I have found a pattern in critics' tendency to corroborate their finding of Sade's personal anguish by way of her voice. For example, in *The Guardian*: "That voice has matured: once

[239] Stephen Holden, "What the Charts Say About Pop Music," *New York Times*, May 5, 1985; Stephen Holden, "In an Exhibitionist World, Sade's Quiet Songs Shine," *New York Times*, June 19, 1988.
[240] John Mendelssohn, "Sade: Promise (Epic)," *Creem*, May 1, 1986; Richard C. Walls, "Sade: Diamond Life (Portrait)," *Creem*, May 1, 1985.

frigid and frosty, she is now the queen of pain";[241] in *The Washington Post*: "Experience…has seasoned that voice, giving it depth and richness";[242] and in *NME*: "Sade sounds so vulnerable, you can hear the sobs of a distraught girlfriend."[243] In a glowing review of the album in *Vibe*, Cheo Hodari Coker asserts that Sade's vocal execution is as of yet unheard of: "Sade elevates the timbre of her voice, singing with a volume and passion she has rarely displayed."[244] In all these cases, we see listeners identifying voice quality as verification of Sade's sadness, a process that forms the basis for what I have termed *plaintive vocality*. Such apparent positive changes in Sade's voice heard on *Lovers Rock*, tied to notions of her authenticity, lead critics to ascribe her new artistic value built on emotional and expressive depth.[245] Yet, for all the rhapsodizing on Sade's newfound vocality, what critics heard as different was not a matter of her voice at all. In fact, Sade's vocal delivery, timbre, and stylizations on both *Diamond Life* and *Lovers Rock* remained consistent. What shifted, then, was not her voice, but rather "the power structure within which the vocalizer and listener [were] situated."[246] While critics appraised Sade's voice to determine the profundity of her work (or lack thereof), considering her unchanging vocality, it was instead the classificatory and prejudicial space of genre,[247] and its attendant power relationships, that were operating in the background to assess her.

In this chapter, by analyzing critical reception of Sade's albums released six years apart, I show how claims of plaintive vocality were wrongly utilized to undermine or exalt her

[241] "The Lovely Noise of Leaking Plumbing; Sade: Lovers Rock (Epic)," *Guardian*, November 10, 2000, https://www.theguardian.com/friday_review/story/0,3605,394987,00.html.
[242] Wiltz, "Deeper Sade," 2000.
[243] "Lovers Rock," *NME*, September 12, 2005, https://www.nme.com/reviews/reviews-nme-3374-336027.
[244] Cheo Hodari Coker, "Sade: Lovers Rock," *Vibe*, December 1, 2000.
[245] See Coulter for claims of "authenticity" viewed as measures of female singers' musical value ("Notions of Gendered Authenticity" 18).
[246] Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 31.
[247] My working definition of genre is a hegemonic classification that identifies a set of stylistic and timbral markers as belonging to a shared tradition or market category.

performances by supposedly corroborating her inner emotional life. Conversely, I argue that genre prejudices—under the guise of vocal analysis—were instrumentalized by critics to discount Sade's artistry. This is because in musical listening practice, genre recognition functions as a method of appraisal that is fundamentally racialized and gendered. Specifically, as a Black woman, Sade was negatively circumscribed by musical genre and thus, per Sylvia Wynter, "genres of the human"[248]—her selfhood and artistry flattened by critics. On *Diamond Life*, Sade was rendered as a vacant sexual object, and on *Lovers Rock*, as a victim of suffering—both conceptions that undermined her artistry. To move beyond these reductive archetypes of Black female artistry, I instead read Sade's work through the lens of women's lament and professional mourning. Within this theoretical framework, we can better understand how Sade expertly conjures grief as a means of Black feminist expression, thereby highlighting her artistic labor and authorship. Furthermore, by analyzing Sade's musical contributions within the context of women's mourning practices, we can observe how Sade stretches our working definition of women's lament, thus expanding the art form's conceptual limits beyond its boundaries in lament scholarship.

In what follows, I first situate Sade within the lineage of professional mourning through an overview of musical practices and strategies of Black diasporic lamentation, such as in the sorrow songs and the blues. Then, I outline the public reception of both *Diamond Life* and *Lovers Rock*, as well as Sade's reflections regarding the creation of these albums. While critics tended to perceive a dramatic shift in Sade's vocal delivery between these two works, wherein *Lovers Rock* appeared to exhibit a newly plaintive vocality resultant from her personal tribulations, I instead examine Sade's voice across both albums through analysis of her recordings from these

[248] David Scott and Sylvia Wynter, "The Re-enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Small Axe* 8 (2000): 207.

periods to show the consistency of her vocality. Following this, I propose that genre biases formed the basis for judgments of Sade's artistic worth under the pretense of supposedly legitimate assessments of her voice. With *Diamond Life*, associations with smooth jazz and "quiet storm" made it difficult for listeners to recognize the lamenting and political nature of Sade's music, while, on *Lovers Rock*, her engagement with lovers rock reggae allowed listeners to register her laments, however, they did so through the lens of her autobiography. In both cases, genre prejudices led critics to overlook Sade's sociopolitical narratives. To understand these listener orientations, I draw from scholarship in musicology, sociology of music, and cultural studies, and show how musical genre and style have been historically mapped to human difference, thereby predetermining the musical frameworks in which Black female artists are allowed to self-realize. Finally, I analyze renditions of Sade's *Lovers Rock* laments from her audiovisual concert album *Lovers Live* (2002). Reading this music through strategies of Black lamentation, such as antiphony, and Black feminist frameworks for performance, such as Uri McMillan's "avatar," I propose that Sade acts as a professional mourner, whose lamentations forge an empowered channel to express and process feelings of gendered and racial traumas. Far from solely expressing her own anguish, Sade utilizes emotion as a form of artistic agency and Black feminist communication.

Sounding Sorrow

As stated in the introduction, the disciplinary studies of the ritual laments and laments of art and popular music have faced scholarly division. Such is also the case in the history of scholarship on Black musical lament traditions, such as the sorrow songs, where we see a historical rift regarding what counts as authentic lamentation. While W. E. B. Du Bois described the sorrow

songs sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in prototypical lament language, saying they "tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world,"[249] Zora Neale Hurston, on the other hand, rebuffed the idea that such "entertainment" could express Black mourning, arguing that "there has been no genuine presentation of Negro songs to white audiences."[250] Musical laments of Black experience, for Hurston, were those slave songs performed in private ritual, such as spirituals or work songs, which were only later appropriated for the public stage.[251] Hurston's sentiment is echoed by Saidiya Hartman in her assessment of Black performance under enslavement. In these scenes of subjection aimed towards the delight of white audiences, she argues, "will is indistinguishable from submission, and bodily integrity bound to violence," thereby rendering such spectacles as absent of agency.[252] In other words, Hartman elucidates that a performance devoid of autonomy cannot be regarded as a creative act. She then contrasts the notion of performance to Black "practice"—music sounded privately in spaces of communal investment.[253] Such tensions between ritual and staged music-making in the history of Black lamentation elucidate the difficulty in defining something like the sorrow songs, given the precarity of Black performance in the first place.[254]

Zooming out to address this discourse, Paul Gilroy, in his analysis of Black diasporic musical forms, examines how such music has become instrumentalized within cultural criticism to circumscribe authentic Black expression.[255] For Gilroy, the quest for authenticity in musical

[249] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 246.
[250] Hurston, as quoted in Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 92.
[251] See Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (HarperCollins, 1963).
[252] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 33.
[253] Hartman notes that in the transgressive act of "stealing away," Black people could formulate identities within "zones of erotic investment" and in the safety of Black communal contexts such as forbidden get-togethers (ibid., 59).
[254] See also Eileen Southern, *The Music of the Black Americas: A History* (Harvard University Press, 1971); Scott Herring, "Du Bois and the Minstrels," *MELUS* 22, no. 2 (1997): 3–17.
[255] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 92.

forms of the Black diaspora—a realm of inherent admixture—is often an errand in search of racial essence.[256] Rather than provide a narrow definition of the songs of Black experience according to performance practice, genre, or style, Gilroy formulates the shared ontology of sad songs within Black musical practice. He argues that such songs help to communicate information, organize consciousness, deploy political agency, and "systematically transcode other forms of yearning and mourning associated with the histories of dispersal and exile and the remembrance of unspeakable [racial] terror."[257] In other words, such sad songs generate mechanisms for memorializing struggle and perseverance. Understanding musical forms of Black lamentation as vehicles for political and creative thought is present in many scholarly inquiries into Black popular and art music traditions, such as hip hop,[258] soul/R&B,[259] and the blues.[260] Daphne Brooks, for example, outlines a conception of the "'modern sorrow song' as

[256] Ibid., 95. See also Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays, Vol. 2: Identity and Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2019); Ronald Radano, "The Sound of Racial Feeling," *Daedalus* 142, no. 4 (2013): 126–34; Matthew D. Morrison, *Blacksound: Making Race and Popular Music in the United States* (University of California Press, 2024).
[257] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 36–38, 201.
[258] On hip hop, laments, and sorrow songs, see Joseph Winters, "Contemporary Sorrow Songs: Traces of Mourning, Lament, and Vulnerability in Hip Hop," *African American Review* 46, no. 1 (2013): 9–20; Murray Forman, "'Things Done Changed': Recalibrating the Real in Hip-Hop," *Popular Music and Society* 44, no. 4 (2020): 451–77; Damariyé L. Smith, "'Not You Too': Drake, Heartbreak, and the Romantic Communication of Black Male Vulnerability," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 40, no. 1 (2023): 41–54. For a detailed overview of Black feminist interventions in hip hop discourse, see Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 721–37.
[259] On soul/R&B laments, see, especially, Emily Lordi, *The Meaning of Soul: Black Music and Resilience Since the 1960s* (Duke University Press, 2020); Daphne Brooks, "'Bring the Pain': Post-Soul Memory, Neo-Soul Affect, and Lauryn Hill in the Black Public Sphere," in *Taking It to the Bridge: Music as Performance*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Richard Pettengill (University of Michigan Press, 2013); Daphne Brooks, "Open Channels: Some Thoughts on Blackness, the Body, and Sound(ing) Women in the (Summer) Time of Trayvon," *Performance Research* 19, no. 3 (2014): 62–68; Tennille Nicole Allen and Antonia Randolph, "Listening for the Interior in Hip-Hop and R&B Music," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 6, no. 1 (2020); Codee Spinner, "Girl Group Lament: The Shangri-Las, the Supremes, and Racial Melancholy," *Women and Music*: *A Journal of Gender and Culture* 28, no. 1 (2024): 82–99; Alexander Weheliye, *Feenin: R&B Music and the Materiality of BlackFem Voices and Technology* (Duke University Press, 2023); Shana L. Redmond, "'Sing About Me': Social Media Memorial and Inventory Form," *Current Musicology*, no. 99/100 (2017).
[260] Formative studies on blues lament and spirituals include: Baraka, *Blues People*; James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," *Playboy*, 1964; Harriet J. Ottenheimer, "Catharsis, Communication, and Evocation: Alternative Views of the Sociopsychological Functions of Blues Singing," *Ethnomusicology* 23, no. 1 (1979): 75–86; James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Seabury Press, 1972); Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Anti-Slavery Office, 1845).

innovated by Black women musicians" such as Lauryn Hill, as those that "articulate the complexities of existential sorrow born out of forced migration, subjection and captivity."[261] In her work on the blues, Angela Davis casts the blues as tradition of lamentation particular to Black women. She argues that "the omnipresent blues seem to symbolize, in a fundamental though generalized way, the mystifying, all-pervasive—and seemingly insurmountable—but obscure social forces that have created the overall context of misery and oppression."[262] For Davis, Black blues women lamented their fate as a form of speaking truth to experience; taking female oppression "from the silent realm of the private sphere and reconstruct[ing] it as a public problem."[263] Tammy Kernodle has also posited women's blues laments as means for a marginalized collective to expose societal hierarchies, and thereby act as tools for social critique. Kernodle, however, goes further to chart a genealogy of Black women's blues laments to origins in African ritual traditions. She indicates that "like the African lament, the blues gave women the means to convert private expression into public music making. Through her 'wailing,' 'moaning,' and 'crying,' the rural blues singer…articulated the black woman's perspective of life…and provided a voice for a segment of the population that through racial and sexual politics had been suppressed."[264] In sum, Kernodle traces Black women's blues to the African ritual lament and posits Black female singers in popular traditions, like the chief mourner of the ritual, as those in charge voicing sociocultural critique and deploying political and creative agency. The

[261] Brooks, "Trayvon," 66.
[262] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (Knopf, 1998), 235.
[263] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 116.
[264] Tammy Kernodle, "Having Her Say: The Blues as the Black Woman's Lament," *Women's Voices Across Musical Worlds* (2004): 213. Amiri Baraka also traces this history in *Blues People*, 1963.

intellectual work on Black lamentation and Black female lamenters assists me in framing such vocalists under the terms of this dissertation: as professional mourners.[265]

A Smooth Operator?

It may seem a self-evident point that a pop singer like Sade is a professional. However, as previously mentioned, when she released her first album *Diamond Life* in 1984, she was viewed as a mere sex symbol. Public reception honed in on her subdued vocality as a sign of artistic defect, while positing her beauty as her principal virtue. In eminent rock critic Robert Christgau's lukewarm review of the album, he declares that "there's not much range to her grainy voice," stating that her main asset is her fashion model looks.[266] Jeffrey Ressner similarly remarks, "If image is really everything in music these days, then [Sade] is a top contender," and goes on to assert that "Sade's brand of soft jazz-pop is sometimes infused with emotion yet more often than not, Adu seems cool and distant. She tells her listeners about romance, but rarely shares her innermost feelings with them."[267] Even well-meaning writers such as Stephen Holden take on a similar tack: "Stunningly photogenic, Miss Adu possesses a dusky, haunting pop-jazz alto whose blasé sensuality perfectly matches her sleek appearance."[268] In reviews both positive and negative from this period, the interpretations remain consistent: critics view Sade and her voice as lacking emotional depth and as exemplifying seduction. Even in a 2010 retrospective profile on Sade, journalist Sasha Frere-Jones does not stray far from the same rhetoric. He waxes

[265] For studies on professional mourning in the African tradition specifically, see Agawu, "Music in the Funeral Traditions of the Akpafu," 75–105; Bade Ajuwon, *Funeral Dirges of Yoruba Hunters* (Nok Publishers, 1982); Blakely, "Performing Dangerous Thoughts," 1993; J. H. Nketia, *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People* (Negro Universities Press, 1969); Wilce, *Crying Shame*.
[266] "Sade," Robert Christgau: Dean of American Rock Critics, accessed March 5, 2025, https://www.robertchristgau.com/get_artist.php?name=sade.
[267] Jeffrey Ressner, "Music Review: Sade," *Hollywood Reporter*, December 26, 1985.
[268] Stephen Holden, "The Pop Life; 'Diamond Life,' Sade's Debut Album," *New York Times*, January 30, 1985.

poetic on Sade's beauty, and follows with an assessment of her vocality on her early albums. "[On 'Diamond Life'] we could already hear the graphite core of Sade's voice, a grainy contralto full of air that betrays a slight ache but no agony…[Sade values] imperfect dignity over a show of pain."[269] For these critics, Sade's vocality was anything but plaintive; she was depicted as guarded, dispassionate even—a perception of her voice that supported the view that she lacked emotional authenticity.[270]

In an interview with Mark Bego for a 1986 biography, Sade appears to counter these criticisms of her vocal performance when she asserts,

> I'm more toned down and it shows in the way I sing. I don't think it's necessary to shout and scream to move people. Sometimes I feel like I'm shouting, screaming: I'm really putting something of myself into it and I'm really expressing something. But when it is perceived by people, they find that it is really very "backward". Maybe at the right time, with the right song, I'll REALLY get to scream and lash out, but I don't think exaggeration is the best way to get things across. This applies to everything, clothing, drawing, architecture. These days, it has become so normal to be hyper-eccentric…that it becomes conformist.[271]

Sade indicates a deliberate motive in her chosen vocality: a restrained kind of singing, in which the emotional expression is implied as opposed to overt. This contrarian approach could have been directed towards the British underground pop scene at the time, such as the New Romantic

[269] Sasha Frere-Jones, "The Long War," *New Yorker*, March 15, 2010, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/03/22/the-long-war.
[270] For more on the prescriptions for presentation of affect as it relates to Black women's music in particular, see Spinner, "Girl Group Lament," 2024. In this article, Spinner addresses how Black girl groups such as The Supremes were restricted to voicing complicated emotions such as anger and sorrow in a nonthreatening manner that accorded with Motown values of Black respectability. Spinner invokes Tyrone Palmer's notion of "Black affect" to show how The Supremes' courtly performances resulted from misogynistic and racist constraints of the era that pathologized Black women's displays of difficult emotions. Sade may offer a counterpoint to Spinner's proposal, in that her music calls into question whether a Black woman's performance of demure affects being read as nonemotional is a mode of essentialization. In other words, Spinner's reading of The Supremes as inherently restricted may reduce Black women as having to voice exuberantly in order to be perceived as exhibiting proper depth of feeling.
[271] Mark Bego, *Sade*, trans. Michel Lafon (Carrere, 1986), 74.

movement, whose artists such as Spandau Ballet and Boy George were more garish in their dress, appearance, and musical style. We might even see Sade's comments as a response to press darling, Kate Bush, who tended to incorporate over-the-top theatrics and angular vocalizations in her work. Contrary to these trends, Sade emerged from the lesser-known Britfunk scene, which was influenced by American jazz and soul, tending towards a more self-possessed presentation, and "firmly rooted in a sense of Black Britishness" in a way that the New Romantics were not.[272]

On her breakout single "Smooth Operator," from *Diamond Life*, we can hear this very sound; a cool mix of Latin-pop percussion opens the song as an electric bass dives through a descending series of minor seconds, just as Stuart Matthewman's tenor sax picks up on the second beat, belting the film noir–esque leitmotif of the song's antagonist. In the accompanying music video, our antihero enters just as the sax reaches its peak; he's a confidence man, a "smooth operator." The video narrativizes Sade's poetically incisive take on a chauvinist criminal who gets by on look and charm alone, with Sade herself playing the role of jilted nightclub songstress. The grooviness of the track, Sade's matter-of-fact delivery, and the band's sleek appearance, all set in motion the public perception of Sade as a glitzy ice queen, who exemplified the "diamond life" she in fact sought to critique. The tongue-in-cheek nature of the message was lost on critics. Instead of the operator himself, it was Sade and her band who became the epitome of "smooth." Holden confirms this general misinterpretation of the single in a profile on Sade in 1988. He says, "Ever since 'Smooth Operator'…[Sade] has been linked with the song and its glamorous music-video portrayal of the 'diamond life' of playboys, gaming tables, and expensive, indolent women. But if one listens closely to Sade's music, the sensibility

[272] Robert Strachan, "Britfunk," in *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, ed. Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (Routledge, 2014), 82.

one discovers is almost the opposite of a blasé international nomad."[273] Holden imparts the fact that those critical of Sade failed to connect the dots; her music exuded not hollow opulence, but shadowy unrest.

A sense of sociopolitical discontent is present, for example, on "Sally" from *Diamond Life*. Sade says of this track to Bego,

> The idea for this song came to me the last time I was in New York, waiting for the bus at the corner of Bowery and 3rd Street, in front of the Salvation Army. There were many young men there and clearly on the streets. Sally was the image of the mother or the prostitute, welcoming people, giving them a place, "doing our dirty work." In England, they call it "Sally's Army"![274]

This "sardonic lament,"[275] primarily a dirge in A minor, rotating i iv, suggests sorrow with glint of ire, when it modulates to A Dorian as Sade sings about "Sally," brightening the key as she applauds her for "doing our dirty work." Only a jazz-inflected E9sus turnaround chord adds a kind of levity. And "Sally" is not the only track on *Diamond Life* that defies the glamorous image; taking the album as a whole it is somewhat easy to observe Sade's sociopolitical commentary.[276] Throughout her oeuvre, Sade tends to incorporate at least one to five romantic laments and around one to three sociopolitical laments on each one of her albums, ranging from topics about race relations ("Why Can't We Live Together," 1984), sex work ("Jezebel," 1985), youth violence ("Clean Heart," 1988), war ("Like a Tattoo," 1992), and global poverty ("Pearls," 1992), to simpler tunes about unrequited love. Overall, her baseline sentiment is a kind of

[273] Holden, "In an Exhibitionist World."
[274] Bego, *Sade*, 77.
[275] Ibid.
[276] I think of "political music" in two related senses: one, as "social realism," which describes one's surroundings along the lines of class, race, gender, etc.; and two, as a music that is instrumentalized for ethical means (i.e., intends to send a moral or social message). Sade engages with both types of political music throughout her work; here, I tend to refer to it as "sociopolitical" to integrate both categories.

existential melancholy laced with socially conscious themes.[277] Yet, as outlined, critical appraisal of early work tended to depict Sade and her music as shallow and commercial.

In later reviews of *Lovers Rock*, her early work served as an antithesis to the music that was now seen to contain more emotional depth. For example, in Frere-Jones's 2010 profile, he directly compares *Diamond Life* to his self-proclaimed favorite album, *Lovers Rock*, claiming that the album's unique strength is specifically its "emotional resonance," conveyed through Sade's voice. He says, "One nice thing about *Lovers Rock* was the lilt that kept our heroine's bleaker side moving."[278] Like Eshun and the journalists mentioned before, for Frere-Jones, the success of *Lovers Rock* boiled down to how Sade was able to convey some sense of personal dejection through her voice. In succinct terms, her voice was heard as newly plaintive, a result of, according to these critics, Sade's affairs of the heart.

Yet, on the track "King of Sorrow," a lament from *Lovers Rock*, Sade depicts a scene distinct from her own life. In the accompanying video set in San Juan, Puerto Rico, she portrays a struggling single Black mother of two children. As these potent images spill across the frame, she laments, "I'm cryin' everyone's tears." In an interview given around the release of *Lovers Rock*, Sade states that "['King of Sorrow'] is about…where you feel like you're the only person…that carries the burden, but…you have to face the world as if everything's fine. This song is for the people."[279] In this statement, Sade intimates that the song is intended to speak for a particular subculture, imaginably the Black community. Black fans, among others, are able to

[277] For more on melancholy as it relates to race in particular, see Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford University Press, 2000). Cheng argues that "The social and subjective formations of the so-called racialized or minority subject are intimately tied to the psychical experience of grief" (x). See also in David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Duke University Press, 2019).
[278] Frere-Jones, "The Long War," 2010.
[279] Sade, *Lovers Rock*, Electronic Press Kit (EPK). Uploaded by Greg Wnnew, "Sade – 'Lovers Rock' Part One" and "Sade – 'Lovers Rock' Part Two," June 12, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWXu8MbzPw8.

pick up on this meaning, with multiple commenters on the official YouTube video remarking how they hear the tune as an ode to their respective single parent; such as @marckid93, "Mom used to play this song when i was all the time as a kid and now as a grown up, I understand why...Single parents really deserve their flowers and I hope one day I can give my mom the entire damn garden." The commenter indicates that the song works as a bonding mechanism in grief between him and his mother, perhaps indicating the social inequity they faced.

Like "King of Sorrow," many of the tracks on *Lovers Rock* convey sociopolitical attitudes, however, in reviews of the album, critics tended to link Sade's laments to turmoil in her personal life, dismissing her social commentary. Overall, journalistic response to the album tended to circumscribe Sade's work within a limited binarist reading in which her personal outpouring was conceptually opposed to her capacity for (political) narrative. In other words, her perceived authenticity was opposed to her authorship. In the case of *Diamond Life*, critics denied Sade's musical value through claims of inauthenticity, painting her as a vacuous object of desire. On *Lovers Rock*, critics ascribed musical value to her through claims of authenticity, however rendering her as a victim of misfortune. In both cases, Sade's sense of artistic labor was overlooked and her agency diminished, specifically through biased assessments of her voice.

Whispering Aloud

Sade's critics tended to rationalize prejudicial interpretations of her work through evaluations of her voice. But what exactly were these critics hearing? Particularly in the supposed plaintive shift from *Diamond Life* to *Lovers Rock*, is her vocality really so different? Across her albums, Sade's voice is characterized by her dusky tone, due to her contralto voice type. However, as vocal instructor Dileesa Archer notes in her analysis of Sade's voice, for a contralto, her range is

narrow, and her tessitura sits low, with her "belting" note around E4 and her mixed register hovering at approximately A4-B4.[280] Although her voice shines in the lower register, it is unlike the voice quality of other well-known contraltos, such as Sarah Vaughan, whose voice is formidable and heavy. Due to the amount of air Sade releases when she sings, her voice ends up sounding light and soft—a hallmark of her vocal timbre. Her signature smooth and airy tone is on account of her open vocal placement, in which her tongue is relaxed and placed in the back of her mouth, creating an "open cave" for a tremendous amount of air to escape, particularly on drawn-out vowels.[281] This cavernous sound, created through her mouth structure, tongue placement, and use of air is often associated with words like grainy, husky, smoky, and breathy. Sade's ability to allow that much air to escape her mouth while also maintaining stable pitch and even dynamics, is one of her unique skills as a vocalist. This is further highlighted by Sade's rare use of vibrato—a vocal styling that usually conveys expressiveness, but can also be used to assist in decoration (such as melismas), or in subtle forms of pitch correction. To execute long sustained notes without vibrato is not only rare in pop music, it is vocally challenging, and in the case of Sade, gives her voice the sense of being pillowy and blurred on the edges of each sung phrase. Sade's lack of vibrato is also what makes her intonation more apparent, marking another trademark of her vocality, which is being consistently sharp of target notes. While another singer could utilize vibrato to subtly massage and cover the pitch placement, without vibrato, Sade's pitch is laid bare and imperfect.[282] Overall, a small contralto range, extremely airy texture, a lack of vibrato, and sharp intonation are staples of Sade's vocality.

[280] Dileesa Archer, "Sade Vocal Analysis," February 10, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tbFMPKAa4c.
[281] Kristal Cherelle, "Inspired by Sade: How to Have a Smooth R&B Voice!" Indie Artist School, September 18, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nS4e3XtvwYA.
[282] Musician Fil Henley tracks Sade's sharpness with pitch monitoring software in "Tonight we attempt to unravel the MYSTERY of Sade!" Wings of Pegasus, May 18, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdT-XBceoto.

Archer indicates in her analysis of Sade's voice that it is "difficult to do a vocal analysis on someone who does not really sing a lot." Archer admits she is not a big fan of Sade because she prefers vocalists who "sing from the gut" or "sing big," while Sade's voice is "stylistically conversational," without much vocal decoration.[283] It is true, Sade's ornaments are subtle, limited to her use of slow grace notes, "blue" notes, and portamento at the end of phrases before reaching her target pitch. Several users in the comments section of Archer's video respond that what makes Sade's voice special is something other than vocal virtuosity. @SunnyIlha remarks, "She has a soft edged voice, glossy on the edges. Almost 'whispering' aloud at times." Sade's vocal expressivity is not found in extensive ornamentation or an extroverted delivery, but rather subtle changes in register and usage of breath, as well as a dexterous relationship to meter. Often Sade moves indeterminately within the given meter of her songs, at times arriving late to the downbeat, other times rushing ahead, always subtly evading and syncopating with the steady rhythmic groove or bass ostinato figures common to her arrangements.

We are able distinguish different instrumental timbres by analyzing distinct tones in the same duration and pitch. For my purposes here, I analyze "Smooth Operator" from *Diamond Life* and "Every Word" from *Lovers Rock*, as these songs have hook melodies with similar pitch ranges and contours. In the chorus of "Smooth Operator," Sade sings a scalar descension from F4 to D4 along with the words "smooth operator." In "Every Word," the repeated hook melody also descends in a similar pitch range, however, going first stepwise up from E4 to F4 and hanging there before sliding down to a grace note from D4 to C4.

[283] Archer, "Sade Vocal Analysis," 2017.

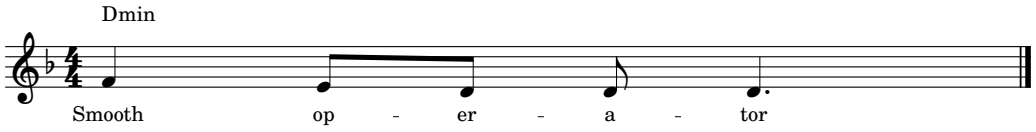

Figure 8. "Smooth Operator" hook melody

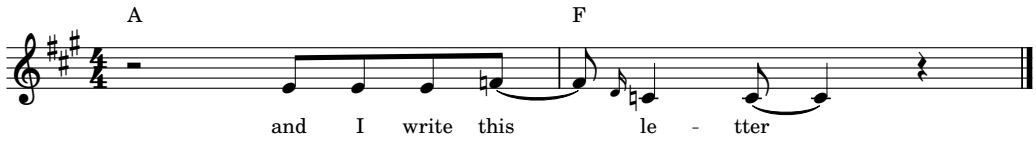

Figure 9. "Every Word" hook melody

Besides an emphasis on vocal fry in "Every Word" and a slightly rounder tone on "Smooth Operator," the vocality is consistent, especially on F4; a glossy, airy timbre, a lack of vibrato, and a slight sharpness to her intonation. In other words, Sade's vocal trademarks are unmistakable, meaning that there is no significant difference in her vocality that would warrant such a disparity in critical response to these albums on which these songs are featured. What makes these two tunes I have chosen so distinct is not Sade's voice, but everything else: the instrumentation, arrangement, texture, and stylistic conventions particular to the genres of each of these songs. On "Smooth Operator" and the whole of *Diamond Life*, the music sits squarely in the jazz-pop (or smooth jazz) genre with up-tempo, Latin rhythms, heavy use of saxophone, and standard jazz forms and instrumental arrangements. On *Lovers Rock*, the album draws from lovers rock reggae. Strikingly, "Every Word" samples the 1981 roots reggae recording "Love Is What the World Want" by Barry Brown. "Every Word" features a snippet of Brown's vocal, in which he sings "is what the world want" in Jamaican patois, with added reverberation and echo.

Such distinct details in style characteristics of each song show us that while critics attempted to assess Sade's vocality as the main differing aspect that ascribed artistic depth to these albums, it was in fact genre markers, and critics' attendant biases, that belied this appraisal process.

Musical Distastes

Musicologist David Huron forwards the theory that the sound of genre dominates listener experience in his description of genre cueing. He points to a 1999 scientific study by David Perrott and Robert Gjerdingen in which listeners were able to identify musical genre with 250 milliseconds of hearing a song. He compares this to when one "scan[s] the radio dial looking for an appropriate station," and is able "to extract a huge amount of style related information from just a single…tone."[284] Huron proposes that instrumental timbre and texture are the primary mechanisms for genre cueing.[285] Such sonic triggers contribute to value judgments by building up matrices of stylistic expectations he refers to as one of many learned "schemas."[286]

We can see such schemas at work towards the end of Frere-Jones's article, when after showering praise on *Lovers Rock*, he says of the rest of Sade's catalog, "The mission doesn't always succeed. Wallpaper is as wallpaper does, and if I could wipe ninety-five per cent of the saxophone work off Sade albums I would."[287] Christgau uses the same language in a review of her 1986 album *Promise*:

[284] David Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (MIT Press, 2006), 208.
[285] Ibid.
[286] Ibid., 207–8. As Huron explains, "Learned schemas span a huge range of behaviors. Schemas can relate to practiced motor skills (such as brushing your teeth) or perceptual norms (such as watching traffic flows). Schemas can involve social norms (such as polite greeting rituals) or cultural norms (such as framing an object so that it is recognized as 'art'). As long as the schema is well entrenched in a mind, it becomes possible to provoke reaction responses by violating the schematic expectation" (14).
[287] Frere-Jones, "The Long War," 2010.

> There's a problem with aural wallpaper—once you start paying attention to it, it's not wallpaper anymore, it's pictures on the wall. And while as a wallpaper these pictures may be something, they can't compete with the ones you've hung up special. That's why I prefer my aural wallpaper either so richly patterned you can't see past the whole (Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*) or so intricately worked you can gaze at the details forever (Eno's *Another Green World*).[288]

While Christgau admits that some music of this type can be enlightening (such as that by the white male titans of minimalism and ambient), in Sade's case, "wallpaper" becomes a term of derision. For both Frere-Jones and Christgau, the pejorative use of "wallpaper" refers to easy listening music: a term used in 1970s FM radio to refer to a commercial sound with smooth contours, noted for its beauty, while simultaneously, its lack of originality or depth. In a 2017 profile of Sade in *The New York Times*, Jacob Bernstein confirms the historical context that upon the release of *Diamond Life*, "Sade was often stocked in the easy listening section…sandwiched next to Michael Bolton and Kenny G."[289] Due to Sade's use of saxophones, jazz trappings, and smooth vocals, she was placed in the easy listening subgenre of smooth jazz, a "cleanly produced amalgam" blending "jazz instrumentation, pop production techniques, and an R&B aesthetic," that rose to mainstream popularity starting in the 1980s, at its peak in the 1990s.[290] Musicologist Charles D. Carson notes that despite its commercial success, smooth jazz carried a culturally maligned history, as it was seen within both jazz and Black communities as a "betrayal of the genre and thus a betrayal of the race" due to its marketplace aims and "inauthenticity."[291] Carson points out that smooth jazz further represented a bourgeois sensibility, as it was "one of the several means by which the black middle class attempted to negotiate its own identity within

[288] "Sade," Robert Christgau: Dean of American Rock Critics.
[289] Jacob Bernstein, "Sade's Quiet Storm of Cool," *New York Times*, October 25, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/style/sade-sade-sade.html.
[290] Charles D. Carson, "'Bridging the Gap': Creed Taylor, Grover Washington Jr., and the Crossover Roots of Smooth Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2008): 3.
[291] Ibid., 11.

American society at large."[292] In other words, smooth jazz worked within a contested space of "authentic Blackness."[293]

By the mid-'80s, Sade was categorized more specifically as "quiet storm," a smooth jazz subgenre known for "seductive R&B, marked by jazz flourishes, 'smooth grooves,' and tasteful lyrics about intimate subjects."[294] The genre was coined in 1976 by Melvin Lindsey on his FM radio show "The Quiet Storm," a title drawn from the 1975 Smokey Robinson song "A Quiet Storm." Sade's quiet storm designation was likely also due to the fact that she referenced the term on her 1985 single "The Sweetest Taboo." Once again, Sade's association with this genre may have helped her in the commercial sphere, but worked against her in the critical one.[295] As Jason King notes in his work on Roberta Flack, that similarly to smooth jazz, because quiet storm artists were seen as "classy," or "slick," as a result, "some critics view[ed] quiet storm's reach for upscale hauteur as symptomatic of black assimilationism and false consciousness."[296] Such a class-based critique of smooth jazz played into reviewer appraisal of Sade during this time period, for example, in Mendelssohn's review of *Promise* in which he invokes scenes where quiet storm might play: "To me, her music all sounds exactly the same—like something you'd listen to—no strike that: *hear* (she's too boring to listen to actively)—in a hot tub or a restaurant popular with young attorneys in love."[297] While Bernstein asserts that since the time of such

[292] David Andrew Ake, *Jazz Cultures* (University of California Press, 2002), 44, quoted in Carson, "'Bridging the Gap,'" 12.
[293] Carson, "'Bridging the Gap,'" 3.
[294] Jason King, "The Sound of Velvet Melting: The Power of 'Vibe' in the Music of Roberta Flack," in *Listen Again: A Momentary History of Pop Music*, ed. Eric Weisbard (Duke University Press, 2007), 179.
[295] This view is examined in singer Tracey Thorn's profile of Sade in *The New Statesman*, in which she describes the widely held perception of the genre: "In the Eighties [Sade] ruled over the 'quiet storm' radio stations, which specialized in a genre of smooth soul—music to have sex to, rather than march to." "The Queen of 'Quiet Storm': Tracey Thorn on the Return of Sade," *New Statesman*, March 28, 2018, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/music/2018/03/queen-quiet-storm-tracey-thorn-return-sade.
[296] King, "The Sound of Velvet Melting," 181.
[297] Mendelssohn, "Sade: Promise (Epic)," 1986.

criticisms, Sade has been "lifted…far above the slush pile of schlock."[298] Nonetheless, during this period of time (and in some cases in the present), the association of smooth jazz and quiet storm with her early work influenced the perception of Sade as inauthentic. Hidden behind the bias against these genres were classist interpretations of Black artists and what they were allowed to do.

On *Lovers Rock*, Sade invoked the British subgenre of lovers rock reggae; an art form popularized in the late '70s/early '80s, primarily demarcated by soft soul vocals, romantic lyrical themes, and classic reggae rhythms. As influential British DJ Don Letts describes it, "[Lovers rock] had the bass that we all loved from Jamaican music, but it also had [been] influenced a lot by American soul. More melodic things. It was that juxtaposition of melody against the heavy bass line that gave the British production its distinct identity."[299] Sade confirms this musical strategy on the album in an electronic press kit accompanying the release of *Lovers Rock*, when she describes how during recording sessions she would often sing "a lovers rock stylie" (or vocal delivery) over a "reggae beat," rendering, in her words, "a soft sweet reggae." Sade further infused the sound with poetic ideas from roots reggae, such as themes of Black struggle and liberation. She was particularly influenced by Bob Marley's catalog, heard clearly on "By Your Side," which harkens to "No Woman, No Cry." Both songs feature a similar diatonic descending bass motif accompanied by organ as well as rhythm guitar and a heavy kick side-stick pattern. Marley tells his loved one to let go of the past, and "nah" or don't cry, and on "By Your Side" Sade similarly offers to "dry her partner's tears" and comfort them in hardship. In the electronic press kit, Sade also describes taking inspiration from Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" in her

[298] Bernstein, "Sade's Quiet Storm of Cool," 2017.
[299] Paul Carr, "When Reggae Became Lovers' Rock: An Interview with Don Letts," *PopMatters*, October 26, 2018, https://www.popmatters.com/don-letts-lovers-rock-interview-2614122335.html.

writing of the track "Slave Song," a commentary on the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. She maintains reggae thematics on song "Immigrant," which narrates the experience of the Black men of the Windrush Generation. Overall, on *Lovers Rock*, Sade expressed a kind of historical melancholy particular to what Gilroy describes as the Black ontological condition.[300]

By and large, critics belittled Sade's political commentary on *Lovers Rock* when it was released; some journalists were condescending,[301] some were hostile.[302] A reason for such derision could be explained by what anthropologist Lisa Amanda Palmer argues is the historical political delegitimization of the lovers rock genre in the United Kingdom. According to Palmer, lovers rock reggae was seen as "strictly cater[ing] to the romantic yearnings of black women,"[303] and was thereby disparaged due to the assumed dilution of roots reggae's political message.[304] In this way, because of the genre's themes of unrequited love and romantic longing, when critics heard the lovers rock sonics on Sade's album, they assumed that Sade's laments were matters of personal grief. In other words, the sound of the genre predetermined their expectations of Sade, her voice, and what her voice was meant to do, flattening her artistry and denying her the potential to offer sociopolitical thought. In both cases of *Diamond Life* and *Lovers Rock*, critical judgments that ascribed artistic value to Sade through assessments of her vocality belied genre

[300] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 203.
[301] "[*Lovers Rock*] reveals…an artist who is now far more…socially aware." Larry Flick, "Epic's Sade Returns with 'Rock,'" *Billboard*, November 11, 2000; "Forget the icy image; she's a working-class lass after all." James Hannaham, "Sade: *Lovers Rock* (Epic)," *Spin*, January 2001.
[302] About tracks "Slave Song" and "Immigrant," Teresa Wiltz writes: "quasi-protest songs that sound pretentious and silly." Wiltz, "Deeper Sade," 2000.
[303] Lisa Amanda Palmer, "'Men Cry Too': Black Masculinities and the Feminisation of Lovers Rock in the UK," in *Black Popular Music in Britain Since 1945*, ed. Jon Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (Routledge, 2014).
[304] As Don Letts points out, lovers rock was not apolitical, rather its emergence gave a voice to Black British young women that was previously suppressed within the reggae genre. As he explains, "[Lovers rock] was led by young women across the board. Something that's never happened since in reggae. Let's be honest, reggae was a very male-dominated genre, but at that moment in time, it was all about the women who totally took over. That was a very empowering thing; it gave them not only equity but a kind of political equity in a weird way…Political with a small p kind of thing." Carr, "Interview with Don Letts," 2018.

prejudices. As I will show next, this is due to the fact that genre biases are not only matters of musical preference but reflect how listeners hear artists as human.

"Genres of the Human"

Returning to Huron's notion of genre cueing, he indicates that such "schemas" are not neutral, rather, they are "also the basis for prejudice. Like racial stereotypes, schemas can bring things to the experience that are not actually present and prevent us from recognizing elements that *are* present."[305] To extend this point, genre prejudices ascribe or deny value to certain sounds, thus projected onto artists and their music. They regulate how artists such as Sade are classified and valued.

Theorists have long investigated whether stylistic classifications in music act as exclusionary practices. Sociologist William G. Roy's 2004 investigation into race and hillbilly records reveals a hierarchical homology—i.e., the correspondence of aesthetic structures (music genres) and social structures (race, gender, class)—at its segregationist height from the mid-1920s through the 1950s.[306] Similarly, in a 1996 study on musical dislikes, Bethany Bryson shows how listeners' preferred genre categories work to "reinforce symbolic boundaries between themselves and categories of people they dislike," this, she argues, tends to align with racist attitudes.[307] Musicologist Rachel Mundy goes further in her 2014 investigation into how evolutionary theories of human biological classification directly influenced nineteenth-century musicological definitions of style.[308] Her groundbreaking archival project reminds us that genres

[305] Huron, *Sweet Anticipation*, 216.
[306] William G. Roy, "'Race Records' and 'Hillbilly Music': Institutional Origins of Racial Categories in the American Commercial Recording Industry," *Poetics* 32, nos. 3–4 (2004): 265–79.
[307] Bethany Bryson, "'Anything but Heavy Metal': Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (1996): 884.
[308] Rachel Mundy, "Evolutionary Categories and Musical Style from Adler to America," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 67, no. 3 (2014): 735–68.

of music fundamentally rely on what Sylvia Wynter deems "genres of the human." Wynter proposes that the very concept of "man" " (per Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*) relies on cultural constructs of race and gender—wherein people of color are rendered as sub- or nonhuman in order to maintain the supremacy of (the sound of) whiteness.[309] Invoking Frantz Fanon and his notion of sociogenesis,[310] Wynter proposes that such social phenomena pass on as genes would, appearing organic, however while actually the products of the historically contingent goals—colonial, or otherwise—of social agents seeking to sustain their dominance.

In this way, while reading vocalists like Sade through musical genre may appear neutral, such action can force Black female artists into categories that constrain and objectify them. Farah Jasmine Griffin examines this leveling of the Black female singer in her formative essay "When Malindy Sings," in which she examines the ways in which Black women vocalists such as Mahalia Jackson have been allowed to exist—as an object or symbol of the US nation-state or as a *subjected* body, whose "authenticity…is guaranteed by its proximity to violence and terror."[311] In Sade's case, genre biases—both musical and human—limited understanding of her work, through the pregiven expectation of her as either a sex object or a victim of suffering.

But what if we look at Sade as an artistic agent, or as I have termed her, a professional mourner, who uses musical strategies that comment on Black social life? As I will outline next, in her live concert album *Lovers Live*, Sade deploys musical and visual techniques of Black lamentation as a feminist commentary, utilizing contours of sorrow to communicate dissent.

Methods of Mourning in *Lovers Live*

[309] Scott and Wynter, "The Re-enchantment of Humanism."
[310] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008).
[311] Griffin, "When Malindy Sings," 117.

Let's return to "King of Sorrow," but this time from Sade's live concert album *Lovers Live*, released two years after *Lovers Rock* and primarily shot at the Great Western Forum in Inglewood, CA, in 2001. The song opens with acoustic guitar, as the official music video is projected onto the stage. To recap, in the video, Sade acts as a single mother who struggles to balance her familial commitments with her lounge-singing career, serving as a symbol of resilience in the face of systemic burdens. Musically, "King of Sorrow" adapts a descending tetrachord formation, or lament bass, in C minor; an ostinato figure that has long been posited by musicologists as a trope central to lament that works to evoke unending anguish.[312] Sade furthers this lament sensibility in her lyrics, with the image of a Christ figure mourning his fate: "I wonder if this grief will ever let me go? / I feel like I am the King of Sorrow." Sade ornaments this line with dexterity, upwards and reaching in her chest voice, sliding to high notes with a portamento that imitates a kind of weeping. Visually, Sade presents what Black feminist theorist Uri McMillan calls an "avatar," in the form of the archetype of the Black suffering mother. Sade stages a blurring of personas as you hear her voice, while the avatar of single mother from her music video sits stage center, mouthing the lyrics (**Figure 10**). Deploying an "avatar" per McMillan denotes a process in which Black female artists exhibit agency by "performing objecthood"—manipulating and converting their selfhoods into art objects. For McMillan, these avatars are given "human-like agency," and "highlight (and stretch) the subordinate roles available to black women,"[313] thereby working as a mechanism with which to expose social hierarchies and bond marginalized collectives through coded signification. In this performance of "King of Sorrow," Sade engages in a subtle form of avatar production in the utilization of the

[312] See Ellen Rosand, "The Descending Tetrachord: An Emblem of Lament," *Musical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (1979): 346–59.
[313] McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 12.

symbol of the suffering Black mother. By deploying a visual of the seemingly second-class status of Black women, Sade's avatar works as a logic by which she can disrupt the very basis of objectification, by reimagining herself as an "acting object,"[314] both subject and object of her art.

Figure 10. Sade (stage left) performing "King of Sorrow," with "avatar" (stage center)

Sade's music video in particular engages in a commentary on the history of Black women's maternity in the afterlife of slavery. Black feminists such as Hortense Spillers have outlined the history of Black women's position of carrying both paternal and maternal roles in the Black family, which results in ideologies wherein an "African-American female's 'dominance' and 'strength' come to be interpreted in later generations—both black and white, oddly enough—as a

[314] Ibid., 122.

'pathology.'"[315] Sade implicates this history in her performance of the Black maternal avatar. She laments this historical persona, but also exalts it, dislodging Black motherhood from its pathological associations. In this, she reveals the inner workings of power that seek to define and constrain Black women, utilizing the avatar as a tool of both creativity and critique.

Another lament Sade performs at this concert is "Immigrant" from *Lovers Rock*. She opens with a dedication to the memory of her father, Nigerian economics professor Adebisi Adu, and describes the song as "about the struggle he and his peers had to bring us to where we are today." The arena darkens and a photograph depicting a group of Black men disembarking the HMT *Empire Windrush* in the 1950s is projected onto the stage. Sade sings, "He didn't know what it was to be Black / 'Til they gave him his change / But didn't want to touch his hand." A sparse arrangement consisting of only keyboard, intermittent strings, a drum loop, and upright bass, makes the vocal arrangement take central focus. While Sade sings the lead vocal, the background vocals in call-and-response sprinkle across in stereo, echoing particular phrases, and adding melismas, at times blurring the traditionally hierarchal relationship between a lead singer and her backup vocalists.[316] At times, Sade instead sings the response to the call, and the voices become indistinct. Her musical strategy here engages in the technique of antiphony, a central aspect of not only Black diasporic lamentation,[317] but as Gilroy argues, Black social life; he

[315] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 74. Angela Davis also examines how the ideology of Black matriarchal pathology was critiqued by Gertrude "Ma" Rainey in her "Ma" persona (*Blues Legacies*, 244).

[316] Adding long delay feedback to the end of vocal phrases is a common production technique found in dub reggae recordings, where echo is often overdubbed live on preexisting vocal tracks, creating a haunting, psychedelic effect.

[317] In *Jah Music*, Sebastian Clarke (Amon Saba Saakana) outlines the centrality of antiphony to the reggae art form, positing that work songs of Jamaican slaves were characterized by the call-and-refrain pattern, which directly influenced reggae *jamma* songs. Sebastian Clarke, *Jah Music: The Evolution of Popular Jamaican Song* (Heinemann Educational Books, 1980), 21. John Potter also notes that "the practice of reversing meanings dates back to slavery when black slaves would often appear to be singing cheerful songs by inventing antiphonal structures to hide their true meaning from white listeners" (*Vocal Authority*, 101). Antiphony has also been investigated as a central feature of Mediterranean ritual lament practice (see Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament*; Seremetakis, *The Last Word*; Chaves, "Bridge Between Worlds").

states, "The most enduring Africanism of all…can be seen…in the ubiquity of the antiphonal…A relationship of identity is enacted in the way that the performer dissolves into the crowd. Together, they collaborate in a creative process governed by formal and informal, democratic rules."[318] Sade engages in antiphony as a musical technique that reflects a social one; where traditional lead-background relationships in pop vocal production are put into question in order to serve an aim of group communication.

During the chorus of "Immigrant," with a smattering of reverbs and echoes and vocal layering, Sade sings, "Isn't it hard enough / Just to make it through the day," as the bass descends in scalar motion, to mirror her anguished delivery. Throughout her performance, Sade takes on the role of mourning traumatic experience for not only herself, not only her father, but for all those who have suffered under the ramifications of the racist and xenophobic foundations of colonial powers. Sade's election to reperform such traumas in her music and to take on this suffering could be interpreted as a form of masochistic display. While the term "masochism" has its roots in tortured sexuality and desire, in her study on masochism and race, Amber Jamilla Musser posits masochism as an analytic for interpreting performances of suffering by marginalized artists, specifically Black women.[319] For Musser, masochistic performances such as we see with Sade's performance of "Immigrant," constitute a realm where individuated desires as they relate to structures of domination are articulated, enabling one to "see the multiple ways

[318] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 200.

[319] Musser, *Sensational Flesh*. Musser is not the first theorist to discuss the importance of the realm of sensation in bringing to light notions of difference. In Audre Lorde's theory of the "erotic," she proposes this term to encompass a host of affects that can be utilized to expose power differentials. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984). However, Lorde was vehemently against S&M practices, believing they reinscribed structures of submission that Black women were already bound to by white supremacy. Musser critiques Lorde by arguing that such interpretations "enact Spillers' argument that black women are discursively outside of sexuality and individuality," which "collapses racialization with masochism, forgetting that masochism, as we have seen through the book—despite the forms it takes—is elected" (*Sensational Flesh*, 172).

that people experience power and how that shapes the terms of their embodiments."[320] In other words, masochistic tropes can be utilized in performance to present an aesthetic of subjection, which brings to presence the inner workings of domination that contribute to powerlessness, in order to simultaneously encode other forms of agency. In this way, Sade's performance operates along the lines of what Musser delineates as masochism's function as an important space to expose political and ethical stakes, by manipulating one's marginalized subjectivity in order to enact agency. I have also identified this exposure of hierarchies of power as a means of communal messaging through aesthetic and musical expressions of pain as an important function of women's lament. In this way, we can analyze the emotional masochism at work in Sade's music along the lines of female lamenters who have long been custodians of the grief resultant from historical traumas.[321]

It is telling that in nearly every cutaway shot in *Lovers Live*, the camera predominantly features Black and brown audience members, implying the presence of community, perhaps one that Sade wants the viewer to be aware of. In her lamentations, Sade addresses her crowd to mourn collective pain, and also heal, through recognition of shared ethical knowledge. Sade uses her tears to manifest strategies for critical and creative thought—a central function of women's lament.

Conclusion

[320] Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 19.
[321] Masochistic displays are a common aspect of women's ritual lament practice. According to Margaret Alexiou, performances of lament in the ancient Greek funereal contexts incorporated women's self-flagellation; "The woman then lays her offerings on the tomb and begins her supplication, either kneeling down in earnest prayer with her right arm outstretched, or standing with the right arm in the same position and the left tearing her loosened hair" (*The Ritual Lament*, 8). Also in Seremetakis, *The Last Word*.

One night in 2019, I was at a local bar on the east side of Los Angeles and had struck up a conversation with one of the regulars, a fellow musician. We got to talking about my research and I mentioned how I was working on Sade. Without skipping a beat, he quipped, "Oh Sade, well, that's just all about the way she looks." In that moment I observed how easy it was for someone to undercut Sade's craft by objectifying her. This man could not be bothered to even ponder the music, as Sade's beauty acted as reason for dismissal. Such a perspective is in line with the critical interpretations of Sade and her voice that I have deconstructed in this paper—shallow readings that have undermined her artistry by reducing her to an object of desire (*Diamond Life*) or a vessel for feeling (*Lovers Rock*). Under the guise of performing critical analysis, these journalists attempted to corroborate their assessments of Sade through superficial examinations of her voice. However, I have shown that genre prejudices invisible to these listeners formed the basis for their judgments of Sade's artistic worth under the pretense of evaluations of her voice, leading them to flatten Sade and her artistry. Specifically, in the case of *Lovers Rock*, critics heard Sade's laments as mere rehearsals of personal misfortune, when in fact, they were her way of mediating communal pain, proposing ethical understandings, and expressing her artistic point of view.

While foremost this chapter has been a means to attune us to the work of Sade, it also is a study of how genre biases can lead listeners to unjustly dismiss certain artists and works from the lament art form, ultimately foreclosing possibilities for lament scholarship by perpetuating elitism. Although Sade's albums that I have investigated here are outside of the traditional understanding of what lament should be, I argue that Sade's laments on both albums investigated here function under how I have previously defined women's sad songs: as modes of female expression of artistic agency with sociopolitical ends, in which sorrowful music highlights

shared traumas, formulates bonds within collectives, and conveys cultural attitudes of self and society. Sade opens our ears to how lament can be sounded from unlikely and encoded places, saying what, under otherwise unwelcome conditions, could not be said.

Conclusion: "Amor Eterno"

Invariably on holiday visits to see my father, I will hear the chug-chug-chug of acoustic guitars emanating from his computer speakers. These guitars form the backbone of his favorite ranchera-pop disc, *Canta a Juan Gabriel Volumen 6* (1984) by Spanish diva Rocío Dúrcal, with songs written by Mexican singer-songwriter Juan Gabriel. Dúrcal is a household name for Mexican American families, known for her powerful voice and emotive delivery of Gabriel's compositions, lending her the title, "la española más mexicana." My father's favorite is "Amor Eterno," a heart-wrenching lament written by Gabriel at only sixteen years of age. Initially, the song was thought to chronicle the loss of an ambiguously defined beloved; a general memorialization of love underscored by grief. It was not until Gabriel's only performance of the tune at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City in 1990, that listeners learned of the lament's true inspiration, as Gabriel nearly broke into tears ad-libbing the word "mamá" at the end of a lyrical phrase. Gabriel had written the song as an elegy for his mother who had passed away in 1974, adding depth to an already tragic personal narrative of Gabriel's known to many of his fans as marked by "family drama and economic insecurity."[322] Ever since Gabriel's public acknowledgment of the song's dedication, "Amor Eterno" has become an archetypal funeral lament within Mexican diasporic culture, often accompanying tales of loss, struggle, and displacement.

Recently, my father insisted I learn the song; a weighty request considering his own mother's death, which occurred, like the death of Gabriel's mother, at a tragically young age. The parallels between the two men are unmistakable; both born to rancher families in west-

[322] Alejandro L. Madrid, "Secreto a Voces: Excess, Vocality, and Jotería in the Performance of Juan Gabriel," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 88.

central México, whose mothers fled to borderland states in search of better lives. However, when I called my father to ask him about his request, I was surprised to learn that he knew nothing of the tune's original significance. "Amor Eterno" was not his way of processing his mother's death, rather, the song's pluralism of meaning bonded us through an unconscious remembrance of a traumatic past.

This dissertation has helped us to understand how Dúrcal—a Spanish woman unconnected to the legacy of Mexican (American) working-class struggle—could sing "Amor Eterno" in a manner that transformed it into a universal song of grief within the Mexican diaspora. Under the direct tutelage of Gabriel—demonstrated through documented rehearsal videos from the making of *Canta a Juan Gabriel*—Dúrcal was able to voice the ghosts of both wounded mestizo and migrant lives. My research forwards the idea that Dúrcal was able to achieve this musical effect through her embodiment of a professional mourner,[323] a vocalist who concentrates on some inner emotion in order to perform the affects requisite to a lament performance—affects which may be distinct from a singer's personal experience. Such thinking illuminates that for a pop lamenter like Dúrcal, it is specifically a performance of a pain not her own—through her masterful creative acts—that may offer the collective musical navigation of a troubled past, in this case, the specters of Mexican colonial history. The legacy of "Amor Eterno" serves as another example (of many) that demonstrates the complex relationship between authenticity and authorship in performances of sad songs; specifically, how a female lamenter, as an expert in grief, meticulously produces a performance that viewers may paradoxically read as real.

[323] Dúrcal could perhaps be positioned along the lines of the Mexican figure of the weeping woman, *La Llorona.* See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

Why Sad Songs? has asked the reader to ponder a collection of sorrowful pop tunes, listening beneath the exterior of the powerful affects they convey, in order to recognize them as belonging to a shared tradition of women's cultural and ritual musical processing known as lament. I outlined three specific theoretical frameworks to help us better understand women's lament performance in popular music; *trauma performance*, *plaintive vocality*, and *sad songs ontology*. In chapter 1, we saw that Björk, through her musical and public protests, attempted to thwart reductive portrayals of her artistry that were grounded in ideologies of female voicings of suffering. In fact, Björk engaged not in personal testimony, but rather, trauma performance; when a female lamenter conjures feelings of anguish separate from her own experience in order to make art. In chapter 2, we observed how Rosalía's controversial adaptation of flamenco was caught in a web of tensions regarding musical ownership and female subjection under patriarchy. Rosalía reconstructed the plaintive vocality central to flamenco through deft vocal techniques and artistic choices in order to offer commentary on Spanish women's (after)lives. Finally, in chapter 3, Sade's album of laments, *Lovers Rock*, served as an example of a set of sad songs that expands conventional conceptions of what counts as lament. While sad songs in popular music have long been cemented within particular genres, limiting the scope in which we acknowledge lamenters' work, instead Sade shows us that women's lament exists under a more expansive definition. At base, sad songs are modes of female creativity that work to facilitate difficult feeling within audiences as a means of communal bonding, as well as offer strategies for feminist critique. In different ways, these three theoretical orientations outlined by way of the case studies central to each chapter deconstruct and dislodge problematic ideologies of authenticity and gender central to pop music and thereby allow us to offer female lamenters more dimension, agency, and artistic freedom.

At the end of "Amor Eterno," Dúrcal improvises over a long instrumental outro sorrowfully repeating just the words "amor eterno," her words reverberating into an unending, ghostly repetition, as if sending the message out to the supernatural realm. Like the professional mourners of the ritual lament tradition, Dúrcal uses her voice and artistic prowess to musically navigate the passage between life and death, despite her lack of proximity to the origin of anguish. Since the dawn of poetry, the female lamenter has told us of the story of loss, helped us mourn objects in death or in love, and has even assisted us in mediating the pain of the historically marginalized. And while lamenters have long aided us in navigating these realms, utilizing artistic strategies veiled by emotion, hopefully now, we have tools to recognize the intricacies of such creative acts.

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