



Trabajo de Fin de Máster en Estudios Literarios y Culturales Ingleses  
y su Proyección Social

**Singing the Blues/ When Love Songs Are Political:  
Romantic Love and Blues and Jazz Black Female  
Singers Between 1920-1970**

**Ane Garcia Lopez**

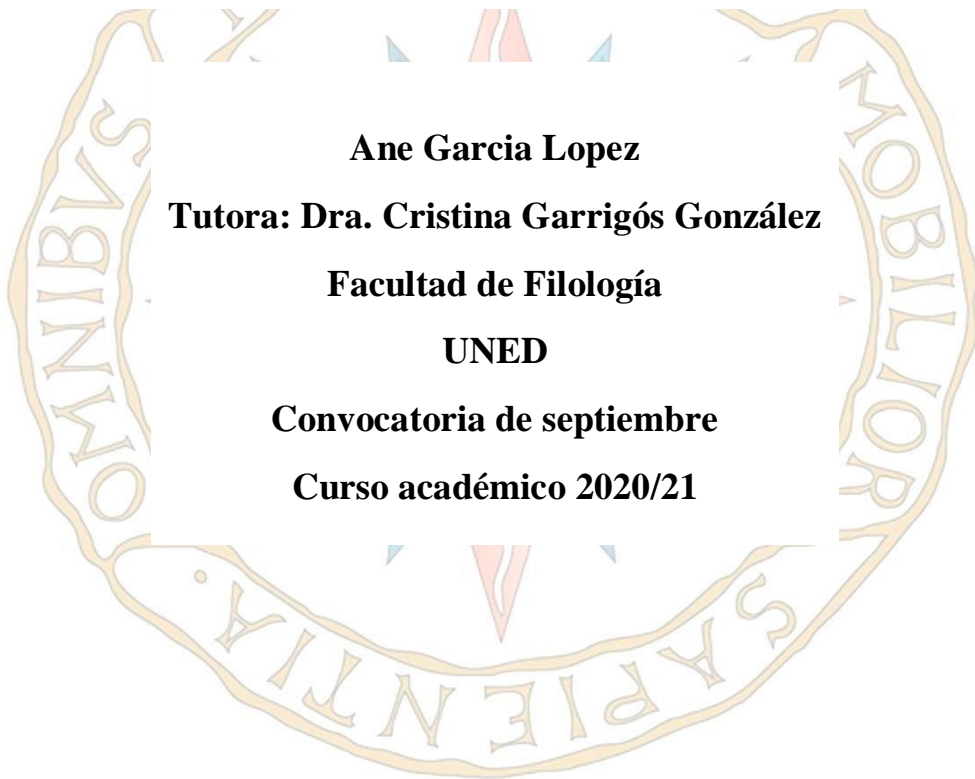
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**Convocatoria de septiembre**

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## **Agradecimientos**

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## **Eskertza**

Eskerrak eman nahi dizkiet nirekin musika partekatu duten pertsona guztiei; bereziki, baimenik eta barkamenik eskatu gabe eszenatokira igotzea posible dela erakutsi didaten emakumeei.

Cristina Garrigós doktoreari eskertu nahi nizkioke bere inplikazio eta exijentzia lan honetan, asko ikasi baitut berari esker.

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## General Index

1. Introduction	6
2. <i>Pensamiento amoroso</i> and the Music Industry	10
2.1 Music as Discourse	11
2.2 The Rise of the Music Industry and the Love Song	13
3. At the Crossroads of Romantic Love and Race	16
4. A Genealogy of Black Blues and Jazz Female Singers	19
4.1 Bessie Smith (1894-1937)	20
4.2 Billie Holiday (1915-1959)	24
4.3 Ella Fitzgerald (1917-1996)	26
4.4 Sarah Vaughan (1924-1990)	28
4.5 Nina Simone (1933-2003)	29
4.6 Is a Genealogy Ever Complete?	30
5. Analysis of the Lyrics	32
5.1 General Analysis	34
5.2 Analysis per Topic or Category	37
5.2.1 Women with Agency in a Relationship	38
5.2.2 Autonomy and Self-sufficiency	41
5.2.3 Emotional Dependency	44
5.2.4 Unconditional Love / Exclusivity / Idealisation	46
5.2.5 Possessiveness	48
5.2.6 Helplessness and Abnegation	50
5.2.7 Abuse / Violence	52
5.2.8 Constitution of the Self Through Romantic Love	55
5.2.9 Challenging Gender Stereotypes	56
5.2.10 Traditional Gender Stereotypes	57
5.2.11 Marriage or Vow	58
5.2.12 Female Desire	58
5.2.13 Jealousy / Competition Among Women	59
5.2.14 Neutral Use of Romantic Love?	60
5.3 Beyond Lyrics	61
6. A Genealogy That Never Ends	63
7. Final Conclusions	70
8. Works Cited	77

## **Tables**

Table 1. General quantitative results. p. 35

Table 2. Quantitative results by singer. pp. 36-37

## 1. Introduction

At the beginning of this work lies a personal realisation that women have sung about love in very similar ways throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and a personal interest for black female blues and jazz singers. It is from the combination of those two that this work came to be. Such personal interest was reinforced by the fairly considerable amount of biopics and biographies about those women that have multiplied in the last years. Works like *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* (2020) or *Bessie* (2015) show the strength and courage of singers like Billie Holiday or Bessie Smith, but also the brutality that those women suffered within their romantic relationships and within a racist context. Those pieces also claim that those women and their legacy are relevant.

Indeed, the release of such cultural products gives away information about the particular time and society in which they are produced: it is a society marked by the fourth feminist wave, the #metoo movement, and the rising awareness on the impact that patriarchy has had on many lives. It is also a society that tries to understand the lives of the oppressed people of the past. A society that turns to its forerunners in order to understand how and why some social stereotypes, unwritten norms and toxic behaviours have been perpetuated. It is a society that sees history as a flexible element that must be revised and rewritten every time.

Even before I understood why I wanted to investigate the specific singers that appear in this thesis, I had a gut feeling that by analysing their life and work, and the way in which their context influenced them, I would understand how certain discourses have reached today's music charts, and how such discourses operate within us. Later, as I was reading the book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davies gave shape to this hunch of mine, as she explained that

With the globalization of music distribution...the scope of black music and its historically broad cultural implication can no longer be confined to African-American communities. In this context, feminist interpretations of blues and jazz women's legacies contribute to an understanding of feminist consciousness that crosses racial and class borders. (xviii)

This thesis looks into the way in which romantic values, as defined by Mari Luz Esteban in *Crítica del pensamiento amoroso*, played a role in the music industry and in the lives of five black female singers: Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Nina Simone. In that regard, this work argues that the so called *pensamiento amoroso* (Esteban 23) has been an essential element for the patriarchal system to function, and that it has affected every aspect of the capitalistic society, including the music industry.

Besides, it also attempts to prove that the continuous presence of romantic values and gender stereotypes on mediums such as music has a direct impact in the lives of women, and aims at addressing the link between romantic values and gender violence. This thesis will also try to see to what extent black female singers reproduced or challenged romantic values in their songs, and how each of those action was accomplished. In that regard, this work will try to determine whether the industry tamed the romantic discourse of black women on stage, as the black culture became more and more assimilated by the white music industry.

That particular choice of singers responds to the objectives of this work: to carry out an intersectional analysis that will expose the relationship between patriarchy, racism and capitalism, and how one oppression often supports another. Together with that, this thesis also aims at revealing how the smallest elements (for instance, songs) of a bigger system (the patriarchal, racist and capitalistic society), are often the key to perpetuate or subvert oppressions. Lastly, this work intends to show how it is often the people who are subjected to violence, the same ones reproduce its mechanisms. In this case, these women who sang about romantic love, were after subjugated by its consequences.

I chose early blues and jazz singers because I considered it essential to analyse the work of women who witnessed the birth of the music industry. It is to be expected that the mechanisms of the industry, and its relationship with patriarchy and romantic love will be more visible at the early stages of the formation of the business. It must be noted that I only analysed the 10 songs performed by each one of them that were most successful on the charts. The songs will be considered regardless of their authorship, because the bond between singer and song was formed in the eyes of the public.

At the same time, it is crucial for me to analyse women who were powerful and talented, and still mistreated by the racist society they had to inhabit, and by the violent partners that many of them chose. I believe there is something essential to understand out of such contradiction: strength and weakness, liberation and submission. As the feminist waves come one after another, we expect certain behaviours to disappear, as women are liberated in many aspects. However, such expectations are not met by the number of women who are killed each year by their partners, for instance. I foresee that the *pensamiento amoroso* plays an important role in the perpetuation of gender violence.

Therefore, if we understand how *pensamiento amoroso*, or romantic values, operate in the work of black female singers in the period 1920-1970, and if we understand why those

women who challenged racism and sexual conventions were still unable to speak up against it or leave their romantic partners and denounce their violent behaviour, we will have one of the keys to understand why and how gender violence is still happening nowadays, through the mediation of romantic thought.

By uniting theory and practical analysis, this work seeks to offer a comprehensive perspective on this topic that is particular and universal at the same time. By applying theoretical knowledge to the analysis of particular elements (songs), a broader picture will be composed, and the mechanisms of patriarchy and capitalism revealed.

In order to achieve its goals, this work is divided into two parts: the first one (sections 2 and 3) is devoted to setting the theoretical grounds upon which to carry out the analysis of the lives of the five women (section 4), and the analysis of the lyrics (section 5) that are undertaken in the second part.

Therefore, in section 2 I delve into the notion of *pensamiento amoroso*, a concept proposed by Mari Luz Esteban that will serve as the backbone of this work. Then, I observe romantic love from two different perspectives that, in a sense, complement one another: on the one hand, I address the impact that music as discourse can have within the individual, and, as an extension, in society; and on the other hand, I examine the reasons why romantic love is appropriate to turn music into an attractive product.

Section 3 is devoted to nuance the second one by introducing the element of race. In that task, authors like Angela Davies and Patricia Hill Collins will be essential, not only to determine how the notion of romantic love in music and culture has largely been introduced by white people, but to locate this very work in a wider context.

In the fourth section, this work analyses the lives of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Nina Simone. I look for connections between them, both musical and biographical.

In part 5, I analyse the lyrics of 10 songs by each of those artists in order to determine how they sang about romantic love. The characteristics that I seek are determined according to Esteban's theory.

Before the conclusions, there is a sixth part devoted to some of the singers that came after those five, in an attempt to establish a connection with contemporary music.



Regarding the theoretical framework that will sustain this investigation, when it comes to the theory around romantic love, Mari Luz Esteban's *Crítica del pensamiento amoroso* will be complemented with works such as *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* by Chrys Ingraham. Their theories will be linked to the role played by the music industry in the US in the perpetuation of romantic love, with works that have analysed that specifically, such as articles by Kim de Laat, Melvin Wilkinson or James T. Carey.

In the part devoted to examine music as discourse, Tim Murphey's and Ramiro Nieto Álvaro's works will be key, together with the article by Carlos Ballesteros, María Olga Bocigas, and Ana Montoya. As for the analysis of the music industry, and the lives of many of the singers in this particular genealogy, Buzzy Jackson's *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them* are essential.

Angela Davies' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* adds a perspective of race to this work, and is especially useful because it addresses the topic of this work directly. With Patricia Hill Collins, intersectionality comes to play in this thesis.

In the section devoted to the lives of the five singers, in addition to Jackson's book, I make use of Nina Simone's autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*, and Billie Holiday's biography by Julia Blackburn.

The part dedicated to the heritage and legacy of these women is sustained by Sheila Whiteley's *Women and Popular Music*, together with the fundamental book by Buzzy Jackson.

## 2. *Pensamiento amoroso* and the Music Industry

In this section of the Master's thesis, I focus on the concept of romantic love and how it is introduced in songs to understand the impact that romantic songs might have in society. With that in mind, I first draw on Mari Luz Esteban's concept of *pensamiento amoroso*, as it helps us understand romance as part of the machinery that perpetuates the current social system that oppresses many of its inhabitants. I observe romantic love from two different perspectives that, in a sense, complement one another: on the one hand, I address the impact that music as discourse can have within the individual, and, as an extension, in society; and on the other hand, I examine the reasons why romantic love is appropriate to turn music into an attractive product. In doing so, I attempt to explain how singing about love in a particular way that responds to the *pensamiento amoroso* came to be so common, why love "sells" music, and how it contributes to the perpetuation of oppressive and violent behaviours among people, and the patriarchal and capitalist system.

Mari Luz Esteban's concept of *pensamiento amoroso* is the basic theory upon which to make our analysis of the music industry in general, and of the lyrics sung by Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Nina Simone, in particular. Thus, I first try to identify what elements are reinforced within the context of *pensamiento amoroso*, and I complement Esteban's view by introducing Chrys Ingraham's view on romantic love. The theories of these two academics provide elements that can be found in the repertoire of the five singers. Once these elements have been located, I define the contribution of the music industry to what Esteban and Ingraham expose.

Firstly, it must be mentioned that Esteban considers the *pensamiento amoroso* to be a cultural ideology that

orienta la conformación de las identidades sociales y genéricas, los procesos de socialización y las acciones individuales, sociales e institucionales. En este modelo ... se produce una expresión cultural de las emociones que tiende a enfatizar el amor por delante ... de otras facetas humanas, y que se convierte en una forma dominante de representar lo humano que se aplica de distintas maneras a mujeres y hombres. (47)

In this case, it could be argued that Esteban is following Althusser's definition of the term when using the concept of "ideology" (Storey 4). The French Marxist philosopher saw ideology "not simply as a body of ideas, but as a material practice." In that sense, he held that "ideology is encountered in the practices of everyday life and not simply in certain ideas about everyday life" (Storey 4). Although Althusser was thinking about the economy rather than love when he developed this notion of ideology, we could apply his view to Esteban

and recognize that we live in a society where the idea of romantic love is perpetuated day by day. Ingraham makes a great contribution to this perspective since she also conceptualises romantic love or romance as “ideology in action” and holds that “ideologies naturalize our socially constructed world, replacing realistic perceptions with idealized notions of that world” (123). In that sense, many examples of idealization can be found in popular culture and music.

At the same time, both Ingraham and Esteban continue to strip love of its alleged innocence, by linking the discourse of romance to the perpetuation of the capitalist system: the former argues that “Patriarchal heterosexuality makes use of the ideology of romantic love to serve the interests of male dominance and capitalism” (Ingraham 124); as for the latter, she states that the ideology of the *pensamiento amoroso* is supported by the culture of consumerism and the industrial society through romantic saturation or “saturación romántica” (Esteban 51-52). At this point, if we turn to popular culture, and more specifically, to popular music, we can see how it contributes to such saturation. As Kim de Laat argues, “Romantic love is one of the most universal themes in popular culture,” and is not exempt from the socially constructed discourse, since “within this context, conceptions of romantic love are likewise socially constructed, gendered and racialized” (1). At the same time, as we will see, romantic love makes songs more attractive, and thus, more commercial.

This is evidenced by the number of love songs that the music industry produces and has produced since the rise of the business. For instance, a study carried out in 1969 showed that 69.5 percent of the popular songs released in 1966 were about love (Carey 723), and this is a trend that had been on the rise in previous decades.

## **2.1 Music as Discourse**

Esteban and Ingraham focus on romantic love as ideology rather than discourse, since their works aim to set a broad framework to explain different behaviours and oppressions within society. Nevertheless, since this thesis investigates romantic love in lyrics, I must focus on the discourse uttered by those songs, as they are “ideology in action” (Ingraham 123). In the investigation that Ballesteros, Bocigas, and Montoya carried out about songs that spoke about consumerism, they state that “Si...la cultura se construye desde discursos y expresiones simbólicas, la música, el lenguaje musical, en tanto en cuanto discurso que es, puede construir cultura, transmitir valores, en definitiva, educar” (349). They go on to add

that we are “inmersos en un sistema que invade cada vez más ámbitos de la existencia de las personas, trata de regir y dar sentido a la vida y comportamientos de las mismas” (349). Ramiro Nieto Álvaro completes their argument by stating that “the impact of music on people’s emotions and psyche is able to cause ideology and attitude changes in society over the course of time,” and he goes even further to add that “music is also the reflection of ideology and attitudes already existing in society... As with any other type of text, lyrics are influenced by the same dominant behaviour and ideas in society that music tries to influence” (23). So, music can introduce and reinforce certain ideologies, but it also reproduces them. This anticipates the difficulty that singers might have when escaping the hegemonic discourse of romantic love since it is only through “fissures of patriarchal discourses” (Davies xi) that they can convey attitudes and models that escape hegemony.

Indeed, as far as the impact that songs as discourse might have in society, it could be said that music has an extra power because listening to music is an individual experience that can become collective in events such as concerts: it has the intimacy of the individual act, and the strength of the collective performance, which is experienced by the listener when singing together with other people. Some scholars, following Nietzsche’s theories, have gone as far as to define music as the most Dionysian of the arts, since it appeals directly to instinctive and chaotic emotions, and not to the formal reasoning of the mind (Kaufmann 207-8). This fits perfectly the “lectura absolutamente cultural y occidental” (Esteban 24) of romantic love as genuine, irresistible— something you cannot help. In this manner, it could be said that in songs about romantic love, two forces that occidental thought considers irrational find and reinforce each other.

This work is not going to be a critique of the irrational component of music, since irrationality can bring many positive things in life, even help us in “the acceptance of life” (Nieto 12). Moreover, as we will observe later on in this work, it is probably that irrational component that helps people find community around music. The African American community that listened to the five singers that I will analyse here is not an exception in that sense, and it can be said that it was through music that many of the horrors that black people suffered during and after slavery were expressed through the voices of blues and jazz singers. However, under the premise of music lying beyond rationality, the patriarchal and capitalist system has introduced and reproduced dangerous messages in society and has justified them through the excuse of irrationality. Such justification makes it more difficult to critique the discourse of a song.

Indeed, I should now address how lyrics operate within us, since that explains how a song turns into social discourse. As an individual experience, due to the amount of unspecified you- and I-referents that we can find in songs, it is quite easy for “the listener to appropriate the words” (Murphey 771). As we are the ones who receive the message, “although our logic tells us that it is not possible that we are being addressed directly, subconsciously (and perhaps illogically) we may receive the messages as directed towards us” (Murphey 771). This is even more likely if an allegedly “universal” topic such as love is the main theme of the song, because, in the end, almost everyone experiences it or the lack of it.

“Songs apparently say what some listeners want to say anyway, literally putting the words into their mouths as they sing along” (Murphey 771). The listeners make those words their own because lyrics seem to describe and define their feelings, realizing that there are more people who feel the same. That is to say, when the individual experience turns into a collective one, the original discourse of the song solidifies, it becomes real for the public. This happens rather clearly with the discourse of romantic love. It is true that, due to the vagueness of the lyrics, each person probably builds a specific idea around the song; nonetheless, the seed of romantic love has been planted or watered within each one of them. The individually appropriated discourse turns into social discourse: the verses of the song have been internalised, and thus, can be reproduced in our speech and actions from now on.

## **2.2 The Rise of the Music Industry and the Love Song**

Everything I have said in this part was conveniently used by the music industry, as it was beginning to take shape in the US at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was precisely during that time that the show business industry suffered major changes (Jackson 17). The commercialisation of the phonograph allowed people to listen to musicians that had never been in their town, and thus artists became famous nationwide. This, on the one hand, provoked the rise of the recording industry, and on the other hand, made theatres normalise their offer, imposing a more commercial style (Jackson 17). What did a more commercial style mean? One of the possible definitions could be this one: commercial songs are pieces that connect with the majority of the people in the heterogeneous public.

In the early blues era, with Ma Rainey as the “Mother of the blues,” she sang about slavery, because she knew that her audience included many who had experienced it, or were

still experiencing it. “Blues do tell me, do I have to die a slave<sup>1</sup>” she sang, and although she was allegedly speaking about being a slave to the blues, the question she poses there is clear. It could be said that her song, according to the definition I have given in the previous paragraph, was commercial at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nevertheless, bearing in mind that the recording industry, and later the radio industry, were dominated by white people, it is likely that the definition of commercial was given a specific shape that corresponds to the Western tradition and imagery, as well as to the specific context of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Namely, “radio played a powerful role in the construction of mass culture” (Taylor 44) in the early twentieth century in the United States. As the main goal was for people to consume radio, those in charge of radio programs went on to look for “the music of the masses” (Taylor 59). Taylor mentions Phil Spitalny, a radio programmer that in 1938 said that people were eager to consume music, as long as the songs were easy to listen to, both from the musical and the emotional point of view (59).

To sum up, it is relevant to note that, since the mass consumption of music began, we have on the one hand, a mass media eager to sell and feed the public with whatever it is ready to swallow easily, and an audience prepared to listen to love songs, as romantic love is perceived by them as an innocent topic. The alleged universality of love made it the perfect topic to connect with a large variety of people. Love songs were emotionally easy because they were not about politics (in appearance) and because they did not challenge the *status quo*, at first. Nevertheless, as we will see in some of the songs recorded by Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and Nina Simone, gender roles and stereotypes are questioned in ways that probably threatened the established (gender) order.

Romantic discourse often arrives in our everyday lives through music. I sometimes wonder whether we would utter some specific phrases if we had not heard them previously in a song. Songs often prepare the ground for certain behaviours to emerge—for instance, threatening a lover so that (s)he does not to leave you. Songs that give space to such behaviours contribute in a way to their justification, thus perpetuating the ideology that lies behind those behaviours.

I would like to say that romantic love is not an innocent, apolitical theme to sing about, as it responds to an ideology (*pensamiento amoroso*) that “orienta la conformación

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<sup>1</sup> This verse belongs to the song “Slave to the Blues.” It was written by Thomas A. Dorsey, and released in 1925.

de las identidades sociales y genéricas, los procesos de socialización y las acciones individuales, sociales e institucionales” (Esteban 47), and helps perpetuate toxic behaviours among individuals. Nonetheless, since it has been perceived as an innocent, harmless topic, romantic love serves as the perfect tool for the music industry to find a music for the masses. As we will observe in the next part of this work, the discourse around romantic love was shaped in a very specific way by the industry. The occidental, white notion of romantic love came into our lives unnoticed, to the point in which we perceive certain utterances as normal. In this manner, we can anticipate that this phenomenon has made its way until now.

In conclusion, capitalism saw in traditional discourses of romantic love an opportunity to sell music to the masses. In that way, love became a product. Precisely, the five women whose work I analyse in this thesis began their careers during the period when the music and radio industries were taking shape. Bessie Smith is the oldest of them, having recorded her first works in the 1920s, and Nina Simone is the youngest one, having released her first album in 1957. Those nearly 40 years were crucial for the music industry: it was the time when the figure of the singer took shape as a celebrity, and most importantly, it was the time when the topics of contemporary music were set. This is one of the reasons why the lyrics sung by these women are relevant: because their paths span different periods that overlap one another, and therefore, they constitute a genealogy that could help us trace the journey of romantic love as a topic from the first recordings to the 1960s. One of my hypotheses is that the discourse on romantic love will become more “tamed” during the 1940s and the 1950s, as the industry gains ground to the individuality of artists.

### 3. At the Crossroads of Romantic Love and Race

Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Nina Simone were black female singers who witnessed the creation of the music industry. Although my main interest is to investigate their figures and works in relation to the concept of romantic love, I am very aware of the fact that them being black conditioned their lives and work as much, if not more, as being women. Therefore, I consider it necessary for this work to have an intersectional approach towards its object of study. The term “intersectional,” coined by in 1989, came to expand the views of the first and second wave feminisms, and has since been key for many feminist studies. The common definition of the term would be the one that can be found in Merriam-Webster: “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, many of the academics who work with an intersectional approach expand this concept to the academic practice itself, as they claim that

This expansive notion of being critical informs knowledge creation in the crossroads spaces of a decolonizing and desegregating world. These meeting places enable those who enter them to retain the particularity of the insights and experiences that drive them there, while working through the meaning of what truly is universal with others who arrive from different paths. (Collins 691)

I believe this quote by Collins complements Angela Davies’ words about how the legacy of black women crosses racial and class borders. At the same time, Collins also reminds us that, intersectionality goes beyond being able to identify different axis of oppression: the very practice of intersectionality in academia, the will to meet and understand others who come from a different standpoint or experience, lies at the chore of intersectionality as well. Thus, by analysing particular experiences of black women singers, this work aims to explain a wider phenomenon that has affected all sorts of women worldwide.

When we speak of love as a “universal” force that “we all experience,” we do not bear in mind that the free expression and experience of love has not been a possibility to many people throughout history. In the case of the African American community in the US, forming free relationships and emotional bonds towards a partner or a family member was not always an option as long as slavery lasted: “Unfreedom during slavery involved...a prohibition to freely chosen, enduring family relationships” (Davies 10). Nonetheless, as

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<sup>2</sup> “Intersectionality.” merriam-webster.com *Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intersectionality>. Accessed 16 Aug. 2021.



slavery in its cruellest form of ownership came to an end, African American people became the owners of their personal relationships, and music reflected that. For Davies, “The birth of the blues was aesthetic evidence of new psychological realities within the black population” (5); along with freedom, forming free romantic relationships arrived as a new possibility, and since it could be experienced freely, it could also be sung about.

In that sense, blues did not differ from other traditions: “Like most forms of popular music, African-American blues lyrics talk about love” (Davies 3). It was precisely in the blues era, at the turn of the century, that African-American people developed “themes of individual sexual love,” which had “rarely appear[ed] in the musical forms produced during slavery” (Davies 4). Therefore, the way in which such individual sexual love is expressed differs from the European-American tradition:

As part of the capitalist schism between the public and the private realms within European-derived American popular culture...themes of romantic love had quite different ideological implications from themes of sexuality within postslavery African-American cultural expression. In the context of the consolidation of industrial capitalism, the sphere of personal love and domestic life in mainstream American culture came to be increasingly idealized as the arena in which happiness was to be sought. This held special significance for women, since love and domesticity were supposed to constitute the outermost limits of their lives...Therefore, European-American popular songs have to be interpreted within this context and as contributing to patriarchal hegemony. (Davies 9-10)

Thus, it could be said that European-American popular songs contribute to what Esteban calls *pensamiento amoroso*, as they promote love and domesticity as the way to happiness for women. Through those songs, “se produce una expresión cultural de las emociones que tiende a enfatizar el amor por delante de otras facetas humanas” (Esteban 47). Moreover, as they do not question romantic love, the European-American songs become part of the romantic saturation (Esteban 51-52) that helps perpetuate the machinery built by romantic love and capitalism together.

Davies’ contribution becomes even more relevant taking into account that Esteban’s and Ingraham’s theories did not touch race specifically, as their works had other objectives. Davies shows how nuanced the situation becomes when we are at a crossroads where two or more axis of oppression intersect: in the case of blues, and later, of jazz, being part of a marginalised collective that had just recently started to sing about common topics such as love, allowed for singers and songwriters to escape the white mainstream concept of romantic love for some time. In this manner,

the blues did not entirely escape the influences that shaped the role of romantic love in popular songs of the dominant culture. Nevertheless, the incorporation of personal relationships into

the blues has its own historical meanings and social and political resonances. Love was not represented as an idealized realm to which unfulfilled dreams of happiness were relegated. (Davies 10)

This will be crucial when analysing the lyrics of these five women. Not only is it important to bear in mind their gender and the way in which they convey love or desperation; it is even more important to consider the context in which they uttered those songs, and the context in which they communicated, where the mere presence of their bodies on stage could give the message a different meaning.

To conclude, it is essential to understand that the universality of romantic love can be questioned from an intersectional perspective, as race was a crucial factor that shaped the way in which many African Americans experienced romantic relationships. This sets the difference between white and black people in the US, as loving freely was not an option for slaves for a long time. Music is a reflection of such experience, as early blues singers did not convey love as the European-American tradition did. Furthermore, even when they do speak of love in similar ways, it must be borne in mind that the portrayal of personal relationships in blues has its own “historical meanings and social and political resonances” (Davies 10). Nevertheless, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century became older, and black musicians entered the more mainstream music industry, this distance between both traditions becomes weaker.

#### 4. A Genealogy of Black Blues and Jazz Female Singers

After examining diverse theories around romantic love and the music industry, in the following lines I carry out two tasks: on the one hand, I analyse the lives of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Nina Simone, in order to compose a genealogy of black female blues and jazz singers.

Their biographies are relevant to this work because, as we will discuss in further detail, most of them suffered gender violence throughout their lives, very often at the hands of their male partners or husbands. The examination of their biographies will be completed the next part, where the analysis of the lyrics proves how, while they suffered abuse and violence, they also sang songs that somehow perpetuated the social framework that justified such violence, as some of their songs fit the love pattern that Esteban defines as *pensamiento amoroso*. It is not the aim of this work to explore the personal relationships of these women due to morbid curiosity; instead, what this work wants to do is to point at the difficulty of breaking away from hegemonic discourses, even when they are damaging.

As I have already mentioned, a personal realisation lies at the core of this work: that women have sung about love in very similar ways throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. At this point, I think I should develop that sentence, as my realisation was broader than stated by the initial utterance: very talented women, women geniuses, have sung about love as if they were worth nothing without it, and some of those women have suffered gender violence from their partners. And this idea, that is to say, that no matter how talented, smart or capable you are, you are nothing without a romantic partner who loves you, has reached our days; and this notion, that no matter how talented, smart or capable you are, you can still be shattered by a man, has had an impact in our society.

I have considered these women to be appropriated for this type of analysis for various reasons: primarily, because they are at the crossroads of several axes of oppression (race, gender, class, sexuality), a fact that offers a broader scope for examination, and obliges me to open up to realities that go beyond white popular culture. Also, their great contributions to the discourse against racism (Billie Holiday with *Strange Fruit*, or Nina Simone with *Mississippi Goddam*) reveals how the issue of gender and romantic love has been subtler and thus harder to subvert. I do not mean to suggest that confronting the racist discourse was easier than confronting the sexist and romantic discourses. What I mean is that gender violence happened in private, and was unspoken of, while slavery, lynchings, and other

forms of racial abuse were brutal and public at the time. Thus, public horror was easier to identify and to make a discourse against. Invisible violence is harder to confront.

Hopefully, these five singers will give us a clue or two on how they adapted their discourses to fit the requirements of the (white) market with regards to the romantic love. As I analysed in part 3, music has played an important role in the perpetuation of romantic notions, which have affected people outside and inside the music industry, including these female singers. In the following sections, I will try to establish a genealogy of black female blues and jazz singers, as I investigate their lives and draw parallels among them.

#### **4.1 Bessie Smith (1894-1937)**

I will begin this genealogy with Bessie Smith, since she constitutes its main foundation. Although it is Ma Rainey who holds the title of “Mother of the Blues,” it was Smith’s career which “marked the beginning of a new aesthetic premise in American music: the singer was the song... Suddenly, popular music became personal” (Jackson 55). This is very relevant to the analysis of the lyrics. It is the reason why I have not taken into account who composed the songs that these women performed: precisely, because at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, music lyrics, and thus, the message they kept, became one with the person that conveyed that message: the singer. In the eyes of the public, there was no character on stage any more, but a real person who conveyed specific lyrics as if they were his/her own.

It must be taken into account that the early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the birth of celebrity culture. As Kurzman, Charles, et al. state, “the spread of capitalism systematically generates new forms of status” (352), celebrity being among those new forms. Charles E. Hurst also argued that celebrities are a creature of capitalism, as their reputation (and lives) can be commodified (116-22) along their talent. This applied to those who were part of the culture industry, including movie stars and musicians. In the case of music, as it developed into a business, an industry, musicians not only earned a reputation for their talent; besides, they also had the attention of the public, an attention that was not limited to their performances, as the interest of the public reached their private lives as well.

The fact that music lyrics and their interpretation might be perceived as intimate by the audience, along with the public’s eagerness to know details about the celebrity’s life, probably contributed to the strong association between singer and words. Besides, the new-

born music industry was probably aware of such phenomenon, and took advantage of it in order to sell more. As the music industry evolved, this could have been a factor in the songs that record labels chose for each singer. Music has a special truth to it because the body of the musician is there, tangible to the public, and because there is not a framework of fiction (as it could happen in theatre or movies) that prevents the public from fusing performer and song. This lack of distinction also contributes to the public feeding from the information they have about the celebrity: in that way, a song that speaks about heartbreak performed by a singer who is known to having been dumped recently, will be felt more strongly by the public, who will believe to be buying a truth.

As critic and biographer Gary Giddins puts it in the *Queens of Jazz* documentary, “Singing is the most intimate form of music making. Every other musician on the stage has a filter between himself and the audience, and that is the instrument. But the singer is naked.” (Rodley 26:32). This, of course, was (and still is) a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it allows singers to communicate directly with the audience; on the other, it exposes them to the public. Bessie Smith, with her personal, powerful voice, was one of the first ones to be perceived as one with the song, and after her came other women such as Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, or Nina Simone.

Namely, Smith is a central figure because she is still closely linked to Ma Rainey’s blues tradition, which, at the same time, is still linked to the memories and experiences of slavery. Therefore, we can observe reminiscences of the cohabitation of duality that Angela Davies mentions: “God and the Devil had cohabited the same universe during slavery, not as polar opposites but rather as complex characters who had different powers and who both entered into relationships with human beings” (6). This implies that the morality in the blues and jazz eras within some sectors of the African-American community, does not rely on the duality of good and evil, and therefore, as we can observe in the lives of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, in many aspects of their lives, their actions are not regulated by any kind of moral: both were quite openly bisexual, they liked partying, they could travel and they made money.

In that sense, in comparison to other women, and without losing from sight the implications of being black during those times, it can be said that they enjoyed more freedom. However, this is not particular to singers, as black women were never “confined to the home; they couldn’t afford to stay there, anyway... They were the breadwinners, church

organizers, and community leaders, and with Bessie Smith, they began to contemplate the possibility of commanding attention as outspoken rebels, too” (Jackson 52).

Thus, following the traces of her precursor and protector Ma Rainey, Smith came “to represent an African-American alternative to those twin female rebels of mainstream white culture, the flapper and the vamp, whose devil-may-care pursuit of pleasure and career was a slap in the face of middle-class morality” (Jackson 52). At the same time, she opened up a window for other women to follow her out of the dictates of gender and race.

Smith had a difficult childhood, having lost both parents at a very young age, and remaining under the custody of a sister that did not treat her right. Her career took off with the help of her brother Clarence, and she worked in Ma Rainey’s company before going solo. She married a security guard called Jack Gee, with whom she shared a stormy relationship. Nevertheless, despite Smith being open about her sexuality, her partying, and her success, the violent character of her marriage remained unspoken.

The domestic violence that Smith suffered at the hands of her husband was well known to her immediate circle of friends and family, but seemed to be the one aspect of her life that was not shared with her audience. In a well-publicized life of sex, drugs, and other indiscretions, Smith’s own abuse at the hands of her husband was the only taboo subject. In retrospect, the contrast between Bessie Smith’s public image as a strong, proud, self-possessed woman and the violent reality of her marriage is striking. (Jackson 52-53)

This quote is very revealing, for it shows how a strong public image can hide an abused woman—a pattern that can still be identified in celebrities nowadays. Besides, it reveals that domestic abuse was not spoken about, even when other scandalous behaviours were being revealed (having women lovers or taking drugs, for instance).

However, this information about Smith was not a topic of her songs. As for other artists, such as Rainey, the most important topic for her was the relationship between a man and a woman (Jackson 35). But her songs hardly ever addressed any dark aspect of romance, and when they did, they normalised those aspects. Was it because of the music market? Was it because she was too embarrassed or ashamed?

Throughout her career, Bessie Smith recorded 156 singles between 1923 and 1933, the majority of them with Columbia Records, and the last ones with Okeh Records. During the 1920s the blues genre was really successful, but with its decay at the end of the decade, and Columbia not renewing her contract in 1931, Smith began singing other types of songs—more commercial, it could be said. “The ‘Empress of the Blues’ performing squeaky clean songs was a stretch, but Smith did it for obvious reasons: she needed the money” (Jackson

57). This is a clear indicator of how singers might modify their style and lyrics and adapt them to the market. Smith worked in this line from 1931 up until her death in 1937. It could be said that she was in decline during this last period of her career, but we will never know whether she would have adapted to the jazz market.

Bessie Smith influenced the lives and careers of many artists of her time, including the women who share this genealogy with her. It is relevant to note that not only have their music and singing been linked, but so have their personal lives and their public images. Jackson establishes a connection between Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, and the base of such connection, in this case, was their suffering of domestic violence and how that translated into the public image of each one of them: “Unlike Billie Holiday, whose violent private life clearly informed her wounded, fragile public image, Smith consistently projected the persona of an invincible woman” (53). This quote is relevant because it identifies different public perceptions in front of the same fact: despite both of them suffering domestic abuse, their image was presented in different ways to the public, thus revealing how the public’s preconceptions of them play an important role in perpetuating a specific image of them, that often seemed to doom their lives.

The end of Bessie Smith seems to respond to a previously written narrative, as it often happens with public personalities. As humans, we feel the urge to build a complete image of a person once their life is over, more so when it comes to famous people, to make sense of their lives, but especially of their deaths. For that reason, the life of a celebrity often fits “into an overarching archetype” (Gabler 13). In doing so, we look to soothe ourselves, and also to explain our existence through others. In that sense, artists belonging to the African-American community rescued Smith to make sense of the black experience during her time. As writer James Baldwin put it, for instance, “Bessie Smith was much freer—onerous and terrible as this may sound—much freer than the people who murdered her or let her die” (19). In this manner, this quote proves how Smith’s death, resulting from a car crash, followed by medical neglect and racial discrimination, gave a new dimension to her life and work.

## 4.2 Billie Holiday (1915-1959)

In 1933 while Bessie Smith made her last recordings, Billie Holiday made her first one. Thus the latter picked up on the former's legacy, with a voice and sound that reflected the more depressing times that followed the crazy 1920s. "Billie Holiday was the future, with a sound especially suited to the uncertain era of widespread poverty, social unrest and World War ahead" (Jackson 71). With a weaker voice, a voice that conveyed vulnerability and truth, Billie Holiday sang from the abyss.

Between 1933 and 1959, she recorded 12 studio albums, three live albums, and 38 singles. She worked for six record companies: Columbia Records, Commodore Records, Decca Records, Aladdin Records, Verve Records, and MGM Records. In comparison with Smith, she recorded and sold more albums than singles, which reflects the technological development in the record industry, as well as its transformation into a large business field.

Like many others, Holiday began her career in a Big Band, in an era when "there was tremendous pressure on the Big Bands to play the songs chosen by the industry" as candidates to be successful (Jackson 87). This leads us to think that by that time, the industry had already identified the topics and genres that were more easily sold: love songs, emotionally easy, as I discuss in part 3. Nightclubs also followed this current, as they demanded artists to perform "escapist love songs" (Jackson 91).

Billie Holiday interpreted love songs throughout her career, but her style, and the fact that her private life (her drug addiction and violent relationships) was public, turned her image into "an uncanny combination of vulnerability and cynicism, as she infused sad and tender love songs with the knowledge of her own painful affairs" (Jackson 83). Again, this is a result of identifying the singer with the song, a tendency that will interfere in the lives of these women and the generations that came after.

Like Bessie Smith, she also came from having a difficult childhood: she was born to teenage parents, was raped at age 11, convicted to a reformatory because of it, and she worked as a prostitute from a young age. She always lived a transgressive life, as she was also bisexual, took drugs, and loved partying. She even played with the limits of gender, as she even presented herself as William or Bill sometimes (when introduced to women), earning the nickname Mr. Holiday (Blackburn 90).



The dominant (white) culture ignored her work for a long time, along with her indiscretions. Nevertheless, the song “Strange Fruit” (recorded in 1939) put her under the spotlight, as the lyrics confronted the racist regime that still killed black people with impunity. Once again, although the lyrics were written by Abel Meeropol, the song became hers because she sang it.

As the 2021 film *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* explores, it is a possibility that her public image was somehow manipulated to emphasize her drug addiction and problematic private life to discredit her and justify the vigilance and continuous arrests to which the police subjected her. Nevertheless, this is a theory that has only recently gained recognition. Even her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), co-written with William Dufty, helped perpetuate this particular image of her, as the publishing house thought the book would sell more if it insisted on the most dramatic aspects of her life. However, her behaviour was quite common among musicians in the jazz music circle. Her problem was an extraordinary talent that isolated her (Blackburn 132), an isolation that many talented women have suffered, combined with her attempt to confront the racist *status quo* of the time.

Billie Holiday had very toxic and abusive relationships with men. She got married three times to Jimmy Monroe, Joe Guy and Louis McKay, and had other tumultuous relationships, the worst of which was with a gangster named John Levy (not to be mistaken with the bass player). Most of them were pimps, drug addicts, or had connections with the mafia, because Holiday needed men who could protect her from the dangers of the underworld. Those men usually ended up being her manager and thus having access to her money, which often resulted in them stealing from her. In her own words, “I gotta have a man that is a man, and I gotta have a man that keeps reminding me of that! Otherwise, I’m making more money than he can make and I’m more famous than him. So, in order to assert his masculinity, he knocks me down, he slaps me down” (as quoted in Blackburn 164). With those words, Holiday seems to be accepting the violence she suffers, almost as if she deserved it for being talented and famous.

This seems to be a pattern of the time, as John Levy (the bass player) claimed:

In that era all the female vocalists had to have a man who’ll beat on them and take their money and misuse them. They seemed to thrive on that. Well, not thrive, but it was something. Why do some people take abuse from another human being? Why let someone do that to you? Nobody can answer that, but some people have to have this. Females call that love. (Blackburn 164)

Levy's words rise some relevant issues that deserve further analysis. In fact, the bass player's words remind me of those by Simone de Beauvoir, as she stated that the word "love" did not have the same meaning for one sex or the other (451-52). "Desde el momento en que la mujer es definida como la Otra, su vida queda inscrita en la dependencia, la vulnerabilidad y la inmanencia" (Esteban 140). This sense of emotional dependency crosses this genealogy very clearly, and Billie Holiday's words are a clear example of it: in her utterance, we can identify how traditional gender roles (men need to be strong) meet the emotional dependency that those same gender stereotypes implant in women. At the same time, we can see how such combination results in women not only submitting to violence or economic exploitation, but justifying it via the discourse of romantic love. The fact that songs about *bad-man-but-I-love-him* or *he-hurt-me-but-I-love-him* were so common in the women's blues tradition is no coincidence. It must be noted that traditional gender roles and romantic discourse brought economic opportunities to men, as they could exploit their wives' or partners' talent for their own benefit. This is relevant because once again, patriarchy and capitalism form an alliance in the fist of a man that hits a woman.

Under that fist, Holiday was perceived as vulnerable and dependant: she was an addict, to men, to drugs. The public image that was forged around her seemed to feed her disgrace, and she shared death circumstances with Smith: she was also denied medical assistance because she was under arrest in hospital, and died while the police prevented doctors from attending her. There were many other musicians who took drugs and were not as persecuted as she was. Her subversive life as a black woman who confronted the racist *status quo* played a role in her tragic death.

### **4.3 Ella Fitzgerald (1917-1996)**

Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday coincided in time, during a period marked by the Prohibition and the economic depression. She also had a difficult childhood, as her single mother died, leaving her with a stepfather that did not treat her right. In her tumultuous teenage years, she apparently ran numbers<sup>3</sup> for the mafia, an activity that often involved suffering violence at the hands of the men who were in charge.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Urban Dictionary, "the number runners worked for organized crime in the 20's and 30's. During this time the Mafia and other gangs controlled a lottery which was called the numbers. The people who worked for the numbers racket were called number runners. They collected the bets from the gamblers and delivered the payoff when the gamblers won." ("Running numbers." urbandictionary.com *Dictionary*,

After singing in the Harlem streets for some years, she began her career in the Chick Webb Orchestra, and became famous with the song “A-Tisket, A-Tasket.” She recorded her first single in 1936, and, after leaving the orchestra and starting her solo career, up until her death, she recorded 59 studio albums and 34 live albums, with 72 hit singles, and several collaborations with very relevant musicians such as Louis Armstrong or Duke Ellington. As we can observe, the fact that she lived much longer than Holiday allowed her to develop a more extensive career.

Both singers were very different musically: Fitzgerald was known for her prodigious ability to improvise with her voice, which was pure and clear, as well as impeccable when it came to intonation or phrasing. Her singing was bright and lively, which sets a clear contrast with Holiday: the pain that was so present in Holiday’s voice disappeared when Fitzgerald sang the same tune.

It is remarkable how these women, even when they shared a difficult childhood or background, developed very different characters and ways of facing things. Ella Fitzgerald, in a sense, serves to prove how not every talented female musician is doomed to self-destruction.

Fitzgerald’s way of singing, her cheerfulness and apparent lightness was perfect for what the industry was looking for at the time: easy music that allowed people to escape from their reality. In that sense, Fitzgerald (together with Vaughan) constitutes the less problematic and more commercial side of this genealogy. As she affirmed in an interview late in her life, “I like pretty lyrics because... a pretty lyric can bring back memories of something” (Zwerin min. 3:30). This affirmation reflects a will to move people, but not in a too turbulent or scandalous way.

Indeed, in comparison with her fellow genealogy-mates, Fitzgerald’s life seems quite peaceful: she did not challenge the sexual conventions, and she was not as openly rebellious as Smith or Holiday. However, being a public figure, and despite her shy and discreet character, her marriages were surrounded by scandal. She married at least twice, to Benny Kornegay and Ray Brown, and possibly a third time to a Norwegian young man called Thor Larsen. Her love stories have not been reported to be violent, but it could be said that they were not successful marriages either. Fitzgerald was forced to annul her first marriage

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Urban Dictionary, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=running%20numbers>. Accessed 22 Jul. 2021.)

because Kornegay was a convicted drug dealer and pimp; her second husband left her, and the alleged third was accused of stealing by a previous fiancée.

She suffered for love and for the lack of it, and sang about it. In that sense, her life experiences were very appropriated for what the music industry at the time wanted. At the same time, she also suffered due to her body image, since being overweight made her insecure: the fact that the body of the singer is exposed to the public took a toll on her. She relied on the affection of the audience to fill the void that loneliness carved within her. She died from diabetes at age 79.

#### **4.4 Sarah Vaughan (1924-1990)**

Together with Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan is considered one of the most influential jazz singers. Having a look at her life, she can be classified, along with Fitzgerald, as a less controversial and more commercial artist. She did not come from a conflictive background and began playing piano and singing at church.<sup>4</sup> She is well known for her great vocal capacity and range. Like Holiday and Fitzgerald, she took her first steps singing in a big band and then jumped into a solo career. She recorded 48 studio albums, and ten live albums, and released 89 singles, as of 1946. Her first album was released in 1950.

Her personal life does not seem as scandalous as Smith or Holiday, although she was arrested on a drugs charge (Blackburn 181). Nevertheless, aside from what her nickname, ‘Sassy’, can give away, there is not much on her biography that reaches the standards of the scandal of Lady Day or The Empress of Blues.

Like Fitzgerald, she had three unsuccessful marriages with George Treadwell, Clyde Atkins and Waymon Reed, and also got pointed at because of her look. In fact, her first husband, Treadwell, invested in a makeover that put her under the spotlight. This

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<sup>4</sup> I haven’t touched upon the role that the church played in the African-American communities, but it was very relevant for many women. In fact, many black women found a way to make community within church, and they built a black female morality that was approved by the dominant white culture. Nevertheless, this lead many black women to judge others such as Holiday or Smith, since they did not follow those religious guidelines, which reinforced the stereotypes that the blues and jazz singers fought. This has nothing to do with Sarah Vaughan, since nothing makes us suspect that she was part of a religious community in such a devote way. However, I thought this was worth mentioning.

phenomenon of changing bodies that will be then exposed and exploited on stage has had a long way in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and undoubtedly has reached the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Not much has transcended about her relationship with men, aside from the fact that they tended to be her manager, which is a pattern in many female singers of this genealogy (Fitzgerald would be the exception). She did sing about love but was very discreet about her private life. Again, I am forced to draw parallelisms with Fitzgerald, as heartbreak is what characterised her love life, rather than violence. In this manner, Fitzgerald and Vaughan correspond to a tradition of clean, cheerful and commercial virtuosity, although Vaughan's voice reaches deep and high at the same time.

#### **4.5 Nina Simone (1933-2003)**

Nina Simone is the last artist of this genealogy. She was a powerful musician, a genius that set an example for many “Young, Gifted and Black”<sup>5</sup> women of her time, and for many that came after. Out of the five women in this short genealogy, she is the one that feels closest to us, on the one hand, for chronological reasons, and on the other, because she could be considered a pop figure. She was a talented pianist and singer, and many of her tunes are still hymns for the modern audience—for instance, “Feeling Good” or “Sinnerman.”

Regarding her professional career, Nina Simone published her first album 30 years after the radio was popularized in the US, in 1959, and she released 24 studio albums, the vast majority of them between 1959 and 1970. The social context of the time, as well as the music industry, were very different if we compare it to Bessie Smith's era. By Simone's time, the music industry had already settled itself as a well-positioned business, thanks to marketing and other tools of capitalism: during the 1960s the record market was huge, and teenagers were discovered as a potential market to be exploited.

It was during that time that Simone's career started to take off. By her time, Big Bands were not a thing, and jazz was already past its prime. Nevertheless, Simone began singing in clubs, accompanied by her piano. She was fierce and strict with the audience and demanded silence. Simone covered popular songs very often answering to the public's demand. In her memoir *I Put a Spell on You*, published in 1992, she describes the popular

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<sup>5</sup> This is the title of one of Nina Simone's songs.

audience to be musically ignorant, and too easy to please (Waymon 146). Her commentary suggests that by the 1960s she identifies how the industry has shaped the public taste, up until the point of turning the audience into a mass that does not have its own criteria.

Nina Simone was born Eunice Waymon, in a poor family, and her musical talent was discovered very early on. She began playing at church, and with the help of the people who surrounded her, attempted to become a classical pianist, an opportunity that was denied to her because of the colour of her skin—she was denied entrance in Curtis Institute of Music. She preferred the term “folk musician” over that of “jazz singer,” since she believed that there was more folk and blues in her music, and not so much jazz (114-115). She was a determined racial activist, and she denounced the racial oppression in her songs.

Simone was fierce when it came to advocating civil rights, as many of her songs prove (*Why? The King of Love is Dead* or *Mississippi Goddam*), as her life was marked by her skin colour, as well as by her gender. As she states in her memoir, she was abused by her husband/manager Andy Stroud (Waymon 125-127), and was emotionally dependant on men, to the point of saying that she found it more difficult to be happy without a husband to love (266). She also struggled with mental health and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She died of breast cancer in 2003, in France.

#### **4.6 Is a Genealogy Ever Complete?**

To conclude with this part, I would like to say that genealogies always remain incomplete, as it is impossible to encompass everything and everyone that a given period of time implies. Through the lives of these five women, I have attempted to cover a small but significant part of the music industry in the US that involved black female blues and jazz singers. The period of time covered corresponds to the span of the careers of these women, although most of the attention has been devoted to the period between 1920 and 1960. A genealogy is never complete, but it is also never limited to the people who form it. In this case, I hope to have covered aspects of the lives of many black women, and of many female artists.

As observed, these five women share many aspects of their lives: most of them were born to poor families and had unstable backgrounds, which in some cases directed them towards a life that involved drugs, prostitution or crime, as it is the case with Bessie Smith,

Billie Holiday or Ella Fitzgerald. Besides, being born black subjected them to discrimination and violence from a young age.

They undoubtedly shared their incredible talent as well; a genius that often isolated them, and that, as singer figures, exposed them to the public in extraordinary and sometimes harmful ways. They were identified with the song, and thus, their lives lay open in front of the audience each time they opened their mouth. It is in this way that their love lives, their and their pain reached the public; at the same time, their feelings were also perceived and shaped in particular ways that sometimes served market interests (see Billie Holiday). Some of them sang about a transgressive life, a bisexual life that involved drugs, as it was the case with Smith; whereas others treated more commercial and easy songs that, without being untrue, perpetuated romantic discourses.

Most of them were managed by their male partners or husbands, and they believed it was natural that their husbands were in charge of their career and their money. This belief contributed to them normalizing the gender violence they suffered, as they thought that this was a prize to be paid for their talent: they menaced their husbands' masculinities, and violence was a way to be in balance. Nevertheless, the most shocking thing about this gender violence is that they remained silent about it and assumed it, in a way they had not done with other aspects of their lives—e.g. racial injustice. In her book, Jackson asks whether a woman who is brave enough to sing against lynchings must necessarily also be able to confront the man who mistreats her (93). There are several reasons that could explain why a woman does not stand up to her partner, but this work will hold that it is no coincidence that many talented strong women remained silent about abuse. The goal of emphasizing this aspect of these women's lives is not to blame them for not confronting gender violence or romantic discourse as they confronted other types of violence or discourses, since there was (and still is) a whole system that operated to maintain such silence. It is the *pensamiento amoroso*, the heteroromantic thought mentioned by Esteban, that permeated the lives of those singers and that society, which made those women assume that violence, sacrifice and devotion was their mandate when it came to men. It was an interiorised misogynistic discourse that whispered in their ear, "Without love you are nothing." It was a song that they had listened to before they sang it on.

## 5. Analysis of the Lyrics

The following part constitutes the core of this master's thesis. The analysis corresponding to each artist's works is limited to the 10 songs that were most successful commercially.<sup>6</sup> This means that the analysis will consider the songs that reached music charts, a criterion that responds to one of the goals of this work: determining what kind of discourse reached success within an industry whose main goal was to produce commercial songs. Besides, this guideline also fits the extension of this work, as it does not allow a wider examination.

All the songs are considered equally, regardless of the authorship—hence, for the purpose of this analysis, it doesn't matter whether they were self-composed, or someone else wrote them. The reason for this is that, as I said previously, with these women the public began to identify the singer and the song as one. In fact, despite some of the most popular songs performed by Smith, Fitzgerald, Vaughan, Holiday and Simone not being written by them, they are inextricably linked to the singers—Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" is the clearest example of this. For that reason, I consider that those songs are somehow theirs, as they performed them and thus conveyed their message.

There is, however, another reason for me to neglect the authorship of the songs. And that is that the same text is not read the same way, depending on who communicates it. In his study of songs released between 1954 and 1968, Wilkinson argued that "many songs are completely interchangeable in that they could be sung by either sex without changing any of the words" (162). Nevertheless, if we take Esteban's words into account, even as women and men sing the same thing, within the context of *pensamiento amoroso*, women are sentimentalized and are regarded as

incompletas, particulares, dependientes; mientras que los hombres son percibidos como completos, universales, independientes, al margen de que tengan o no detrás a alguien/es (normalmente mujeres) que abastezcan sus necesidades físicas o emocionales. (49)

It is to be expected, then, that a song by a female musician that communicates abandonment, for instance, will not have the same impact or will not be read the same way as when a man sings abandonment. At the same time, the imagery that each performance will feed is different: the impact that a woman like Bessie Smith had at the time when she

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<sup>6</sup> The source used to select the songs by these women is the webpage [playback.fm](https://playback.fm), as it gathers detailed information about when each song charted. At the same time, all the lyrics that have been used in this work have been taken from the webpages <https://genius.com/>, <https://www.lyricfind.com/> and <https://www.musixmatch.com/>.



was singing about sexual liberation cannot be compared to that made by another male singer. So, songs can be linguistically interchangeable, but the message changes depending on the speaker (singer, in this case). It is not only the lyrics that perpetuate a certain idea of romantic love: who conveys them becomes important since singers are performing subjects who do not always have a character to distance themselves from. What they perform is perceived as personal, as they embody it at that moment.

But what exactly will I be looking for in this analysis? What indicates the perpetuation of romantic discourse, of the *pensamiento amoroso*? We will once again turn to Esteban in search of clues. In a short analysis of pop songs in Spanish, she highlighted “la inevitabilidad del emparejamiento,” “la omnipotencia (el amor todo lo puede),” “el libre albedrío” (the belief that holds that our love feelings are not interfered by external factors), “la equivalencia (la equiparación entre enamoramiento y amor), la media naranja, la pasión como eterna, o la exclusividad del matrimonio” as topics usually sang by women (Esteban 92-93). She also added that jealousy appeared as a source of suffering for women, and that it was them who most claimed “la dependencia, la pasividad, el sufrimiento, el sacrificio...” (Esteban 93).

This brings us back to the previous part of this work, where we determined that the idea of “love” for women was often linked to emotional dependency, as women have historically been defined as incomplete beings. As we see in Esteban’s words, such dependency, experienced in real life, is translated into music lyrics: music is a reflection of certain ideologies, and thus, as it pronounces and reproduces specific aspects of life, it also reinforces and perpetuates them.

Esteban also claimed that female singers showed their contradictions more, as they embodied the tension between following cultural mandates and being free (Esteban 93). This becomes a central point for this analysis, because it is in contradiction where we might find resistance: a “fissure” (Davies xi). Finding perspectives and discourses that contradict or exclude one another within the corpus of a single singer suggests various things: a lack of control over one’s productions, in favour of the market and the industry; a lack of interest on the lyrics; and, mostly, contradiction suggests resistance to either of the discourses pronounced previously.

## 5.1 General Analysis

Following Esteban's theories, I set a list of characteristics to search in the lyrics of the songs. On the one hand, I locate the traits that reinforce the heteroromantic discourse:

- Emotional dependency / Loneliness / Abandonment
- Unconditional love and dedication / Exclusivity/ Idealisation
- Constitution of the self through romantic love
- Possessiveness
- Marriage or vow
- Traditional gender values
- Helplessness and abnegation
- Jealousy
- Abuse / Violence

On the other hand, I discuss other discourses that challenge the *pensamiento amoroso*. The following will be explored:

- Challenging gender stereotypes / Heteronormativity
- Portrayal of powerful women in relationships
- Female desire
- Autonomy and self-sufficiency

Lastly, I keep a category for neutral perspectives on love: songs where love seems to be a mere excuse to fill the voice, an aesthetic choice.

Having established these categories, I proceed to count how often these topics appear in the songs. I first make a general table with all songs, since that already offers a general picture of what stands out in the romantic discourse sung by these women. Then, I proceed to analyse each singer individually. I make an individual table for each one of them, where we can locate the topics that have emerged in her songs. This allows us to see whether the topics or the frequency with which they appear have changed with time, bearing in mind that there is a notable span of time between Bessie Smith and Nina Simone.

This quantitative analysis followed by a close analysis of the lyrics. In this manner, I itemise each characteristic found in their songs, and even compare in which ways each of them addresses the topics. Overall, the purpose of this part is to see how those 5 singers have perpetuated traditional ideas of romantic love, and to what extent they have subverted them.

**Table 1. General quantitative results. 52 songs analysed.**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Song quantity</b>
Emotional dependency / Loneliness / Abandonment	13
Women with agency in a relationship	12
Autonomy and self-sufficiency	12
Unconditional love and dedication / Idealisation	10
Possessiveness / Exclusivity	10
Abuse / Violence	9
Constitution of the self through romantic love	8
Challenging gender stereotypes / Heteronormativity	7
Female desire	5
Helplessness and abnegation	4
Jealousy	3
Traditional gender stereotypes	3
Marriage or vow	2
Neutral	3

The first thing that stands out in this table is that the two categories that appear the most correspond to female empowerment. Angela Davies states that these women conveyed what we now perceive as feminist ideas through the cracks, the “fissures of patriarchal discourses” (Davies xi). It is also notable that jealousy and marriage are almost absent from the songs, a factor which could be attributed to the heritage of slavery and thus, of blues (Davies 11). Marrying another person was not a possibility for slaves, as they were not allowed to have a contract with anybody, and therefore, it is possible that next free generations did not emphasize this aspect of romantic relationships as much.

**Table 2. Quantitative results by singer.<sup>7</sup>**

	B. Smith	Holiday	Fitzgerald <sup>8</sup>	Vaughan	Simone <sup>9</sup>
Emotional dependency / Loneliness / Abandonment	4	3	2	3	1
Abuse / Violence	4	-	2	1	2
Women with agency in a relationship	4	3	1	2	2
Autonomy and self sufficiency	4	2	-	2	1
Challenging gender stereotypes / Heteronormativity	3	1	-	1	1
Unconditional love and dedication / Idealisation	2	3	3	1	2
Possessiveness / Exclusivity	2	2	1	2	3
Marriage or vow	1	-	-	-	1

<sup>7</sup> Every decade corresponds to the most successful hits of one of the singers: Smith to the 1920s, Holiday to the 1930s, Fitzgerald to the 1940s, Vaughan to the 1950s and Simone to the 1960s and on. It must be taken into account that I am exclusively speaking of their top hits, as their individual work was produced beyond a limited decade.

<sup>8</sup> Out of Fitzgerald’s 10 songs, “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” and “Cow Cow Boggie” were popular songs that do not speak about romance, so they haven’t been taken into account in this table.

<sup>9</sup> Out of Nina Simone’s 10 songs, 3 do not speak about romantic love. Although “Ain’t Got No” and “Young, Gifted and Black” do speak about self-sufficiency and self-affirmation, they do not do so within a romantic discourse. Therefore, they are not included in this table. The third song is “Mr. Bojangles,” which tells the story of a street musician.

Traditional gender stereotypes	1	-	-	1	1
Jealousy	2	-	-	-	1
Helplessness and abnegation	1	1	-	1	1
Female desire	1	-	1	3	
Constitution of the self through romantic love	-	2	1	2	2
Neutral	-	-	-	2	-

As I have already stated, analysing 10 songs per singer is enough to draw precise conclusions. Nevertheless, this quantitative analysis, helped by a close look at the lyrics, allows us to observe the evolution of these topics from Bessie Smith to Nina Simone.

In general, it could be said that this genealogy starts with a discourse that seems more untamed. Bessie Smith's lyrics are precise, and despite holding powerful imagery, they are to the point: they denounce violence and claim power at the same time. They are the reflection of that tension between following an established path and freedom, a tension mentioned by Esteban (93). It is the pain present in her work which links the lyrics to reality—a pain inherited by Billie Holiday. Love songs take a more abstract turn with Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan, whose brilliant vocal abilities, heartbreak and love help to convey an idea of illusion and idealisation, that is, a discourse that is closer to the romantic songs that we listen to nowadays. With Nina Simone, we go back to the blues, to the pain.

## 5.2 Analysis per Topic or Category

After a general introduction to all the songs, I now delve into each of the topics that I have sought in the selected corpus. It must be noted that topics interfere with one another, and a single song can convey contradictory or complementary discourses. I carry out this analysis in order of relevance, as portrayed in the general Table. Within each topic, songs will be addressed in chronological order, so that we can see whether there is a development in the topic, or if there is none at all.

### 5.2.1 Women with Agency in a Relationship

It is at least noticeable how the first two most relevant categories correspond to female empowerment and autonomy. Davies already hinted this when addressing Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday: out of the 52 analysed songs, 12 express ideas of female autonomy and strength.

If we look at the careers of these artists within the context of the feminist movement, we see how those feminist topics correspond to the time in which they were sung about, as Rainey and Smith's careers developed during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when first wave feminism was strong. That first movement was widely focused on female suffrage, and the racial factor was often neglected by white suffragettes—hence Sojourner Truth's well-known 1851 discourse "Ain't I a woman?," which reproached that same neglect to white women. Nevertheless, having (black and white) women advocate for their own rights set a background that probably enabled these topics to appear in society, and consequently, in songs.

Turning to the rest of singers in this analysis, it could be said that Holiday, Vaughan and Fitzgerald's careers took off in the interval between the two waves: after white women earned their right to vote in 1920 in the US, first wave feminism calmed down, and the First and Second World Wars did not facilitate the rise of the second wave until the 1960s. In that sense, it was Vaughan and Fitzgerald, together with Simone, who lived through that second wave, much more focused in sexual liberation and equal pay. However, it overlapped with the Civil Rights Movement, where Simone for instance played an important role with her songs.

Going back to the topic to be analysed in this section, we see how Bessie Smith's songs present women who have agency over the relationship they are in: they make firm decisions for their own benefit. Thus, in her well-known "Down Hearted Blues" (1923), we can hear Smith sing

*I got the world in a jug, the stopper's in my hand  
I'm going to hold it until you didn't come under my command*

With that final phrase, Smith confronts an abusive situation, previously expressed in the song (*Once I was crazy 'bout a man / He mistreated me all the time*), and takes her own power back. In this song, we can see how "being crazy about someone" makes the woman put up with the abuse, in the name of that alleged crazy love. At this point, the idea that love

is irremissible, that one can only surrender to it, is also questioned in the song. As it can be observed, topics are interwoven, and they reinforce or discredit one another.

“Down Hearted Blues” was composed by Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin in 1922, and Hunter herself performed and recorded it before Smith did. It is worth noting that the composer of this empowering song is a woman that wrote the song to perform it herself. This gives us a stronger sense of empowerment. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that songs that conveyed agency or power on the women’s part were often composed by men. An example of this is “Ain’t Gonna Play No Second Fiddle,” by Perry Bradford:

*Let me tell you daddy  
Momma ain't gonna sit here and grieve  
Pack up your stuff and get ready to leave*

It is also to be highlighted how the lyrics of these two songs are not to be sung by male performers. The gender of the speaker is clearly marked by the lyrics, not only through the pronouns, but also through their description of gender roles: for instance, even if a male performer changed the pronouns, he would hardly admit that he was mistreated by his woman.

Smith continues to express agency in her self-composed “Lost Your Head Blues:”

*I'm goin' to leave you,  
baby, and I ain't goin' to say goodbye*

In this case, although this phrase could apply to either gender, the rest of the song, and her own body on stage reinforce the agency that she has when asserting her own independence.

The presence of romantic love in these three songs is essential for the audience to understand the contrast between going “crazy for love” and being in command of oneself. Once again, it is in the clash between two apparently colliding discourses when we find the empowerment. For instance, in the first three stanzas of “Lost Your Head Blues,” Smith conveys pure devotion to her partner, even when he is poor or lonely, only to see him go away with another girl. Instead of being overthrown, she takes that situation and turns it into power. Without the previous devotion, her sense of independence would not strike as strongly to the audience as it does. Her firm decision and her lack of hesitation are worth highlighting, as they portray a strong woman making her own path.

After analysing songs where lyrics respond to a female voice, I will now turn to another song whose lyrics do not respond to any particular gender. “Carelessly” was written by Nick Kenny, and Norm Ellis, and was recorded by four different orchestras in 1937, two with male singers Ted Mack and Danny Dennis, and two with women’s voices by Kay Thomson and Billie Holiday. This is an interesting case to analyse, because the lyrics need no changing in order to adapt to either gender. In that way, it is the look of the audience upon the particular singer, together with the particular interpretation of the singer, what changes the message itself. It could be said that the hegemonic social discourse plays a role in cases such as this, as conventions may or might not be challenged, depending on the audience’s social expectations. In that manner, it could be said that the lyrics from “Carelessly” can be subversive, but that is up to the sociohistorical context, and the particular audience.

*How carelessly you gave me your heart  
And carelessly I broke it, sweetheart  
I took each tender kiss you gave to me  
Every kiss made you a slave to me*

As I have already delved into Holiday’s songs, I must now mention the song “I’m Gonna Lock My Heart” (1938), where the speaker of the song refuses to ever love again.

*I’m gonna lock my heart  
And throw away the key  
I’m wise to all those tricks you played on me  
I’m gonna turn my back on love  
Gonna snob the moon above.*

It could be argued whether refusing to love is having power over a relationship, but in this case, I believe the speaker of the song is expressing power over the romantic discourse. She is aware of the “tricks” of romantic love, and of the romantic imagery employed to trap women. This awareness is expressed in her mocking the “moon above,” which is one of the top clichés when speaking about romance. The moon is supposed to rule our emotions, and have an impact on lovers, who cannot help themselves. In this song, Holiday seems to be refuting any remote control over her, as well as the inevitability of love. In this manner, this song acquires more power than it initially may express, as the woman portrays herself as independent and powerful.



As for Ella Fitzgerald, her song “Stone Cold Dead in the Market” (1946) speaks about a woman with agency over her relationship in an extreme way. Since this song is heavily linked to abuse, I analyse it in the section that corresponds to that topic.

Sarah Vaughan, “Whatever Lola Wants” (1955) constitutes the perfect example for female agency. Lola appears as a quite aggressive, sexual and demanding character that gives orders to her male victim. Bearing in mind when the song was recorded, it could be said that Lola matches the image of *femme fatale*, the sexually liberated woman. In that sense, this song challenges gender stereotypes and expresses female desire openly. Nevertheless, it could be argued whether it feeds into the male fantasy.

*I'm irresistible, you fool*

*Give in (give in you'll never win)*

*Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets*

Nina Simone’s song “Do What You Gotta Do” (1968), expresses female agency over the relationship, but in a very ambivalent way. I believe it is necessary to address these more discursively ambiguous songs too, as they make us question our perspective, by forcing us to open up to other possibilities. In “Do What You Gotta Do,” the woman lets the man go, and it might seem that she is giving in to his needs. Nevertheless, when she says “I’ve had my eyes wide open from the start / And boy, you never lied to me,” there is a choice that she makes to accept the relationship as it is. There is a sense of sincerity in this relationship, and for that reason, I have placed it under this category.

## **5.2.2 Autonomy and Self-sufficiency**

Most of the songs in this category are inextricably linked to the ones in the previous section, as agency, autonomy and sufficiency fall very close from one another. Nevertheless, the main difference lies in the factor of relationship. The previous part was concerned with the agency of women regarding a romantic relationship, whereas this part will address autonomy and self-sufficiency on their own.

Bessie Smith expresses such freedom and self-sufficiency in the song “T Ain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do” (1923), composed by Porter Grainger and Everett Robbins, and first recorded by Anna Meyers. At first, the lyrics seem to speak about independency and freedom of choice:

*If I should take a notion  
To jump into the ocean  
'T ain't nobody's bizness if I do, do, do, do*

It must be highlighted, however, that together with expressing her absolute freedom, the song tells people to mind their business about the gender violence that the speaker suffered, thus confirming how this was a taboo for many, including Smith herself. Thus, with a highly ambivalent discourse, as she demands freedom to subject herself to the abuse of a man.

*I swear I won't call no copper  
If I'm beat up by my poppa  
'T ain't nobody's bizness if I do, do, do, do*

She is not speaking about romance or any other kind of romantic cliché here: she does not even mention love as a reason to submit to a man. She is speaking about violence in a very raw way, and defending her privacy fiercely. Now, the lyrics could be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, Bessie could be telling everyone to mind their business, and overall, the whole song supports this view; on the other hand, she could be saying that nobody really cares. Why does she need to swear that she won't "call no copper"? Who is she swearing this to?

I have mentioned previously that contradictions in discourse, even as they happen within a single song, are often the source of subversion. I would argue that this song does not fit such theory. There is a clear contradiction in the words of "T Ain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do:" it presents a powerful woman that seems to be able to respond to those who criticise her, but by the end of the song, she is someone who accepts or at least doesn't fight her abuser. There is a deep sense of emotional dependency in her words; an emotional dependency that we read to be Smith's own, as this song seems to reflect her story with Jack Gee.

In order to return to the topic of this section, Billie Holiday's "Summertime" is probably one of the most relevant songs in this corpus. It was originally written by George Gershwin, with lyrics by DuBose Heyward, Dorothy Heyward, and Ira Gershwin for the opera *Porgy and Bess*, a piece about life in a segregated community of African Americans in South Carolina, considered the great folk opera of the US. This particular song has widely been covered by many artists of popular culture such as Nina Simone or Janis Joplin, which brought the song closer to the popular audience. The lyrics seem to lull a kid, but they also

feel as if she was singing to herself, to comfort herself, and that is why they convey autonomy and self-sufficiency, with lines such as

*One of these mornings, you're goin' to rise up singin'  
Then you spread your wings and you'll take the sky*

Another one of Holiday's songs ("Travellin' Light," 1942) also expressed the same feeling of lightness and autonomy, in this case, after a lover is gone:

*I'm trav'lin' light  
Because my man has gone / I'm free as the breeze  
No one but me*

This song is particularly interesting because it takes what could be an abandonment as an opportunity to be with oneself and enjoy one's freedom. In that sense, it distances itself from other songs that address abandonment.

This category is topped by two of Nina Simone's songs: "Trouble in Mind" (1961) and "Ain't Got No" (1968). The first one is a traditional vaudeville-blues song by pianist Richard M. Jones, recorded by Thelma La Vizzo and Bertha "Chippie" Hill in 1924 and 1926 respectively. The lyrics express the optimism of an individual when facing difficulty, but in Simone's cover, and due to her personal history with mental health, the song seems to match her especially. Once again, the preconceptions of the audience play a role in the interpretation of the lyrics.

*Trouble in mind, I'm blue  
But I won't be blue always,  
'cause the sun's gonna shine  
In my backdoor some day.*

This section of the analysis cannot come to an end without mentioning Simone's "Ain't Got No," because it constitutes THE hymn of self-sufficiency and autonomy.

*But what have I got?  
Let me tell ya what I've got  
That nobody's gonna take away  
Got life, I got my life*

It is worth highlighting that Simone speaks about life instead of love when speaking about the very basics of human dignity. That is a true statement of freedom and individuality.

This song also addresses social reality, as the speaker denies having anything material (no home, no shoes, no money, no class, no friends, no schooling). It is worth noting that love is among all the rest of the things she doesn't have, and not at the centre of her lack.

### 5.2.3 Emotional Dependency / Loneliness / Abandonment

The category of emotional dependency, which also addresses the expression of loneliness and abandonment, corresponds to the realm of the romantic thought, the area of characteristics that reinforce the *pensamiento amoroso*. As I previously addressed in part 5.2 of this thesis, dependency has long been linked to women when it came to romantic relationships. The notion of “needing someone” to be a whole has deep roots within our collective imagination. Emotional dependency is one of the most dangerous weapons of patriarchy when it comes to romantic love, and it is essential to it as well, as it is emotional dependency what prevents many women (and men) to leave a relationship, even when they realise it is hurting them. In a sense, it is linked to the constitution of the self through romantic love, but in this case, we analyse them as two different aspects of the romantic discourse.

The first example, and one of the clearest ones, comes from a song that has long been covered in the previous section. In “T Ain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do” (1923), Smith sings “I'd rather my man would hit me / Than to jump up right and quit me,” thus revealing that she is not as free and as careless as her song's refrain is trying to convey. There is no freedom of choice, because no free person would choose someone who hurts them. The question is that the chain that ties this person to her abuser is a deep sense of emotional dependency. A sense that, without that alleged “love,” you are worth nothing, you disappear.

Smith also recorded songs that convey the feeling that without love or without that person, happiness is far away. In “Empty Bed Blues” (1928), Smith sings

*My springs are getting' rusty, sleepin' single like I do  
When my bed get empty, make me feel awful mean and blue*

This idea appears again in “Baby, Won't You Please Come Home” (1923):

*I've got the blues, I feel so lonely  
I'll give the world if I could only...  
Ask him won't you please come home*

It must be noted that this sense of abandonment, of loneliness, even of fear about remaining single and getting “rusty” or old, although it was not exclusive to women, was indeed more common for them, since usually it was men who left (for another job, another city). In that sense, these songs remain closer from the European-American tradition that associated romantic fulfillment with happiness. It is true that these singers experienced a different life, as they were able to travel and be successful—but still, they were often abandoned by their husbands or partners, as we have observed in their biographies.

Not a single song in this corpus is as raw as “T Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness If I Do” when it comes to emotional dependency. Billie Holiday also recorded that song later on, as she is the heiress of Smith. Other hit songs by Holiday also express this feeling of loneliness, of longing. For instance, in her “Lover Man” (1945), she claimed that

*The night is cold and I'm so alone*

*But no one to love me*

*Lover man, oh, where can you be*

This parallelism between loneliness and cold vs. love and warmth is not exclusive to music, and nowadays it is considered a common place and even a cliché to continue to draw such comparisons and oppositions. Ella Fitzgerald draws upon similar imagery to express sadness, in this case, rain (“Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall,” 1944).

Imagination has a strong presence in this respect too, as speakers use wishful thinking to do what reality doesn’t allow them: comfort themselves, “wish you could hear what I say / And here in the gloom of my lonely room we're dancing like we used to do,” (Ella Fitzgerald, *I’m Making Believe*, 1944); ask for another chance, “If you could see me now, you'd know how blue I've been / One look is all you'd need to see the mood I'm in / Perhaps then you'd realize I'm still in love with you” (Sarah Vaughan, “If You Could See Me Now,” 1946); or to dive deep into heartbreak, “broken hearted melody / Must you keep reminding me / Of the lips I long to kiss” (Sarah Vaughan, “Broken Hearted Melody,” 1959).

In that sense, it could be said that, with regards to emotional dependency, Vaughan and Fitzgerald lean more towards a more imaginative world, with beautiful imagery, even to convey heartbreak. Their lyrics in that sense are not as raw.

It is with Nina Simone that we go back to the roughness of Smith and Holiday, with her “To Love Somebody” (1969):

*But I'm a woman  
Can't you see what I am  
I live and breathe for you  
What good does it do  
If I ain't got you If I ain't got you*

This song was originally composed and sung by the Bee Gees, and they performed the song in a more vivid and playful way, whereas Simone covered it in a rather nostalgic way. She also changed the words to say that she was a woman. This modification is really significant: in both versions, the speaker conveys emotional dependency, but the implications of such dependency are perceived differently, depending on the messenger. As Esteban said, women are “sentimentalized” (49) and thus placed in a particular position with regards to their male lovers, and therefore, to the listener, Simone sounds more desperate and dependant than the Bee Gees.

#### **5.2.4 Unconditional Love / Complete Dedication / Exclusivity / Idealisation**

This category encompasses many different subcategories, as they often complement one another. All these aspects of romantic love, at the same time could be read as feeding emotional dependency, as they often contribute to the forming of the romantic imagery, with words such as “only” or “forever.”

Bessie Smith expresses the idea exclusivity in love with other words, and as it is usual in her, with other additional messages. In the song “Down Hearted Blues” (1923), the speaker says that

*I ain't never loved but three men in my life  
My Father, my brother and the man that wrecked my life*

In a sense, with those words, she is admitting to only having loved one man in a romantic way. At the same time, she is also confessing how damaging that relationship has been. There is no idealisation in this song, but there is exclusivity and faithfulness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> After reading about her life, we know that Smith was not sexually faithful to her husband, but here I speak of faithfulness in terms of not forming a strong affective bond with anyone else.

Smith also expresses unconditional love in “Lost Your Head Blues” (1926), a song composed by her, when stating that “I was with you, baby, when you didn't have a dime.” It is worth noting that in the songs performed by Smith, love affairs are always mediated by the social reality of the time: not having money, having to pay rent... In “Baby, Won't You Please Come Home,” composed by Clarence Williams and Charles Warfield, as the speaker is expressing desperation for her lover to come back, she mentions that “Landlord gettin' worse / I've got to move May the first.” This is very important, because it doesn't isolate love from the rest of events in life—furthermore, these types of commentaries help break the illusion and magic around romantic love, and in that sense, they are subversive. As we will observe, they do not appear as often in the work of the rest of the singers, a fact that could confirm how European-American tradition engulfed some aspects of the African American tradition.

In fact, Holiday's, Fitzgerald's, Vaughan's and Simone's works fall into the usual romantic vocabulary in various songs. For instance, Billie Holiday expresses exclusivity and wish for eternal love “No Regrets” (1944): “Still in my heart you'll be forever mine.” As well as in the song “Embraceable You” (1936).

*My irreplaceable you*

*Just to look at you*

*My heart grows tipsy in me*

*You and you alone*

Furthermore, in “Lover Man” (1945), Holiday even references the romantic discourse that is present in society and songs, and declares that she prays to achieve this dreamlike standard:

*I've heard it said*

*That the thrill of romance*

*Can be like a heavenly dream*

When we move on to Vaughan and Fitzgerald, however, we find idealisation and devotion, which could be translated as dedication. The idea that the lover is magical, someone who makes everything better, appears quite often in their repertoire. Love is described as magic, almost as a moment of epiphany. These characteristics help perpetuate romantic ideals, as they isolate love from the earthly world and place it in the sky, beyond our reach.

Just to name some examples, Ella Fitzgerald's "When My Sugar Walks Down the Street" (1944), where the speaker states that "It's never dark when he's around." Words such as "never," "forever," and "always" convey a sense of absoluteness that is out of reach in reality. This, together with the idealisation of the lover as a source of epiphany in lines such as "But now that the stars are in your eyes / I'm beginning to see the light," present love as something that doesn't need work or effort. Again, love and the lover are something completely detached from the rest of things. Sarah Vaughan's repertoire also contributes to this idealisation, for instance, with the song "It's Magic" (1948), which has quite a revealing title:

*You sigh and the song begins*

*You speak and I hear violins...*

*The world becomes a wonderland*

*Oh, it's magic*

By repeating imagery and concepts that idealise love and portray it as something that happens apart from other aspects of life, songs naturalise behaviours such as the complete devotion/dedication and blind faithfulness that many women (and men) keep for the sake of a romantic ideal that is a cultural construction. We must bear in mind that this imagery has been normalised to the extent that if someone tells us that he/she "breathes and lives for us," it doesn't strike us anymore. An in that normalisation, innocent songs like the ones sung by these women have also played a part.

### **5.2.5 Possessiveness**

When analysing and critiquing romantic discourses in songs, possessive pronouns are often highlighted as vehicles for damaging behaviours.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, via those small elements, a person can claim to have complete control over another person; or one can place oneself in the hands of another person. Once again, language can be considered a vehicle to construct meaning and determine behaviour. When formulated in that way, the impact of possessive pronouns takes a new dimension, a dimension hard to comprehend while listening to the chorus of pop songs like "My Girl" by The Temptations or "I'm Yours" by Jason Mraz.

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, in reggaeton songs.



Nevertheless, this work will argue that language matters, and that what we sing is inserted in the social discourse afterwards.

The concept of possession is tightly linked to that of exclusivity, the notion that one can ONLY belong to one other person, which is one of the foundations of romantic discourse. Possession can be expressed by employing simply a possessive pronoun, as in Bessie Smith's "'T Ain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do" (1923), where she speaks about "My poppa."<sup>12</sup> This apparently casual uses are common in popular songs.

At this point, it must be said that possession can be expressed in two directions: either I'm yours or you are mine, or both at the same time. In this corpus, we have examples of both cases. On the one hand, we have the expressions of submission to the other person: In "Smooth Operator" (1959) by Sarah Vaughan, we can hear her sing "And I'm so glad / Just to be your girl," which, in the context of a quite light song, sounds like a casual comment. Nevertheless, in some romantic songs, possession is especially emphasized, and together with exclusivity, it makes up a formula for happiness, or at least for the end of trouble. For instance, in "Down Hearted Blues" (1923), after speaking about how her man mistreats her, Smith asks the following:

*The next man I get has got  
To promise to be mine, all mine*

The rest of the singers in this corpus follow Smith's steps when it comes to possession, as they express a will to own the other person. For instance, Billie Holiday brings sacrifice into the discourse of possession in her performance of "Lover Man" (1945): "I'd give my soul just to call you my own." In her case, owning the other person feels almost like a necessity. Sarah Vaughan also fits this category with "If You Could See Me Now" (1946), with the line "I think you'd be mine again if you could see me now;" and so does Nina Simone's recording of "I put a spell on you" (1965).

That last song was originally composed by Jalacy "Screamin' Jay" Hawkins in 1956, and was intended to be performed as a love ballad. However, together with producer Arnold Maxin, Hawkins came up with a strange version, where he screamed the song (Rubiner 117). The musician also recorded a video for the song, in which he appeared dressed up as a tribal sorcerer, and making strange moves. In that manner, the phrase "I put a spell on you"

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<sup>12</sup> My italics.

acquired a magical tone, and the song seemed to be referring to sorcery. In that sense, Simone brought the song back to its originally intended meaning, as her interpretation of the piece fit the love ballad pattern.

Both performances of the song convey possessiveness, but in Hawkins case, it feels like an evil force that is trying to bewitch someone. His way of representing the song is not intended to be taken too seriously, and therefore, nor is the possessiveness it expresses. In Simone's case, on the contrary, the song transmits a desperation and a need to have the other person that can be identified as real.

There are times in which possession is expressed more indirectly, although the message of it is clear. In "These Foolish Things" (1936) by Billie Holiday, for instance, the speaker says, "You came, you saw, you conquered me," thus expressing a surrender and ownership on the other person's part. That verse references Caesar's expression *veni, vidi, vinci*, which, in the context of the song, places the woman in the position of a conquered territory, and conceives love as a battle.<sup>13</sup>

Nina Simone's refrain "My baby just cares for me," by expressing exclusivity, also denotes certain ownership—In this case, it is not so clear who possesses who.

When I listen to these songs, and I hear these women express the will to own another being, I hear more than that. Behind that possessiveness lies insecurity, sacrifice and suffering. In a sense, there is a will to have some control over the relationship, and we know that such control was oftentimes not in the hands of women. I am not justifying their possessive attitude, and I certainly wouldn't see it appropriate for a contemporary artist to express these ideas, but taking into account the mindset of the era that these women lived (they justified their husbands beating them), I believe that the expression of possessiveness between the 1920s and the 1960s had more to it than just saying the words "mine" and "yours."

### **5.2.6 Helplessness and Abnegation**

Esteban mentions in her work that, within the ideology of *pensamiento amoroso*, love is something that makes us lose our minds (53), something we cannot help and cannot reason

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<sup>13</sup> This imagery was very used during Renaissance, for instance, in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*.

against. That is what is meant by helplessness and abnegation or surrender to love. The people from Ancient Greece and Rome blamed Eros or Cupid for this sudden craziness, and the first example that I analyse does quite the same, by blaming love itself. “Careless Love” (1925) by Bessie Smith:

*You brought the wrong man into this life of mine  
Love, oh love, oh careless love  
You've fly through my head like wine  
You've wrecked the life of a many poor girl  
And you nearly spoiled this life of mine*

According to these lines, the woman has no power over such careless love. She cannot control it, even as it is ruining her own life. By personifying love, as if it was a Greek or Roman god, Smith renounces any responsibility over her actions, which is one of the direct consequences of this characteristic of romantic discourse: if love makes us crazy, if it possesses us, nobody will hold us accountable for the actions that we carry out in the name of love.

“Carelessly” (1937) by Billie Holiday, although in a more indirect way, also expresses this lack of responsibility in love. A lover rejects the love of another person, and then repents. It could be said that in the first half of the song, the speaker acts without any concern for the other person, and then, after realising what they have lost, takes accountability for his/her actions. This song also points at the power relations that develop within romantic partnerships, and thus constitutes a great counterpoint to the “love makes us crazy” discourse.

Sarah Vaughan also employed this language, but in her case, to express desire. In “Smooth Operator” (1959), she claims to be “Burning with desire / You set my heart / And soul on fire / You drive me wild.” In this case, I believe it is sexual urgency rather than a romantic feeling, which cannot be controlled, although the euphemistic language is used to make it all more appropriate for the audience. Hiding sexual desire behind romantic discourse, is a common practice in songs, and also in society. In the case of women, it could respond to the social requirement that asks for women not to express their sexual desires. Therefore, in this case, Vaughan songs is quite subversive, as it presents a woman openly expressing her desire. However, it must be noted that disguising sexual desire as romantic feeling (in songs and elsewhere) has been a way for men to “charm” women before taking

sexual advantage of them, and therefore, this practice has been weaponized within rape culture.

A song such as “My Baby Just Cares for Me” (1957) by Nina Simone expresses the idea of helpless love more lightly. Simone sings “I wonder what's wrong with baby / My baby just cares for me,” hinting at the crazy love for her that possesses her lover and makes him forget all the things that capitalism has to offer (material things and film stars). This song was originally written by Walter Donaldson and Gus Kahn for the 1930 film *Whoopee!* (an adaptation of the stage musical), and it became its performers hit. Eddie Cantor became well known with this song, a success that Simone did not reach with the same tune until it was used in a Channel no. 5 advertisement in 1987. In my view, this song reflects the capitalistic industry that record and music-making had turned into by the 1950s, as it is very materialistic and utterly romantic, and it fits advertisement perfectly. I believe that this idea of love as something helpless has been broadly used by mainstream pop culture throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

### **5.2.7 Abuse / Violence**

This next part is of especial relevance because the songs addressing abuse and gender violence show the consequences of romantic discourse. As we will observe in the following songs, abuse and violence appear in different manners: sometimes the speaker seems to excuse or forgive those attitudes, and other times she denounces them. Sometimes violence is named casually, and other times it is made the topic of the song. This is a very interesting contrast because it does reflect how society reacts to violence within a romantic relationship.

I begin with four songs recorded by Bessie Smith, songs that expose violence in a blunt and raw way. They speak about gender violence as if it was the most normal things to happen to a woman within marriage or a relationship. As we have already seen, singers like Holiday and Smith normalised, and at the same time silenced, the beatings they received, so, it should be expected for their songs to transmit that. In fact, both singers performed “T Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness If I Do” (recorded by Smith in 1923 and by Holiday in 1949), a song with very meaningful lyrics as far as violence is concerned.

*I'd rather my man would hit me*

*Than to jump up right and quit me*

*'T ain't nobody's bizness if I do, do, do, do*  
*I swear I won't call no copper*  
*If I'm beat up by my poppa*

It is astonishing how these lines can express freedom and autonomy, and complete submission at the same time (I have already analysed the first two verses as conveying emotional dependency). I believe the taboo factor that I have explored in Smith's life plays a role in this song because those lines seem to be responding to what other people say. The speaker of the song seems to be reluctant to follow any advice, and sticks to her "poppa."

In "Aggravatin' Papa," on the contrary, the speaker addresses the violent man, and asks him to stop.

*Aggravatin' papa, I'll do anything you say*  
*Anything you say*  
*But when you go struttin', do your strut around my way*  
*So papa, just treat me pretty, be nice and kind*  
*The way you treated me will make me lose my mind*

There is a plea in these lines, a plea for him to stop. There is also complete submission as a consequence of violence; that is to say, by the time the speaker communicates this message, the abuse has already accomplished its goal: the woman will do "anything you say." Submission is total.

I would like to briefly comment on the use of "lose my mind" in this song, as it sets a striking contrast with the way this phrase is broadly employed in love songs. When it is used in the extended romantic way, "losing one's mind" or "being crazy about someone" means that one cannot help being madly in love with someone, to the point of overlooking anything from small imperfections to toxic behaviours. Without going any further, in Bessie Smith's "Down Hearted Blues," the lyrics goes "Once I was crazy 'bout a man / He mistreated me all the time." In this typical use of the expression, the speaker expresses that because of love, she put up with mistreatment. In "Aggravatin' Papa," on the other hand, losing her mind is a consequence of abuse, and it means losing her mental health, her sanity.

Other songs point at psychological abuse rather than physical. In some cases, this leads to woman towards self-destructive behaviours: for instance, in "Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle," Smith sings that "you cause me to drink," which places the blame of her self-

destructive behaviour on the other person, by hinting at psychological mistreatment, in this case, through cheating. Sarah Vaughan and Nina Simone also face their lover with verses such as “You're mean to me / Why must you be mean to me? / You love to see me cryin' / I don't know why” (Vaughan, “Mean to Me,” 1946), or “You know I can't stand it / You're runnin' around / You know better, daddy / I can't stand it cause you put me down” (Nina Simone, “I Put a Spell on You,” 1965).

A song recorded by Nina Simone remains quite ambiguous with regards to her lover, as she denies mistreatment on her partner's side: “I know they make you sad / They make you feel so bad / They say you don't treat me like you should” (“Do What You Gotta Do,” 1968). These lines rise doubt within the listener, as the speaker could be excusing her lover. The rest of the song reflects a relationship where the two participants are aware of the whereabouts of the other, but we do not know if the narrator, who seems to be in love, is a reliable one.

Up until this point in the analysis, Ella Fitzgerald's songs have usually taken a more naïve path in comparison to those by Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, and have recurred to beautiful and more abstract imagery. Nevertheless, when addressing gender violence, Fitzgerald's “Stone Cold Dead in the Market” (1946) is probably the most brutal song in this corpus, and even if we look at it through the lenses of humour, it comes across as shocking. This song speaks about a woman who kills her husband in the middle of the market because he beats her. The story is conveyed through three narrative voices: the woman's, the man's, and a third-person narrator.<sup>14</sup> First, the events are narrated:

(Wife)

*He's stone-cold dead in de market*

*I killed nobody but me husband*

(Husband)

*Last night I went out drinking*

*When I came home, I gave her a beating*

*So she catch up the rolling pin and went to work on my head*

*Till she bash it in*

*I lie cold dead in de market*

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<sup>14</sup> I say “possible” because in some of the verses it is not clear who exactly communicates them. For instance, the phrase “She kill nobody but her husband” remains ambiguous when it comes to the narrator.

The man tells the story, but there is no reflection on his part. He doesn't explain why he used to beat her, nor does he show any kind of repentance. Meanwhile, the woman explains how he deserved it. There is no repentance on her part either, even as his family threaten her.

*My family they swearin' to kill her*

*His family they swearin' to kill me*

*And if I kill him, he had it coming*

There is empowerment in her actions, as she takes control over her life:

*There is one thing that I am sure*

*He ain't goin' to beat me no more*

*So I tell you that I doesn't care*

*If I was to die in the electric chair*

This song is highly absorbing, raw and subversive: there is no room for love; it is utterly about survival.

### **5.2.8 Constitution of the Self Through Romantic Love**

In this subsection, I will be analysing which songs convey the idea that loving someone in a romantic way constitutes an essential part of what one person is.

If we revisit "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm" by Billie Holiday, we see that with lyrics such as "Why do I care how much it may storm? / I've got my love to keep me warm," the speaker claims not needing anything but her beloved. She makes a list of her own things (gloves, coat) that she doesn't need any more because her lover gives her everything she need. The song "Lover Man" also conveys a similar idea: with the return of the lover, she will be complete again, and at peace, as "Someday we'll meet / And you'll dry all my tears." There is a new self that is formed with this love; a self that is heavily dependent on the other to be happy and whole.

Nina Simone also transmits this need to be with the other to feel complete. In her songs, though, this urgency is conveyed indirectly. For instance, from "I Put a Spell on You"'s "I don't care if you don't want me, / I'm yours right now," we get the sense that she is nothing if she is not his, and that's why she needs to possess him as well: to ensure her being. Along that idea comes "To Love Somebody" as well: "I want my whole life to be lived with you"

presents a wish and a need. What happens to the self if that wish cannot be? Does it disappear? Who is a woman without love?

In the song “Smooth Sailing” (1951), Ella Fitzgerald seems to portray a more realistic and balanced interdependency within the couple:

*We find each others arms in troubled waters*

*We found that's the safest place to go*

...

*Now we're not afraid when storm clouds gather*

*'Cuz we got the kind of love that'll see us though*

### **5.2.9 Challenging Gender Stereotypes and Heteronormativity**

In the following lines, I explore the lyrics of the songs in which these five women challenged gender stereotypes. At the same time, bearing in mind that Smith and Holiday were bisexual, I also include heteronormativity as something to be subverted. However, although we know that Smith for instance talked about non-heterosexual orientations in songs like “Sissy Blues,” those songs were not among her top hits (probably because they were too subversive). Hence, within this category, I limit my analysis to the overthrow of gender stereotypes.

It is clear by now that Bessie Smith was a singer and a woman with character, and that she subverted many stereotypes with her attitude and by placing her body on stage. Some of her songs reflect this strong and powerful character. Phrases like “Ain't gonna play no second fiddle 'cause / I'm used to playin' lead” (1925) portray this assertive character.

Many of the songs that I will mention in this part of the analysis are challenging and subversive because of the person who sings it is a black woman from a poor background. If it was a man who sang “Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle,” that song would be even perpetuating gender stereotypes.

The same thing happens with “Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out,” recorded both by Smith and Simone (1929 and 1960, respectively). In a sense this is a very masculine song, a song about someone who is rich, and in Smith's time, probably white:



*Once I lived the life of a millionaire  
Spendin' my money I didn't care  
I carried my friends out for a good time  
Buy bootleg liquor, champagne and wine*

Both Smith and Simone made money out of their music, and they could enjoy quite a comfortable life because of it. In that sense, the lyrics of the song correspond somewhat to their reality, and it is their way of living that challenged gender stereotypes as well.

Billie Holiday also challenges the idea that women are silly girls who believe anything in “I’m Gonna Lock My Heart” (1938), as she says that “I’m wise to all those tricks you played on me / I’m gonna turn my back on love.” She refuses the social mandate of loving, opening up that option for many other women.

“Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets” by Sarah Vaughan also subverts gender roles, as it portrays a woman who is in total control of her lover. Ella Fitzgerald also performed that song, but it was not among her hits. Lola is sexual and ambitious, characteristics that are usually attached to men.

### **5.2.10 Traditional Gender Stereotypes**

While some of the songs in this corpus challenge gender stereotypes, there are three in which those roles are reinforced, or at least confirmed.

Sarah Vaughan’s “Black Coffee” (1949) is the only song that does it explicitly, although the lyrics also express the sourness that comes along with stereotypical gender roles:

*Now a man is born to go a-lovin'  
A woman's born to weep and fret  
And stay at home to tend her oven  
And down her past regrets  
In coffee and cigarettes*

Both Bessie Smith and Nina Simone address masculinity in their songs, although they do so in a very subtle way. In “The St. Louis Blues,” Smith sings that “He's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea / Or else he wouldn't have gone so far from me,” which alludes to the alleged emotional aloofness that men are supposed to have. Meanwhile, in “Do What You Gotta

Do,” Simone sings “Man, I can understand how it might be / Kind of hard to love a girl like me.” This phrase is very significant, as it affirms various things: on the one hand, in Simone’s lips, “a girl like me” could be interpreted by the public as referring to her being a successful talented woman, or it could also be perceived as a mention of her bipolar disorder, a trait that allegedly made her “difficult;” on the other hand, in the same phrase, she acknowledges that her success undermines her lover’s masculinity, and therefore, it is her responsibility to make up for it. As we have seen, this sense of guilt and will to compensate were common among these talented women.

### 5.2.11 Marriage or Vow

As we have seen in Table 1, a vow is named only twice in these songs, and marriage is not mentioned at all. This is quite significant, and it could be linked to what Angela Davies says about black people not being able to choose who to marry during slavery. As a consequence, marriage is not as important to the black traditional imagery in music.

A vow is mentioned twice: in Bessie Smith’s “Careless Love” (1925), only to say that such promise has been broken: “You’ve made me break a many true vow;” and in Nina Simone’s “I Loves You Porgy,”<sup>15</sup> in the following verse: “I keep this vow, Porgy, I’s yo’ woman now!” As we can see, marriage and vow are not central to this corpus, as these five women distance themselves from white culture, which held that “love and domesticity were supposed to constitute the outermost limits of their lives” (Davies 10).

### 5.2.12 Female Desire

The expression of female desire has turned out to be a double-edged sword: while it is positive for songs to portray women as desiring beings, they often remain as passive figures. Here are two examples:

*He's got a new way of loving,  
almost takes my breath away*

Bessie Smith, “Empty Bed Blues,” 1928

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<sup>15</sup> This song was also composed for the opera *Porgy and Bess*, and along with “Summertime,” it has also reached a wider public through covers by popular musicians.

*He's so affectionate and I'll say this*

*That when he kisses me, I'll sure stay kissed*

Ella Fitzgerald, "When My Sugar Walks Down the Street," 1944

In these two songs, both women show their desire, their more sexual part, but they remain passive because it is he who loves and it is he who kisses.

It is in Sarah Vaughan's repertoire that we find the most extensive expression of female desire in this corpus as songs such as "Smooth Operator" (1959), "Make Yourself Comfortable" and "Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets" demonstrate. The first one still shows a passive female figure, as she asks to be kissed, "don't make me wait;" but the last two show complete initiative on the woman's part. We have already analysed Lola's song, so I will now quote the lyrics of "Make Yourself Comfortable."

*Why did we hurry through the dinner, hurry through the dance.*

*To leave sometime for this. To hug, hug and kiss and kiss, now.*

*Take off you shoes in here and loosen up your tie.*

*I got some kisses here, lets try one on for size.*

These lyrics show how the initiative is clearly on her side, as she is telling him what to do. She controls the sexual encounter, and she expresses her desire, which subverts the common gender roles.

### **5.2.13 Jealousy / Competition Among Women**

Cheating and messing around was pretty common during the era of these five artists, and, as we have seen, some of them had active sentimental and sexual lives. Cheating and competition among women are common topics in love songs, as they are tied to possession and exclusivity, two of the pillars of romantic love. However, in these songs jealousy is not addressed directly, and often, that feeling is expressed indirectly through possession, for instance.

Jealousy appears in "The St. Louis Blues," as the female speaker has been abandoned by her partner for another woman.

*Saint Louis woman with her diamond rings  
Pulls that man around by her apron strings  
Wasn't for powder and the store-bought hair  
The man I love wouldn't go nowhere, nowhere*

It also appears in Smith's "Empty Bed Blues," as the woman's husband seems to have had an affair with a friend of hers:

*He's got that sweet something and I told my girlfriend Lou  
But the way she's ravin', she must have gone and tried it too*

It also appears as something damaging for the person who suffers from it in Nina Simone's "I Put A Spell On You" (1965). The following phrase also presents jealousy as a weapon against the lover, a way to make the other person suffer:

*You know I can't stand it  
You're runnin' around*

Jealousy, despite not being the most recurrent within this corpus, is a relevant one in popular music, as it has been widely addressed in love songs. However, to cover this topic would require further research and it is not within the scope or the objectives of the present work.

#### **5.2.14 Neutral Use of Romantic Love?**

I cannot finish this analysis without naming the songs in which romantic love is used as an aesthetic motive. Many songs in this corpus employ love in that manner, but in most of them, it is overpowered by some other stronger trait. Therefore, I will focus on Fitzgerald and especially Vaughan in this section. As we have already seen throughout the different categories, both artists opted for more neutral and pretty lyrics, in general (Fitzgerald's "Stone Cold Dead in the Market" constitutes a great exception, for instance). To quote one song in this section, I think "Tenderly" (1947) by Sarah Vaughan makes quite a good example of the neutral use of romantic love.

*The evening breeze caressed the trees tenderly  
The trembling trees embraced the breeze tenderly*

*Then you and I came wandering by*

*And lost in a sigh were we*

*The shore was kissed by sea and mist tenderly*

*I can't forget how two hearts met breathlessly*

*Your arms opened wide and closed me inside*

*You took my lips, you took my love so tenderly*

It could be said that jazz sung by some black women distanced itself from the blues tradition, which had not represented love “as an idealized realm to which unfulfilled dreams of happiness were relegated” (Davies 10). As black music is assimilated by the music industry, music by black musicians loses its distance with the concept of romantic love and enters the realms of romantic saturation (Esteban 51-52). In this manner, songs like Vaughan’s and Fitzgerald’s, which employ song as a theme, inevitably contribute to reinforcing the *pensamiento amoroso*, albeit in less damaging ways.

### **5.3 Beyond Lyrics**

The body of work of each of these artists is not discursively coherent when it comes to romantic love. They might appear as powerful women and be completely submissive at the same time (“T Ain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do”); or they might reject love in one song (“I’m Gonna Lock My Heart”), and then claim that they need nothing apart from love (“I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm”). To sum up, they sometimes reinforce the *pensamiento amoroso*, but other times they undermine it. As I see it, this is the result of the combination of many things.

On the one hand, this incoherence points at the medium of music itself, which allows the singer to play a specific speaker in each song, and thus portray attitudes that do not match one another. The fact that these specific singers used to perform songs not written by them contributed to the presence of various types of discourse. Nowadays, I would say that certain discursive coherence is demanded from musicians, and therefore, from a contemporary perspective, it would be easy to reproach incoherence to these singers without going any further.

However, we must bear in mind that these artists performed within a context and a specific industry, which constitutes the second ingredient of the incoherence cocktail. In this

respect, it must be addressed that this industry was not interested in what those black talented women, had or wanted to say, but what would sell more singles and albums. Their celebrity status played an important role in this, as the industry could commodify their private lives as well. Besides, as we have already observed, from the 1920s to the 1960s (and later on as well), the business was controlled by white men and was surrounded by a patriarchal and capitalistic system. This played a role in music lyrics, of course, as we have seen throughout this work: it is no coincidence that most of the songs in this corpus deal with love, rejection and dependency, as their aim is to sell. In this regard, it is worth noting that the romantic discourse of the 1920s and the early 1930s (Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday) seems to be less tamed than that of the 1940s and the 1950s (Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan). By that, I do not mean that Smith and Holiday did not reinforce romantic concepts and toxic behaviours, for we must bear in mind that they did suffer and justify gender violence in their songs; but their communication was raw and brutal, while later singers bought into a more idealistic concept of romantic love. Nevertheless, a more extensive analysis would be required to draw more exact conclusions.

Together with the lack of coherence we also find the cracks, “fissures” mentioned by Davies (xi). Some of those cracks eroded the wall of racism (“Strange Fruit,” for instance), an accomplishment that was symbolic and essential at the time. In fact, we could say that they were more direct when tackling racial issues, probably because of the historical context in which they sang; and also probably, because the damage caused by the *pensamiento amoroso* was not as tangible. Indeed, the task was more difficult when it came to romantic love, as abuse, mistreatment and the need for love were even more internalised than racism, as we have seen in the biographies of these women. Still, they also managed to erode the wall of romantic discourse and broke the taboo of gender violence with songs like “Ain’t Got No;” “Stone Cold Dead in the Market;” “Aggravatin’ Papa;” “Ain’ Gonna Play No Second Fiddle;” “What Lola Wants, Lola Gets,” and others.

The legacy of these women was their incoherence and the fissures they opened. From the incoherence, we can learn how discourses are mediated by many factors, including internalised concepts such as romantic love, or external influences like the music industry. From the fissures they opened, we can hear their voices, that sing romantic love on, but also resistance. If we stick our ears to that wall, the cracks open wider and wider.

## 6 A Genealogy That Never Ends

A personal realisation about very talented women singers brought me into writing this work: it was just fairly recently that I understood that the lyrics of the most commercial hits of the past 20 years,<sup>16</sup> share many traits of the romantic discourse that we find in great classics. How did that come to be was the first question I asked myself, and many more followed, as I entered the guts of an industry and an art permeated by patriarchal, racist, and capitalistic, among others.

While I was reading the lyrics sang by talented, amazing women like Smith, Holiday, Fitzgerald, Vaughan and Simone, many more came to mind, as I found parallels between old jazz and blues songs, and modern pop hits. In this manner, when Beyoncé sang “your love's / Got me looking so crazy right now” in 2003, was she that far from Bessie Smith? Or when Amy Winehouse said “You should be stronger than me / Don't you know you supposed to be the man / Not pale in comparison to who you think I am,” didn't those words resonate Billie Holiday's conception of what a man should be? Or when Rihanna described how she'd killed a man in central station, was that place far from the market in which a stone-cold dead man lay?

The fact that the themes do not change that much is quite meaningful, because we certainly believe that the times have: second wave feminism aimed at achieving sexual freedom, reproductive rights, and equality in the workplace, among others; and third and fourth wave feminisms have claimed the necessity of an intersectional point of view within the feminist struggle. At the same time, society seems to be more welcoming towards voices who denounce any type of gender or sexual misconduct, abuse or violence. This increase in awareness is probably one of the reasons why this theoretical work can be written in 2021. However, romantic values have not lost as much strength as expected, and, as a consequence, I would dare say, gender abuse and violence are still very hard to confront and to eradicate.

In this manner, many of the talented women that followed Smith, Holiday, Fitzgerald, Vaughan and Simone also lived turbulent relationships with male partners, from Tina Turner to Rihanna. Some of them also had tragic ends, like Janis Joplin or Amy Winehouse. To the public, at some point, it even became inevitable for these women to have terrible love lives, or to die at a young age. This points at the way in which the public already expects romantic failure on their part, and almost blames them for getting into toxic relationships or

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<sup>16</sup> To give just a couple of examples: “Crazy in Love” by Beyoncé, or “No One” by Alicia Keys.

addictions. What society does not realize sometimes is that these female artists represent how success and talent is oftentimes punished by a patriarchal society. This sense of punishment has also been transmitted along the genealogy line.

There are many names that could be mentioned after Simone, as this is a genealogy that never ends, but I will mention just a few names that I believe have been key, because they somehow hold the heritage of the older jazz and blues singers, but also because their personal lives also resemble those of Smith, Holiday, Vaughan, Fitzgerald, or Simone, in one aspect or another. At the same time, many of them openly confessed the influence that other artists on this genealogy hand on them.

This is the case with Etta James, who began her career even before Simone, in 1954, and remained active up until her death in 2012. She lived through the 60s and the 70s and is considered an essential figure in R&B and rock'n'roll. In her performances, she sang about sex in pieces like "Roll with me, Henry," following the example of Bessie Smith, as blues sung by women was one of the few areas in which the idea that sexual pleasure was reserved to men was contested (Jackson 119).

However, as was the case to many of her predecessors, being sexually liberated did not mean being free from violent relationships. James was aware of her tendency to get involved with abusive men, and she fought it, as she identified such behaviour to be very common among black blues female singers and associated it with fear (Jackson 126). Speaking about Billie Holiday, with whom she shared heroin addiction, and herself she stated that "We're so frightened inside that when a pretty-faced sweet-talking man comes along, he nails us in no time... Fear locks us in and makes us prisoner" (James and Ritz 132).

But, what were these women so afraid of? Loneliness, the music industry, the drug-dealing world (many of these women were addicted), failure? Were they afraid of their own talent, which, as we mentioned in Holiday's biography, isolated them? When women began asking for freedom, asserting their own talent, and showing ambition and exercising independence, was the possibility of losing the love of men perhaps the ultimate threat for them?

Some songs performed by James hint in this direction: "I'd Rather Go Blind," co-written by the singer herself together with Ellington Jorden, and recorded in 1967, she says "I love you so much / That I don't wanna watch you leave me, baby / Most of all, I just don't, I just don't wanna be free." With this phrase, James' words echo those sung by Bessie Smith and



Billie Holiday in “T Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness If I Do,” a resemblance most notable in the use of the grammatical structure of the phrase itself: “I’d rather my man would hit me / Than to jump up right and quit me.” In comparison, James’ expression feels more exaggerated and metaphorical, as going blind here is perceived as a hyperbole rather than a real option. In contrast, Smith’s and Holiday’s words express a real option. In either case, both songs convey a fear of loneliness and freedom.

The contradiction that we have found in the corpus by the five singers in this particular genealogy has gone down the line of singers that came after. They wished freedom and success, but at the same time they feared loneliness and being unable to establish healthy romantic relationships. Even as the second wave feminism emerged, they found themselves trapped representing a sexual liberation that was orchestrated by others. This contradiction is best embodied by Janis Joplin (and Tina Turner), who enjoyed the sexual freedom of the 1960s and the 1970s, but also experienced its obverse.<sup>17</sup>

Joplin’s outspoken attitude towards sex was widely publicised, but if her...most quoted metaphors, ‘singing as fucking’ and ‘fucking as liberation’ conformed to the ideology of rock, there was, at best, a limited congruence. With the counter culture defining freedom for women almost exclusively in terms of sexual freedom, the concept of sexual liberation had become charged with significance... However, as sexual freedom continued to be defined by the male as availability, a woman who wholeheartedly embraced the dictum of unlimited fucking remained, essentially, submissive...Within the overall framework of her musical output...there is a fragile imbalance, a sense of sexual magnetism hinged to a self-tormenting insecurity. (Whiteley 54)

Joplin came from a small and conservative town in Texas, where she was considered a weirdo throughout her teenage years. After, when she came on stage and started to stand out, she was widely criticised for her unpolished image, her non-standard beauty, and her arrogant behaviour on stage. Indeed, Joplin “confounds traditional audience expectations” (Whiteley 52). However, her behaviour also denotes a way to survive within a sexist music industry: “Joplin was confronted by the problems inherent in musical style which took on the blues tradition of sexual affirmation and sexist conservatism... Her solution was both confrontational and conforming: lead with arrogance, project toughness and be ‘one of the boys’” (Whiteley 57). Behind such behaviour, however, lay a vulnerable woman who was seeking “proof that she could be loved” (Powers 31).

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<sup>17</sup> I am aware that Janis Joplin and Amy Winehouse are white (the latter was Jewish), a factor that could seem to contradict the intersectional perspective of this work. However, as the thesis mainly focuses on romantic love and its impact in female artists, I have considered those two figures to be highly relevant when it came to exploring diverse aspects of romantic love in the 1960s and de 2000s respectively, hence their inclusion in this post-genealogy.

Songs like “To Love Somebody” (also performed by Nina Simone) or “A Piece of My Heart” (originally recorded by Erma Franklin in 1967) seem to be part of that personal search. In the latter, Joplin sang: “each time I tell myself that I, well I can't stand the pain / But when you hold me in your arms, I'll sing it once again.../ Take another little piece of my heart” in a way that felt much deeper and torn than the original version.

She began her career imitating Bessie Smith’s singing, and drew heavily upon the blues corpus. However, “Joplin’s choice of material reflected her own sense of inadequacy rather than a straightforward homage to blues queens” (Whiteley 56); indeed, Joplin always seemed to be invested in the songs she performed, be them self-composed or not.

Her life presents parallelisms with many female artists: she was bisexual like Smith or Holiday, although was never open about it; she also relied heavily on alcohol and on drugs, and had a tragic ending, as she died at the age of 27 as a result of a heroin overdose. Her premature death turned her into an icon and a symbol of female freedom and sexual liberation. Nevertheless, throughout her life she was aware of the price she had paid for success, and her anguish over not being loved was widely addressed in the songs she chose to perform. She was also aware that the public seemed to enjoy more her work if they believed she was self-destructive (Jackson 176). Once she was called a star by an interviewer, and she said about herself that “She ain’t no star: she is lonely” (Dalton 164).

As mentioned earlier, Joplin was not the only artist who experienced the double-edged sword of sexual liberation within the music industry. Tina Turner is also an essential figure to understand how elements that are freeing can be and have been weaponized against women. In Turner’s case, she had to endure terrible violence in the hands of her husband and bandmate, Ike Turner, who curated Tina’s sexualized image according to his own taste. Tina Turner’s case is a clear example of how the “sexual freedom continued to be defined by the male” (Whiteley 54).

During the 1970s and the 1980s, many female singers projected an image of control over their own free sexuality (Turner herself, and Madonna are clear examples of this). However, the image of free sexuality did not erase the romantically saturated discourse in songs, thus creating a dichotomy between freedom and being loved. There is no power without vulnerability, but in the case of female artists, and especially singers, such vulnerability can be devastating.

It took Tina Turner 16 years to get a divorce from Ike. During that time, his beatings remained a secret, and Tina hardly spoke about the violence she suffered. When the abuse began, she was unable to express her fear and unhappiness, unless she sang about it in the song “A Fool in Love” (Jackson 151). In the lines of that song, “You know you love him, you can’t understand / Why he treats you like he do when he’s such a good man,” we find an ambiguity that refuses to specify what it is exactly that he does, and makes it easier for him to be declared a good and beloved man. Romantic unconditional love appears again as the main element that justifies abuse.

Nevertheless, if there is a time that saw the supremacy of the dramatic love ballad, it is the 1990s. During this time, technique triumphed over a credible expression of emotional depth (Jackson 201), and the most important thing for female singers was to have an extraordinary look (Jackson 201). It is worth noting that it is during this time when superficiality and extreme vocal virtuosity became important that romantic love was conveyed in the form of dramatic ballads: divas like Mariah Carey, Céline Dion or Whitney Houston filled the stage with their tremendous voices, and made the audience sing out loud phrases like “I will always love you.”

Houston’s most iconic song was originally written and recorded by Dolly Parton, who first performed it in 1973 in an emotional yet technically more simple way. The 1990s style undoubtedly adds drama to it, which was probably of interest for both the music and cinema industries that joined forces for this cover. The lyrics and performances of the successful pop songs of the 1990s suggest that, as predicted, music lyrics sung by black female successful performers distance themselves from blues and jazz. At the same time, the racial element also lost presence in the diva scene, while it was retained by the emerging rap and hip-hop scenes, with Queen Latifah as one of its main characters. Rap and hip-hop remained styles attached to everyday life and to social struggles, and so did Tracy Chapman’s songwriting, which Whiteley linked to the work of the rap queen (190). However, Houston or Carey are probably more easily linked to the tradition of black female singers than Latifah and Chapman.

Indeed, regarding the lyrics, songs performed by the divas relayed on similar literary tropes, such as hyperbole and metaphorical language. For instance, in Houston’s “I Have Nothing,” we can hear her sing “Don’t walk away from me / I have nothing, nothing, nothing / If I don’t have you,” a phrase or idea that can be found in the corpus of this work. However, the more artificial performance of the 1990s, and the lack of any reference to real life

elements puts love in a differentiated place, in the mind. This characteristic can also be found especially in Vaughan and Fitzgerald's repertoire, who, precisely, were the more commercial and less controversial singers of the corpus.

Whitney Huston remains linked to the tradition of female artists who were addicted to drugs, had a violent marriage, and died in tragic circumstances. Speaking to Oprah Winfrey about her marriage to Bobby Brown, Huston said that "I think somewhere inside something happens to a man when a woman has that much control, that much fame, if he doesn't have his own" (Winfrey min. 0:56-1:09). Her words echo those of Billie Holiday in the past, but again, even as the 20<sup>th</sup> century was coming to an end, gender violence remained a taboo. Moreover, during the 1990s famous figures did not speak as about the specific things that happened to them, something that Smith and Holiday did (they spoke about the beatings they received, for instance).

What is the element that pervades through the lives of all these talented singers? Why do they keep submitting to gender violence and stereotypes, when they have power, talent and genius? The answer has been pretty clear from the beginning: because the music industry operates within the patriarchal system, and according to its logic, patriarchal masculinity is undermined by female power (that is, talent in action). One way to undermine such power has been to (directly or indirectly) tell women that they would remain lonely and loveless if they chose to make use of their genius. This notion is central to understand why many female artists have been submitted and controlled by their partners. To understand the how, we must look into the whole system sustained by the romantic values of *pensamiento amoroso*: despite being talented, politically active, despite fighting racism or other social injustices, many of these women have been unable to fight back their partners. Why? Because they were allegedly dependant on them, because there was a whole system that told them that, as women, they would be nothing without love. At the same time, they were part of the (musical) discourse that held that same mandate upon them.

Nevertheless, we can also find examples of tragic artists among the celebrities from the 2000s and 2010s: Amy Winehouse is probably the most significant figure of those years. She was English and Jewish, but her music, voice and life correspond to that of the classic blues and jazz female singers, and she could be considered a direct heiress of the blues and jazz traditions: her history could be that of Janis Joplin or Billie Holiday for many reasons. Her addictions and extremely dependant relationship towards his husband Blake Fielder-Civil resulted in an early death at age 27. Again, her history seemed to be pre-written, and

the press did not help in that. She is a contemporary example of how extreme talent also involves great vulnerability to abusive relationships.

Her songs address many of the topics of the analysed corpus. For instance, in “Me & Mr. Jones” we hear her sing “Nobody stands / In between me / And my man,” or in “Wake Up Alone,” she describes how bad she feels when her beloved one is not next to her. Her lyrics in “What is it About Men” seems perfect for this comparative analysis, as she states that “I can't help but demonstrate my Freudian fate / My alibi for taking your guy / History repeats itself, it fails to die / And animal aggression is my downfall / I don't care 'bout what you got I wanted all.” It must be said that with Amy Winehouse, lyrics that address love become more real again. She makes references to her everyday life, to her alcoholism, and to specific situations. She is transparent and raw, which brings romantic love back again to the real terrain that it had lost during the 1990s.

To finish with this incomplete post-genealogy, I would argue that more recent generations of female singers are still fighting this incompatibility between success and love. However, artists like Beyoncé, Rihanna (who publicly said that her partner Chris Brown had beaten her), or Alicia Keys stand their ground as proud feminists—whether celebrity feminism is a commercial strategy or not, that is another question—, and seem to be negotiating such dichotomy. Their discourses tend to be more coherent and political, but such tendency has increased in the last five years. Beyoncé clearly made a journey from themes like “Crazy in Love,” “Halo,” or “Single Ladies” towards songs with strong political messages that match the time of racial unrest in the US. With songs like “Who Run the World,” she declared herself a feminist in 2011, and in 2016 made a clear antiracist and black pride statement with “Formation.” Since then, she has released pieces like “Ape\$hit,” or “Brown Skin Girl,” which are directed at empowering the black community.

Again, racism is addressed more directly than violence against women. In Beyoncé’s case, songs that reinforce values of autonomy and independency, like “Best Thing I Ever Had,” come along other love songs like “1+1,” “Why Don’t You Love Me,” or “Drunk in Love,” which rely on traditional values of romantic love. The lack of coherence is still there because, again, romantic love is not considered political.

## 7 Final Conclusions

Theory and practical analysis have been intertwined throughout this thesis, and in this part, I will attempt to make sense of the broad picture they have composed, by gathering everything that has been discussed and examined.

First, regarding *pensamiento amoroso* as defined by Mari Luz Esteban, it is clear that every aspect of society is interfered by a romantic thought that “orienta la conformación de las identidades sociales y genéricas, los procesos de socialización y las acciones individuales, sociales e institucionales” (Esteban 47). It is worth highlighting that Esteban, as well as Ingraham consider such conceptions of romance to be an ideology, a notion that, in this case, corresponds to “a material practice, (Storey 4), after Althusser’s definition. Indeed, Ingraham considers romantic love to be “ideology in action” (123), a notion that pushes us away from reality and into idealization. Both authors consider that the perpetuation of romantic love is fed by capitalism, and Esteban even argues that the ideology of the *pensamiento amoroso* is supported by the culture of consumerism and the industrial society through romantic saturation or “saturación romántica” (Esteban 51-52).

With that knowledge in mind, the specific field of music appears as a business realm where such romantic saturation happens, and therefore, as an aspect of society that helps perpetuate the capitalist and patriarchal systems. Moreover, music is a special field because it is part of a wider social discourse, and therefore it can build culture (in the sense of practice), transmit values and educate (Ballesteros, Bocigas, and Montoya 349). Moreover, music is a product of the context in which it is created, and as a consequence, lyrics reproduce and reinforce the dominant ideas in society, but they can also introduce new ones or subvert the old ones. At the same time, due to music’s own characteristics, this medium operates in an intimate and at the same time collective level. This means that the lyrics of a song reach us as an individual, often giving the impression of addressing us directly—then, our personal experience becomes collective as we sing that song in a concert with more people. The discourse of the song becomes public, a part of society.

This traits of music have been used by the industry from the very birth of the music business. As the record labels established themselves, they looked for commercial hits, and found romantic love to be an element that made songs fitter products for the heterogeneous public. The alleged universality of love made it the perfect topic to connect with a large variety of people. Love songs were emotionally easy because they were not about politics

(in appearance) and because they did not challenge the status quo, at first. In this manner, capitalism saw in traditional discourses of romantic love an opportunity to sell music to the masses. As a result of the intimate reach of music and the choice of the industry to reinforce particular representations of love in order to sell more, the music market was romantically saturated from the very beginning, and set a specific business formula where a very specific form of romantic love was a key ingredient. Thus, love became a product.

I speak about a specific form because the music industry and the radio of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s were controlled mainly by white men, and therefore, the notion of romantic love that appeared in commercial music at the beginning of the 20th century corresponded to a European white and heterosexual tradition. In contrast to that model, the work of black female singers has proved very interesting to analyse, because the way in which early blues singers conveyed love differed from the white tradition. The black population of the US had a different experience when forming free romantic relationships during slavery, and even after, the implications of a marriage were different. For instance, black women did not stay at home even if they had a husband, and therefore, the songs performed by black women that convey such idea reveal that it is the white notion of romantic love that is being represented. It also reveals how such notion is fabricated and artificial.

Even when the songs by black people did speak of love in similar ways, it must be borne in mind that the portrayal of personal relationships in blues has its own “historical meanings and social and political resonances” (Davies 10). It is to the tradition of blues that the women in the genealogy of this thesis belong, and still, the ways in which they have sung about love have been diverse.

After nuancing the notion of romantic love in music as something that corresponds to the white and European tradition, it must be said that love songs from any tradition relying on traditional gender and romantic values often prepare the ground for certain behaviours to emerge—behaviours that can result in violence against one of the parts of a romantic relationship, usually women. Songs that give space or praise romantic values such as dependency, possessiveness, jealousy or control upon a partner contribute in a way to the justification of toxic behaviours resulting from those elements, thus perpetuating the ideology that lies behind such behaviours.

The lives of the women who have integrated the genealogy of this work are a clear proof of this. Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone suffered violence in the hands

of a male partner, and their finances and heritage, even their career was managed by those men. This is a pattern that was identified by other musicians like John Levy (the bass player) and Etta James, for instance, and responds to the structures of a patriarchal system where masculinity is reasserted through the undermining and control of women, no matter what position those women hold in society. One of the most shocking aspects of this whole mechanism is that it was women who often justified the abuse with discourses that respond to gender stereotypes and traditional romantic values. They did so in songs, but also outside the stage. Billie Holiday's words might be the most meaningful example of this, as she stated that "I gotta have a man that is a man, and I gotta have a man that keeps reminding me of that! Otherwise, I'm making more money than he can make and I'm more famous than him. So in order to assert his masculinity, he knocks me down, he slaps me down" (as quoted in Blackburn 231).

This thesis began with the intention of focusing on lyrics, but the lives and declarations of Smith, Holiday, Vaughan, Fitzgerald and Simone have proven to be as essential in understanding the way in which the notion of romantic love as shaped by cultural products operates within women. These artists can be considered empowered women, people who challenged the social and racial conventions of the time—talented women who became wealthy, travelled, and owned luxuries that many others could not afford. However, they were navigating an industry who conveyed a romantic discourse that corresponded mostly to *pensamiento amoroso*, according to which, the lives of women are defined as the Other, and thus remain "inscrita en la dependencia, la vulnerabilidad y la inmanencia" (Esteban 140). These artists are key to understand how romantic love is weaponized against women when they show and exercise talent and power precisely to undermine their genius, and how this opens opportunities for men to assert and preserve their masculinity through control and economic exploitation. Their cases also show how anyone is able to perpetuate the mechanisms of the system that oppresses them, even as they sing the most beautiful song.

Turning now to what constituted the core of this work, there are two main conclusions to be drawn. On the one hand, contradiction is a major characteristic also in the work of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Nina Simone, and many of the women that followed after them. Even from the small sample of songs that I have analysed reveals that the body of work of each of these artists is not discursively coherent when it comes to romantic love. They might appear as powerful women, and be completely submissive at the same time ("T Ain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do"); or they might reject love



in one song (“I’m Gonna Lock My Heart”), and then claim that they need nothing apart from love (“I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm”). This appears in the corpus of every artist and is something that probably responds to the interference of the music industry in their work. It does not matter whether the viewpoint or reality of the person behind the singer matches what the song says, although it is convenient for the public to perceive singer and song as one, because that sells more.

Regarding the development of the romantic discourse throughout the years, I have observed that the language and imagery employed by the early blues singers in the 1920s was raw and contained more specific references to everyday life than the one employed by jazz singers as of the 1930s. It must be noted that this depends heavily on the artists, as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday follow a more visceral pattern, while Fitzgerald’s and Vaughan’s songs seem more naïve and commercially-driven. It could be said that Smith was followed by artists like Janis Joplin, and Fitzgerald’s and Vaughan’s choice for a less controversial way was matched by the love ballads of the 1990s. In any way, both models reinforced romantic values such as emotional dependency or unconditional love, but they did so in different ways, and established different traditions. However, as the century developed it could be said that the romantic discourse of black popular artists has become closer to the model established by the predominantly white music industry in the 1920s, probably because that concept of romantic love has expanded throughout society, and is now perceived as natural behaviour. Beyoncé’s love songs or Whitney Huston’s are an example of this.

Nevertheless, I would not like to end this part devoted to contradiction without mentioning the way in which these artists have also undermined the notion of *pensamiento amoroso*. At the beginning of the work, I anticipated the difficulty that singers might have when escaping the hegemonic discourse of romantic love since it is only through “fissures of patriarchal discourses” (Davies xi) that they can convey attitudes and models that escape hegemony. In such subversion of established notions, the fact that those artists’ bodies were on stage was fundamental, because it was in the expectations of the public were they could have most effect. In this manner, some lyrics became subversive because it was a black woman who sang them.

This becomes meaningful because many of the songs performed by these women were not theirs, and they were often popular tunes that the public already knew. This is the case with the song “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out,” or “Lost Your Head

Blues” (this one was originally composed by Bessie Smith), for instance. So, it could be said that a song can be transformed by the body that performs it, which is something essential to understand if we want to continue change the patriarchal system. It is fundamental to understand what preconceptions work in the mind of the public in order to subvert them.

The second conclusion that I would like to mention is that, throughout this corpus, and even after shallowly analysing the heiresses of these women, racial violence seems to be confronted more directly than gender violence. As stated previously, one of the hypotheses of this work was that, as the 20th century became older, and black musicians entered the more mainstream music industry, the distance between both traditions would become weaker. This has been so in the case of romantic love, but not in the case of antiracial discourses. And this is very meaningful, because both types of violence continue to exist, sometimes feeding one another.

From songs like “Strange Fruit” or “Mississippi Goddam” to Beyoncé’s “Formation” racial violence has been confronted openly by black female artists throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. This probably responds to the public character of racial violence, as it often happens on the street: lynchings were public, segregation was present in everyday life, and nowadays, black people are killed by the police on the street or in their own homes. As a result, racial violence is very palpable, and the reaction of the public also happens in the public arena, in the form of street demonstrations, or in the form of songs.

Together with protesting racist and violent policies, tunes like “Young Gifted and Black” or “Brown Skin Girl” have sought to empower the black population, and have subverted the white imagery of what a beautiful, talented and loveable person is, in an attempt to break free from what the white culture in the US established centuries ago.

The fact that gender violence and inequality have not been tackled as openly responds to the private character of gender abuse. As observed in the biographies of Smith, Holiday, and Simone, as well as in the case of Turner and Huston, abuse was a taboo, something that happened in private to them and to many other women. The fact that they did not leave their partners, even as the second and third waves of feminism arrived, does nothing but stress how complex it is to deconstruct gender values, and how powerful the ideology of *pensamiento amoroso* is. A violence that operates in private is much more difficult to confront.

In that regard, the romantic saturation of the last century in cultural products has contributed to perpetuate emotional dependency within women. In the corpus that I have analysed we can find songs that portray empowered and independent women in the early blues era, but those songs are often contradictory, one of the most relevant examples being “T Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness If I Do.” When it comes to love songs, it is hard to find one where there is no wish for romantic love, especially among the most commercial singers, like Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan. There is also a tendency that accentuates as the years pass, of idealizing the lover and love itself as something that happens in a magic realm. This phenomenon has undoubtedly reached our days, as many songs by Beyoncé or Whitney Houston prove. Further analysis would be needed to determine whether there has been a tendency towards more ambiguous, hyperbolic and metaphorical lyrics that enable more people to feel identified with them, and to resolve to what extent that has been a commercial strategy.

As feminism has gained ground in the last few years, many artists have started to send feminist messages through their songs: Beyoncé is once again the best example. However, such tendency has focused more on empowerment rather than deconstruction, and romantic love has not been considered a dangerous element that contributed to the perpetuation of violence against women. At least in songs. Artists continue to release albums filled with love songs that do not differ that much from the ones of the 1930s and 1940s, which confirms that the heritage of what those white label and radio men established is still alive. It also confirms how patriarchy and capitalism, together with racism, are great allies in the perpetuation of violence against the Other. The length of this thesis has only allowed for a minimal analysis of music lyrics that correspond to a particular genre, but the presence of romantic love in songs is worth further examination to determine how it has operated in diverse geographical locations, languages, music genres, etc. At the same time, measuring the impact that music devoted to romantic love has had in each generation would require an in-depth sociological analysis.

In any way, this thesis has proved the political character of romantic love and *pensamiento amoroso* when applied to cultural products such as songs, because the impact that such discourses have had in their very interpreters is evident. The fact that the influence of traditional values has hardly been revised with the meticulousness of other aspects of patriarchy also proves that it is still not identified as something that is harmful, which makes it very hard to subvert.

I believe it is in contradiction that the mechanisms of the patriarchal system are revealed. The “fissures” mentioned by Davies (xi) are not only those songs that subvert the established imagery or gender stereotypes. An irreverent, talented artist who is subjected to violence and still sings about love also constitutes a contradiction—a fissure. Why? Because we live in a society that does not accept that anymore: we have seen the bodies of those singers express the things that they can express, in full power, and we cannot understand how such talent and power can still be abused when it belongs to women. The fissure lies there for us to go back to, for us to dig in and find what is in the guts of patriarchy.

I have found a perfectly shaped heart, rotten.

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