

“Respect is just a minimum”:
Self-empowerment in Lauryn Hill’s “Doo-Wop
(That Thing)”

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In his 2016 Man Booker Prize winning satirical novel *The Sellout*, Paul Beatty's narrator states that "the black experience used to come with lots of bullshit, but at least there was some fucking privacy" (p. 230). The global hip-hop industry admittedly circulates images of blackness that were once silenced, but on the terms of an economically and socially dominant order. The resulting fascination with stereotypes of blackness, essentialised by those in positions of corporate power, means hip-hop becomes an increasingly complex identity-forming tool for young people worldwide. From a series of case studies exploring young black women's relationship to hip-hop, Lauren Leigh Kelly argues that many "construct their identities in relation to media representations of blackness and femininity in hip-hop music and culture" (2015, p. 530). However, the stereotypical images of blackness which are encouraged ignore elements of choice, empowerment and re-contextualisation in hip-hop whilst meeting the widespread demand for imagery of a racial "Other". The often negative associations with such images denies individuals the opportunity to identify their own relationship towards them, independent of media scrutiny and judgement.

Lauryn Hill's "Doo Wop (That Thing)" "sounds gender" (Bradley, 2015) through lyrics, flow, and multimedia, working to empower black femininities with self-respect. I argue that Hill's track voices specifically black female concerns, prioritising notions of community central to black feminist thought (Collins, 2009). In doing so, Hill challenges the reluctance of mainstream feminism to acknowledge the specificities of black female experience in favour of a generalised view of sisterhood and equality. Moreover, as one of the most influential female rappers in recent history, Hill is able to "use [her] presence to call into question the masculine designation of [hip-hop] spaces" (Perry, 2004, p.159). By exploring the tensions between mainstream essentialism of black femininity, the difficulties within black communities, and the varied empowering gestures of sexual reclamation for black women, Hill highlights the conflicts black women face in their search for an empowered voice.

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“Doo Wop (That Thing)” was the immensely popular debut single from Hill’s first album, a deeply personal work which Hill herself stated tackled “some really powerful lessons that changed the course and direction of [her] life” (Witter, 1999). The album earned five Grammys at the 41st Award Ceremony, a record for a female artist, and explored numerous themes, including love, spirituality, race and femininity. The global popularity of the album makes it an important text in understanding how hip-hop can shape female identities worldwide. The interweaving expressions of black femininity in the album validate a range of empowered identities which young black women continue to relate to.

This song sounds gender by presenting black women as a resilient and supportive community who prioritise self-respect, questioning hip-hop masculinities which threaten group identity. Collins argues that a defining feature of black feminist thought is the communities black women build through collective discussion of lived experiences, and that these self-defined viewpoints lead to changed consciousness and activist responses (2009, p. 33). The song is in many senses one such activist response, embodying the multiplicity of black femininity by presenting the viewpoint of not just one woman, but the collective concerns of a group of women defining their own voice.

Throughout the song, Hill’s lyrics are echoed just after her by a group of female voices, implying solidarity and support. Group vocalisation is historically viewed as a key method of black community formation, grounded in religious gatherings which were one of the only community events allowed to slaves. C.L. Franklin, father of Aretha Franklin (an artist for whom Hill has written songs) and a hugely charismatic African-American preacher, employed this technique in his sermons, building his ideas gradually to an all-inclusive climax of whooping, shouting, singing, and call and response. Franklin was also one of the first preachers to record his uniquely performative sermons, and in particular “Dry Bones in the Valley” (1967) exhibits how positive vocal affirmation of the preacher’s sentiments encourages communal appreciation and agreement.

Nick Salvatore explicitly refers to the connections between music, preaching and performativity in his work on Franklin, stating that “for both bluesman and preacher, the intimate pattern of call and response ... underscored the very communal nature of the performance” (2006, pp. 64-5). Call and response is seen as central to African-American expression, incorporated into the AAB construction of blues songs. Hill utilises religious language in the opening of the song, using the phrase “sirat al-mustaqim” which means “straight path” in Arabic. The confident responses from several voices create a sense of performative proclamation to a community. Although Hill keeps her personal religious leanings private, her own discussion of her work reflects the idea of preaching through music; she states that “the title of the album was meant to discuss those life lessons, those things that you don't get in any text book, things that we go through that force us to mature” (Witter, 1999). By positioning herself as one transmitting key life lessons, Hill not only utilises traditional markers associated with the strength of African-American religious communities, but also calls to mind the persistency with which black communities have been shaped in the face of many forms of oppression.

The group conversation that opens the song sonically identifies women communally responding to specific gendered oppressions. In the first verse, female voices echo Hill's lyrics and express agreement (“uh-huh”), consolidating a black female community which prioritises the wellbeing of women. In the second verse, the echoes become louder, more assertive and more direct: “Don't care who they offend, poppin' yang (Like you got Yen!)”. The term “poppin' yang” means “talking ‘rubbish’”, challenging the masculine nonsense these women hear from dominant male egos. The echoes sonically represent black hip-hop femininities as a supportive, inclusive community, with a confidence to challenge the perpetrators of the issues they face built from collective experience.

Furthermore, Hill incorporates a conversational classroom skit across the album. In “Doo Wop (That Thing)” a teacher prompts discussion between members of a young black community, and as the music fades out, the teacher challenges the “intelligent women” of the classroom, asking them whether they think they are too young to be in love. The female

students emphatically reject this idea, asserting that there is a difference between loving someone and being in love. A gentle flute riff enters and accompanies the speech as this community of young women debate issues which are important to them.

This skit sounds gender by presenting a non-musical sonic representation of a particular feminine identity. These women support each other by collectively responding to the teacher, disputing his flawed understanding of black femininity and re-defining it themselves. This particular female community share and combine collective experiences to negotiate a dialogical response, critiquing notions of women as easily infatuated and defining their own activist standpoint through a strengthened community (Collins, 2009). Feminist scholar bell hooks argues that black women “must work to link personal narratives with knowledge of how we must act politically to change and transform the world” (1989, p. 111), and Hill’s skit prioritises and validates the narratives of these women. Their collective response presents a self-defined version of black femininity which responds assertively to oppressive forces that attempt to define it for them: in this case, their male schoolteacher.

Hill’s inclusion of mainstream education within a hip-hop text draws explicit links between hip-hop, learning and identity formation. The non-musical element highlights the skit within the context of the song, foregrounding the voices of these empowered young women expressing self-respect. The classroom environment exhibits how gender identity is constituted through group discussion of lived experience and indicates the power that hip-hop has to inform on black femininity. Hill’s song itself becomes a classroom, educating the listener on how young black women self-identify. The literal representation of the classroom re-inscribes the hip-hop text as an educational space in its own right, through which black femininity is both constituted and expressed.

II (see appendix 1)

The lyrics of “Doo-Wop (That Thing)” describe a variety of issues faced by women in hip-hop communities, placing accountability with both women and men. The first verse condemns the sexual promiscuity of young women who are left destitute when men do not support them,

whilst the second holds the unrelenting dominance of hip-hop masculinity accountable for the struggles women face. Here Hill exhibits “dual oppositionality”, a term to articulate how hip-hop discourse is both liberating and oppressive for black women (Stephens, Reddick-Morgan and Phillips, 2005). By encouraging a dialogue between genders concerning their accountability for challenges, Hill is at once able to critique the sexist infrastructures of hip-hop and express group solidarity with the wider oppression of black hip-hop communities. The song thus forms a community, where collective responsibility for the hyper-sexualisation and commodification of women would incite a change in action and consciousness (Collins, 2009).

In the first verse, the lyrics express that women are partly responsible for their lack of self-worth, arguing that sexualised displays of the female body are bound to result in exploitation and should therefore be avoided. The idea that sexual promiscuity undermines self-respect is consistent with the hyper-sexualised Jezebel who effectively seals her own fate, a stereotype which Hill highlights with internal rhyme when she raps: “Now that was the sin that did Jezebel in/Who you gon' tell when the repercussions spin?”. The religious imagery of ‘sin’ associated with the unrestrained sexuality of the Jezebel gives the line a tone of guidance towards self-respect. Hill continues to state that “when you give it up so easy you ain't even foolin' him/If you did it then, then you'd probably fuck again”, asserting that a sexually unreserved woman will not be taken seriously when requesting support after a one-off sexual encounter.

Hill's lyrics are dually oppositional because whilst they condemn women who embody “an inferior image of African-American womanhood” (Tribbett-Williams, 2000, p. 207) they continue to condemn the “niggas” who exploit women freely expressing their sexuality. In the second verse, Hill addresses the “sneaky, silent men/the punk, domestic violence men” who contribute to reduced self-respect. The internal rhyme of “silent” and “violence” highlights their deeply contrasting meanings, constituting a powerful reference to the suppression of black women's voices in relation to abuse. Collins' idea of the dialogical relationship between action and consciousness is implicated in Hill's lyric: “they face a court case when the child support

late/money-taking and heart-breaking, now you wonder why women hate men”, presenting men who withdraw their support as contributing towards rifts within communities.

The second verse closes with the lines “How you gonna win, when you ain't right within? (x 3) Come again (x 4)”. The repetition in both lines exhibits that the problematic hip-hop masculinity which causes such issues for black women can only be resolved with persistent efforts from all to change and “come again”. Similarly, the lyrics of the chorus change from “Guys, you know you'd better watch out” after the first verse to “Girls, you know you'd better watch out” following the second, encouraging a collective response from both genders. This complex dually oppositional approach is ultimately both inclusive and challenging of misogynistic hip-hop structures. Hill's rap simultaneously prioritises the distressing lived realities of black femininity and sustains an already fragile racial community by motivating the entire group towards change.

Hill's methods of flow provide another layer of meaning to the lyrical content which highlights various causes of gendered oppression within black communities. As defined by Adams, flow is “all of the rhythmical and articulative features of a rapper's delivery of the lyrics” (2009), and also one of the key ways in which rap artists signify personal artistic identity and connect with audience concerns. Krims has described flow as the “poetics of identity”, further stating that “consideration of [rap's] internal structuration will be crucial to grasping rap's social functions” (2000, p. 46). Flow is therefore a vital element in considering how female rappers express their positions on gendered issues.

As Adams states, changes in flow can contribute to “deeper layers of musical meaning” (2009), and Hill's flow reinforces the messages of the two contrasting verses. In the first verse, Hill's flow is regular and un-syncopated, with the dominant rhyme of each line falling on the fourth beat of each measure. Hill uses almost constant sixteenth note delivery and accents on strong beats are consistent and predictable, corresponding with the measured advice she gives throughout this verse: “I only say it cause I'm truly genuine” (see Ex. 1).

Ex. 1

Verse 1

It's been three weeks since you was loo-king for your friend, The
 one you let hit it and ne-ver called you a-gain,
 'Mem-ber when he told you he was 'bout the Ben-ja-mins? You
 act like you ain't hear him then give him a lit-tle trim To be *etc*

Oliver Kautny (2015, p. 104) identifies three dimensions of flow: production (the rhythmic processes at play), texture (the musical result of combining these rhythms with the beat) and reception (the feelings flow elicits in the listener). Hill uses articulation to affect reception, through what Adams calls 'relative articulation' (from staccato to legato) and 'absolute articulation' (from sharp to dull) (2015, p. 125). For Adams, combinations of different forms of articulation create particular expressive characteristics.

Throughout the first verse, Hill's articulation corresponds with Adam's assessment of how dull absolute articulation and legato relative articulation leads to a mood of relaxed authority (Adams, 2015, p. 125). Hill's dull absolute articulation emphasises unvoiced fricatives such as the 's' sounds in "sayin' you're a Christian/A Muslim, sleeping with the gin", and the lazy sibilance helps to imply experience and understanding of such difficulty. The legato relative articulation blurs boundaries between words by extending consonants to provide the syncopation, rather than placing vowels on off-beats. On the line "give him a little trim", Hill resonates on the 'm' sounds for longer than strictly necessary, creating micro-temporal syncopations which are less severe than a staccato articulation. The irregularities of

the rhythms are disguised by articulatory techniques, giving the verse an ebb and flow which contributes to a mood of firm yet compassionate guidance.

In the second verse, Hill's flow becomes more syncopated, aggressive and unpredictable. The rhythmic values become irregular, with internal rhyme and enjambment disrupting the natural flow of the lines. Despite similar line lengths and thus the potential for similar delivery, Hill's flow and articulation instead corresponds to her frustration with masculine behaviour and the distress it brings black women. In the line "Let's stop pretend, the ones that pack pistols by they waist men/Cristal by the case men, still in they mother's basement" (see Ex. 2a), Hill's absolute articulation is sharp. She aggressively stops the air behind the voiced 'p' and 'c' sounds, delivering the words with authoritative impact. Her relative articulation exhibits cleaner onset, and the 's' consonants which were extended previously are now clipped, eliciting anger in the listener alongside Hill and building a resistant community of receptive listeners.

Ex. 2a

Verse 2

Lets stop pre-tend, the ones that pack pis - tol by they waist men, cris -
tal by the case men still in they mo - ther's base - ment the etc.

Similarly, Ex. 2b exhibits a fast, syncopated delivery of text, combined with disruptive internal rhyme such as "semen" and "be men". Hill's sharp articulation contributes further to the listener's perception of mood, emphasised the repeated harsh 'k' sounds in "sneaky" and "punk" to indicate her disdain. Hill aligns the consonants cleanly with each offbeat, replacing the blurred syncopations of verse one with tighter, crisper delivery.

Ex. 2b*Verse 2*

Mon ey ta - kin' and heart brea - kin' now you won-der why wo-men hate men and the
snea - ky si - lent men the punk do - me - stic vio - lence men,
Quick to shoot the se - men stop ac - ting like boys and be men! *etc.*

Hill uses flow to articulate mood and thus affect reception, “bringing wreck” (Pough, 2004) to dominant masculine stereotypes and extending the blame for the difficulties faced by black women to black men. She interacts with women in the first verse with a focus on measured guidance, but her frustration explodes in the second verse and the aggressive dominance embodied in her flow and articulation responds specifically to the idea that black women themselves present the problem. Hill identifies the problem as the male exploitation of black female choice, and uses flow to sound gender roles that challenge dominant notions of black femininity.

III

Nicholas Cook argues that “there is [a] perceptual relationship between [the] various individual components” of multimedia such as music videos, highlighting that the visual and aural elements constitute meaning for each other (Cook, 2000, p. 24). He refers to three different models of these relationships in each instance of multimedia (IMM) as conformance, complementation and contest. These exist on a spectrum: conformance indicates a consistent level of literal connections between the components, whilst contest refers to different elements of an IMM battling for precedence. Most common, Cook argues, is the middle ground:

complementation, where the differences between the forms of multimedia are employed to afford the other meaning.

The music video for “Doo-Wop (That Thing)” constitutes meaning across this spectrum, utilising the differences between sonic and visual elements alongside one another to support their respective meanings. The opening shot presents a split screen, with one half depicting a street party from 1967 and the other a street party from 1998, both set in New York City. Both shots show groups of women, standing in a line around the edge of the 1967 shot and as a tight-knit trio in 1998. Hill’s sonic creation of a strong female community is directly visualised in these shots, exhibiting clear conformant relationships between elements.

Similar incidents of conformance are seen when versions of Hill in both 1967 and 1998 perform literal visual representations of the lyrics; for example, Hill leans out of a window on the line “Girls, you know you’d better watch out” and wags her finger as if reprimanding someone, or makes a phone symbol with a hand for the line “you called him again”. A model of complementation between visual and sonic elements is also seen here. The visual juxtaposition of two completely different time periods, combined with Hill’s lyrics and delivery, contributes to a representation of an ongoing struggle against oppressive forces. Hill’s employment of sonic preaching techniques to refer to resistant community is reinforced by the visual re-imagination of 1967 through a hip-hop lens, suggesting that gendered issues faced in 1967 remain persistent in 1998.

A model of contest is exhibited when Hill’s lyrics are echoed shortly after they are rapped: one visual representation of Hill articulates the original line and the other the echoes. The sonic impression of these echoes is that they come from a separate individual supporting Hill’s narrative, whereas the shots of Hill speaking both lines at different times suggest her repeated witnessing of such issues since 1967, and her continued teaching on them. The conflict between visual and sonic elements strengthens messages of community and preaching.

The music video for “Doo Wop (That Thing)” presents a tangible visual representation of the sonic references to female community and their historic experiences. The reality of the

street, different eras of fashion and the similar situations the women face enhance the meanings of the lyrics. The dissonances between visual and sonic signifiers of gender in this music video both constitute and solidify Hill's message, reflecting how differing strands of black femininity may interweave and conflict in complex ways.

IV

Mainstream white fantasies of 'appropriate' blackness continue to repress and attempt to reshape articulations of black hip-hop femininity, neglecting to create spaces where artists will be heard on their own terms. For example, Nicki Minaj's choices in representing her own body are repeatedly challenged in line with respectability politics, "[overlooking] a perspective rooted in self-determination" (Rios, 2014). It is Minaj's self-determination which is central to her image, not her body itself, but media depictions of Minaj as the hyper-sexual black female persist. I argue that in "Doo-Wop (That Thing)" Lauryn Hill moves towards employing hip-hop's extensive globalised access to change mass consciousness, by valuing the voices of minority communities who share their experiences. Young black women worldwide shape their identities via hip-hop, but often public attitudes towards its representations of women undermine their choosing to identify with them at all. Female rappers have begun to deconstruct the complex and damaging layers of oppression which have rendered their voices irrelevant, moving towards validation.

Hill's song explores how pervasive notions of black masculinity function in hip-hop circles as one element of a complex combination of factors which continually silence black hip-hop femininities. By describing women who work at times to uphold black masculinity whilst disempowering themselves, Hill explores the conflict between the prevention of emasculation and the prevention of dehumanising women in hip-hop spheres. This is reflective of a wider culture of silencing women to protect the male ego; Rebecca Solnit describes this discourse as one which "trains [women] in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence" (2014, pp. 4-5). Female rappers bring wreck to this limitation on female space, using hip-hop as an accessible text through which to teach young

black women that their views on their identity matter and are heard. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2015) argues that the rejection of likeability is a crucial way for young women to empower themselves. Female rappers embrace this by rejecting notions of appropriate femininity and prioritising their own voices as they articulate their own identities.

Moreover, upholding such conceptions of masculinity stifles the expressive individuality of young black women, associating them instead with the stereotypes that the dominant order sees as entertaining. It is essential to consider the specific stance of each individual artist, making space for visions of blackness which rebel, reclaim and re-contextualise (hooks, 1992, p.4) and thus embracing forms of empowerment which may differ to our own. Lauryn Hill's juxtaposition of the sexual behaviours of black women with the disturbing impacts of male exploitation highlights that whilst female sexuality is complex and multi-faceted, hip-hop masculinity exploits women's choice to sexualise themselves, policing the female body under the guise of preventing further oppression. Adichie states that to empower young women, we must present them with alternatives to mainstream silencing discourses, alternatives which embrace rather than question their selfhood and identity (2017, p. 47). Hill's track presents one such alternative, voicing specific accounts of black female experiences to reclaim and possess space on her own terms.

Finally, Hill utilises rap to validate *choice* in matters of self-representation and identity, using the self-empowering potential of hip-hop to deny mainstream dictations of black female worth. Rebecca Solnit argues that the denial of female credibility across society "opens up space for men and closes it off for women, space to speak, to be heard, to have rights, to participate, to be respected, to be a full and free human being" (2014, p. 15). Hill derails these dominant masculine discourses within hip-hop, juxtaposing mainstream ideals of appropriate empowerment and female identity formation with voices that articulate the unique difficulties and challenges women can face in hip-hop communities. The "often contradictory and multifaceted depictions of black womanhood" (Collins, 2004, p. 133) emerging in female rap may be challenging for the dominant order to accept, but this is far eclipsed by the power of

giving black women a choice in how they are represented, a choice which has been historically denied.

Hill's rap thus articulates a multi-faceted black femininity, ultimately tackling hip-hop essentialism by exercising choice. Sounding gender is a powerful way to project self-defined identities via a public forum, working to change internalised mainstream notions of appropriate gender roles. Female rappers such as Hill can work in numerous ways to prioritise the black female voice as an authentic resource concerning black female identity, encouraging recognition of how black women are empowered by making active choices of self-representation. This in turn can allow young black women to more freely identify with hip-hop images of black femininity in the face of oppressive forces which have historically utilised the behaviour of empowered black women as tools to silence them.

The rise of social media has resulted in even more widely disseminated images of black femininity, and the resulting intensified pressure to conform for young black women could be fruitfully explored through recent female rap. Moreover, the expanding female rap scene across the UK exhibits a more playful approach to gender and sexuality, distanced from the gritty realism of 90s rap. Exploring the new ways in which gender roles are represented by women and minority groups through rap would continue to shed light on how hip-hop shapes global identity politics. As Joan Morgan argues, "truth can't be found in the voice of one rapper, but in the juxtaposition of many" (1999, p. 62).

Appendix 1: Full lyrics to "Doo-Wop (That Thing)" from *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*

(1998)

Yo, remember back on the boogie when cats used to harmonize like
 Yo, my men and my women
 Don't forget about the dean, sirat al-mustaqim
 Yo, it's about a thing
 If ya feel real good wave your hands in the air
 And lick two shots in the atmosphere!

It's been three weeks since you were looking for your friend
 The one you let hit it and never called you again
 'Member when he told you he was 'bout the Benjamins?
 You act like you ain't hear him, then give him a little trim
 To begin, how you think you're really gon' pretend
 Like you wasn't down and you called him again?
 Plus, when you give it up so easy you ain't even foolin' him
 If you did it then, then you'd probably fuck again
 Talking out your neck, sayin' you're a Christian
 A Muslim, sleeping with the gin
 Now that was the sin that did Jezebel in
 Who you gon' tell when the repercussions spin?
 Showing off your ass cause you're thinkin' it's a trend
 Girlfriend, let me break it down for you again
 You know I only say it cause I'm truly genuine
 Don't be a hard rock when you really are a gem
 Baby girl, respect is just a minimum
 Niggas fucked up and you still defending 'em
 Now, Lauryn is only human
 Don't think I haven't been through the same predicament
 Let it sit inside your head like a million women in Philly, Penn
 It's silly when girls sell their souls because it's in
 Look at where you be in, hair weaves like Europeans
 Fake nails done by Koreans
 Come again, come again, come again, my friend come again

Guys you know you'd better watch out
 Some girls, some girls are only about
 That thing, that thing, that thing
 That thing, that thing, that thing

The second verse is dedicated to the men
 More concerned with his rims and his Timbs than his women
 Him and his men, come in the club like hooligans
 Don't care who they offend, poppin' yang (Like you got yen!)
 Let's stop pretend, the ones that pack pistols by they waist men
 Cristal by the case men, still in they mother's basement
 The pretty face men claiming that they be the big men
 Need to take care of they three or four kids
 And they face a court case when the child support late
 Money taking and heart breaking, now you wonder why women hate men
 The sleepy, silent men
 The punk, domestic violence men
 Quick to shoot the semen, stop acting like boys and be men

How you gonna win, when you ain't right within?
How you gonna win, when you ain't right within?
How you gonna win, when you ain't right within?
Come again, come again, come again, come again

Watch out, watch out
Look out, look out
Watch out, watch out
Look out, look out
Watch out, watch out
Look out, look out
Watch out, watch out
Look out, look out

Girls you know you'd better watch out
Some guys, some guys are only about
That thing, that thing, that thing
That thing, that thing, that thing

Guys you know you'd better watch out
Some girls, some girls are only about
That thing, that thing, that thing
That thing, that thing, that thing

Girls you know you'd better watch out
Some guys, some guys are only about
That thing, that thing, that thing

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