

The Miseducation of The Self:

Ms. Lauryn Hill vs. The Education System

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“How many of y’all have ever been in love? [...] Oh! Let this black man right here tell what his idea of love is, 'cause not all the time we hear a young black man talk about love. About your personal definition, don't tell me what Webster thinks. Huh?”¹ That is what the teacher says in the ending of Lauryn Hill’s song “To Zion.” This small paragraph tells a different purpose of learning than what Western civilians are used to. The teacher asks a student about their personal experience and not what they might have read in a textbook or on the internet. This empiricist manner of learning is one of the fundamental factors in hip hop and neo-soul, such as Lauryn Hill’s oeuvre. In this essay, I interpret Lauryn Hill’s album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* as a means of Hill accounting for a different education system. The organisation of this essay implies a mainly textual analysis of the album, analyses of interviews, and of peer scientists’ concepts.

Black feminist pedagogy

Ever since white cisgendered men have ruled the world, marginalised ethnic groups, such as black, female, and queer people, have fought for a place in society. Alas, the remains are still visible in today’s civilisation, for instance the Dutch tradition of Sinterklaas where black people are portrayed as slaves of a rich white man. These ‘black Petes’ have bright red lips, afros, golden earrings, and smile at any time. The debate whether this tradition is racist is an ongoing story that seemingly becomes the new tradition.

¹ Lauryn Hill, and Carlos Santana, “To Zion,” track 4 on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records, 1998, compact disc.

Even in education, traces of this white superior thinking are present. As Picower puts it, white people are not taught to be aware of their privileges, due to internalised racism. By neglecting this socio-political consciousness, white people pass on the idea of black people as marginal.² By this means, the education system is in need for a new pedagogic culture. McArthur and Lane account for an approach to learning that puts love on a pedestal, and engages in teaching as a lifestyle and a public service, discipline as expectations for excellence, teaching as othermothering, relationship building, and race, class, and gender awareness. This approach is referred to as black feminist pedagogy.³ Given that black women have been marginalised due to their race and excluded from the fight for equal rights because of their gender, a black feminist approach to education is bound to deepen the socio-political awareness of children regarding racism and identity, as well as gender expression of others and themselves. In conclusion, a diverse method of education offers a diverse and accurate worldview of children.

The importance of women

Hip hop and neo-soul are of great importance for making the education system more diverse. Michael MacDonald states that this type of cultural education is the major learning method of the youth. This type of aesthetic education causes children to create their own subjectivity, therefore an individual perspective.⁴ By doing this, internalised racism has a lower opportunity of survival in successive generations.

However, Rebollo-Gil and Moras argue that hip hop music is not safe. It is a means of speaking freely for black man, yet black women are portrayed as stereotypes, such as gold diggers. To abandon this inequity, Rebollo-Gil and Moras state that black women of hip hop should be inclusive.⁵ This is an unfair point, given that black men get to express however they want and black women should be diverse, solely due to their gender. This internalised

² Bree Picower, "The Unexamined Whiteness of Teaching: How White Teachers Maintain and Enact Dominant Racial Ideologies," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 12, nr. 2 (2009): 197-215.

³ Sherell A. McArthur, and Monique Lane, "Schoolin' Black Girls: Politicized Caring and Healing as Pedagogical Love," *The Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Education* 51, nr 1 (2019): 68-70.

⁴ Michael B. MacDonald, "Aesthetic Systems Theory: Doing Hip Hop Research Together," in *Remix and Life Hack in Hip Hop* (Rotterdam; Boston; Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2016), 1-17.

⁵ Guillermo Rebollo-Gil, and Amanda Moras. "Black Women and Black Men in Hip Hop Music: Misogyny, Violence and the Negotiation of (White-Owned) Space." *Journal of Popular Culture* 45, nr. 1 (2012): 128-129.

sexism manifests how men are seen as a problem that remains unresolved and women are viewed as the solution and that they should acclimatise to the situation.

Yet, black women are of great importance for demonstrating diversity and representation. It remains to this day that women, especially black women, are not at all well-represented in society, even though black female rappers, such as Cardi B, Nicki Minaj, and Meghan Thee Stallion, seem to dominate the mainstream hip-hop audience. The reason why these women are thriving today, apart from their lyricism and feminism, is Ms. Lauryn Hill.

I prayed that he would finish

Ms. Lauryn Hill was first in a group called The Fugees. This hip hop formation consists of Hill, Pras Michel and Wycleff Jean. The group gained importance when Hill was casted as Rita Watson in *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit*. The Fugees fought for a second record, after their first had not been sold well. Eventually, they had the chance to record and publish “The Score” in 1996. This album features a cover of Roberta Flack’s “Killing Me Softly,” which became an immediate hit. This song showcased the versatility of Lauryn as a rapper and as a singer.⁶

The manifestation of Lauryn’s capabilities was by no means coincidental. In an interview with the American Academy of Achievement in 2000, Hill said that she had to work harder as a female artist. When Wyclef and Pras were asked about their view on the world, Lauryn was asked what her favourite lipstick was. She wanted to be taken seriously and seen as an artist, like male artists were viewed.⁷

Unfortunately, The Fugees split up in 1997. Wyclef and Lauryn had started a relationship when in the hip hop formation. However Wycleff got married to another woman, he still wanted to be with Lauryn. Lauryn argues that this was not her primary reason to go solo. A

⁶ Sara Pendergast, and Tom Pendergast, “Lauryn Hill,” in *Contemporary Black Biography. Volume 53: Profiles From the International Black Community* (Detroit, Michigan: Thomson Gale, 2006), 74.

⁷ Academy of Achievement, Lauryn Hill Interview – Academy of Achievement.

reason for her was that she wanted to be a free artist and that she did not have the chance to be liberal in The Fugees.⁸

Shortly after the group broke up, Hill started a relationship with Rohan Marley and became pregnant with her first child. The problem was that Wycleff was under the impression that he was the father and that the record label forced Lauryn to have an abortion, because that was better for her career. Hill decided to not have an abortion. Instead, she decided to write songs during her pregnancy and with the birth of her first son Zion she also gave birth to the record *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.⁹

Unlearning in order to learn

The album is often described as a pure work of art. It even made Lauryn Hill the first rapper to win the Grammy for Album of the Year in 1999. In *Rolling Stone* Greg Kot described *Miseducation* as follows: “Its sixteen tracks flow like autobiography, a young woman's journey from innocence to disillusionment and, finally, to the inner peace afforded by self-knowledge. Heartless lovers and soulless artists are obstacles encountered along the way; the presence of God in everyday life and the joy of home and children are signposts. Waiting at the end of Hill's road was a commercial jackpot.”¹⁰ Here, the connections with black feminist pedagogy start to appear. As stated before, black feminist pedagogy handles education in a gendered way: as the gathering of events that one has experienced throughout their life. Kot describes Hill's manner of artistic production as Lauryn telling her listeners what she has been through and teaches them what she learned.

An important means for Hill to narrate her experiences is religion and spirituality. Lauryn herself is follower of the Christian church, though interprets God as the one that made us and loves us all.¹¹ Her singing about Christianity combined with taboos, such as sex and black love, makes her stand out. Miller interprets Lauryn's religious importance as follows: “Regaled as a ‘female prophet of rap,’ Hill created a cultural sensation when she engaged

⁸ Academy of Achievement, Lauryn Hill Interview – Academy of Achievement.

⁹ Academy of Achievement, Lauryn Hill Interview – Academy of Achievement.

¹⁰ Greg Kot, “Lauryn Hill: The Album of the Year,” *Rolling Stone*, January 21, 1999, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/lauryn-hill-the-album-of-the-year-232747/>.

¹¹ Academy of Achievement, Lauryn Hill Interview – Academy of Achievement.

with sex, sexuality, relationships, intimate relationships, God, religion, and faith in this album. Each interviewee saw her as a type of ‘hip hop pastor,’ able to challenge the soul beyond what any ordained minister could do. With one album, she created something that reached out to the hip hop community, which has lasted for almost two decades.”¹² Miller thus describes Hill as a spiritual guide and teacher, which connects to the intumescence of Lauryn Hill as a black feminist pedagogue. Walsh continues to delineate Hill’s importance: “Rappers, such as [...] Lauryn Hill [...], offer what the biblical prophets had – namely, social critique and moral outrage by asserting God’s presence in the mix of concrete daily life.”¹³ Walsh describes Lauryn as a prophet that seeks relief from social issues by using her own experiences. Here, black feminist pedagogy and religion are unified. This is exactly what Hill pursues.

The album is inspired by the book *The Miseducation of the Negro*, in which Woodson states that black people have been culturally indoctrinated instead of being taught in American schools. It openly discusses institutionalised racism.¹⁴ A significant event of the artistic process of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* was that Lauryn returned to the school she went to when she was a child as a means of reconnecting with her roots. This is where the inspiration of the album cover came from. Lauryn wanted to demonstrate that she was a result of rebellion against the system of white education, and by that inspired by *The Miseducation of the Negro*. She wanted a school desk, which symbolised white education and cultural indoctrination, with her face carved out of it.¹⁵ This immediately connects with the concept of the title and black feminist pedagogy: by unlearning the things that you were taught, you learn to create space for your own subjectivity and worldview.

Exploring *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*

This concept of unlearning in order to learn is ubiquitous in *Miseducation*. The album consists of sixteen tracks. A remarkable factor is that the introduction of the album is the

¹² Daniel White-hodge, “Methods for the prophetic: Tupac Shakur, Lauryn Hill, and the case for ethnohistory,” in *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, eds. Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard ‘Bun B.’ Freeman (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 34.

¹³ Carey Walsh, “Shout-Outs to the Creator: The Use of Biblical Themes in Rap Lyrics,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 25, nr. 2 (2013): 232.

¹⁴ Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro*. (Trenton, New Jersey: The Associated Publishers, 1993).

¹⁵ Academy of Achievement, Lauryn Hill Interview – Academy of Achievement.

sound of a school bell and a teacher finishing the attendance list. Lauryn Hill does not react when her name is on call, and starts rapping the first song “Lost Ones.” The classroom comes back at the end of seven other tracks. The educator teaches the class about love and asks if someone has ever been in love and how they define it. This is a direct presentation of black feminist pedagogy, due to the education being centered around love and individual experience. The ending of “To Zion” demonstrates race differences as well. Here, the teacher asks a black boy to tell what love means according to himself. The reason the teacher gives for this particular circumstance is that young black men hardly ever get to express their idea of love, due to racism.¹⁶

In the track “To Zion” Lauryn talks about the backlash she received when she was pregnant with her first child Zion. She begins by addressing her Christian beliefs by describing her pregnancy as an angel coming on her path that tells her to pray. In the consecutive sentences it becomes clear that her experience with people telling her to get an abortion in order to maintain a successful career has been significant. Lauryn sings:

“I knew his life deserved a chance, but everybody told me to be smart. ‘Look at your career,’ they said, ‘Lauryn, baby use your head,’ but instead I chose to use my heart.”¹⁷

Hill here uses her experience in order to demonstrate spiritual power and subjectivity. She did not listen to what anyone else taught her to do, thus did what she felt was right, and she was right. Lauryn sings that the joy of her world is in Zion. This is a very powerful song, because it addresses Hill’s experience as a pregnant black woman in the music industry. She criticises the music industry for keeping her away from joy, that is Zion, and for being misogynistic and racist. In a pastoral way, Hill sings about a social issue by using her own experience.

This demonstration of experience and social criticism is omnipresent. The song “I Used to Love Him” featuring Mary J. Blige describes the problematic relationship between Lauryn

¹⁶ Lauryn Hill, and Carlos Santana, “To Zion,” track 4 on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records, 1998, compact disc.

¹⁷ Lauryn Hill, and Carlos Santana, “To Zion,” track 4 on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records, 1998, compact disc.

and Wycleff when they were in The Fugees.¹⁸ This track conveys the concept of setting self-love above love for someone else. Unfortunately, Utley argues that Hill romanticises the relationship with Wycleff, due to its patriarchal tropes. These tropes include Lauryn needing to be saved, and ultimately being saved by God.¹⁹ However, Utley does not seem to realise that the power of God is a signifier of spirituality, therefore neglects that Lauryn stepped out of a relationship due to the growth of her spiritual power. This makes the track as educational as the other ones. It also fits in the concept of black feminist pedagogy, given that Hill teaches about love around which black feminist pedagogy is centered.

A different type of education is featured in the song “Doo Wop (That Thing).” This song features the African-American doowop, which is a subgenre of rhythm and blues from cities in North-East United States. The song is mainly about sex, but Hill equalises every race and gender. Lauryn speaks of different religions and religious practices as well as ethnic tropes and commences the first chorus as follows:

“Guys you know you better watch out. Some girls, some girls are only about that thing...”²⁰

Here, she states that men should watch out for some women, because everything they want is sex. However, the second chorus points towards women. Women should watch out for some men, because everything they want is sex. By breaking the stereotype that men are always looking for sex, Lauryn Hill equalises gender norms and teaches the listener that men and women are equal. This is a demonstration of black feminist pedagogy, due to its exposure of gender differences and teaches that these norms are wrongly suggested.

“Everything is Everything” is perhaps the most activist song on *Miseducation*. This song is about how racism is omnipresent. It becomes most clear in the following lyrics:

¹⁸ Lauryn Hill, and Mary J. Blige, “I Used to Love Him,” track 9 on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records, 1998, compact disc.

¹⁹ Ebony A. Utley, “I Used to Love Him”: Exploring the Miseducation About Black Love and Sex,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, nr. 3 (2010): 291-308.

²⁰ Lauryn Hill, “Doo Wop (That Thing),” track 5 on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records, 1998, compact disc.

“It seems we lose the game, before we even start to play. Who made these rules?
We're so confused.”²¹

This sentence exposes internalised racism. Lauryn teaches that black people lose from white people, because of their skin colour: They lose the game before they even start to play. Lauryn openly expresses her despair, and sings that black people have lived in a poor environment, simply because they are black. This is connected to black feminist pedagogy, because it exposes race differences, which is one of its major pinpoints.

By interpreting these four songs, it becomes clear that *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* actively demonstrates the concepts of black feminist pedagogy.

Conclusion

This text commenced by exploring the concept of black feminist pedagogy. This type of pedagogy features education based on love and pinpoints teaching as a lifestyle and a public service, discipline as expectations for excellence, teaching as othermothering, relationship building, and race, class, and gender awareness. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* is used to demonstrate how the ideology of black feminist pedagogy relates to hip hop and neo-soul. On this album Hill challenges the Western education system as a means of indoctrination of white culture, as in *The Miseducation of the Negro*. By analysing the album, it becomes clear that Lauryn Hill centres herself around the concept of black feminist pedagogy. Hill discusses gender norms, race, class differences, and love. Moreover, she demonstrates spiritual power by openly using her Christianity. She mentions religious phenomena, such as angles and praying.

Black feminist pedagogy is thus present in Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. The concept of unlearning in order to learn is omnipresent, which concludes that Lauryn Hill argues for a more diverse education system that features black feminist pedagogy, so that our children can learn to create their own subjectivity.

²¹ Lauryn Hill, “Everything is Everything,” track 13 on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records, 1998, compact disc.

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