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Lamentations for Liberation: A Theological Analysis of the Miseducation of Lauryn Hill

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Lamentations for Liberation:
A Theological Analysis of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*

by

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Abstract

While exploring the history of liberation theology themes appearing in Black musician's work (in Dr. Daniel Smith-Christopher's class *Bible and the Blues*), it came to my attention that there are many more contemporary artists whose work also touches on these themes, such as Lauryn Hill. My thesis argues with the help of Black and Womanist scholars that the naming of one's reality through musical lamentations is a healing act. Further, musical lamentation is an act to carry forth communities and provide them with healing because the act of acknowledging and lamenting the suffering of a marginalized community is liberating in and of itself. This act of lamenting serves, then, as an act of truth-telling, that refuses to deny the pain that is caused by systems of oppression such as racism and sexism. Lauryn Hill's album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* then expresses a theology of lament in which the lamentation itself serves a healing purpose for those listening.

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Prologue

While exploring liberation theology themes in Black musician's work (in Dr. Smith-Christopher's class *Bible and the Blues*), it came to my attention that there are many more contemporary artists whose work also touches on these themes. With the advent of American blues, artists like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday permanently shaped the tradition of black music as a pathway to finding meaning and expressing lamentation in our culture of racism, classism, and sexism. This paper argues that hip hop, rap, and Rhythm and Blues (R&B) do the same by looking at the work of a particularly significant singer and songwriter, Lauryn Hill.

The Lamentations of the Hebrew Bible harken back to the trauma of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the experience of the Babylonian Exile, expressing deep lamentation and grief. Learning this history touched me very deeply as someone who grew up in the South, where racism was a clear and present reality for peers of mine who were not white. Growing up, my parents, and especially my dad, a fan of black music such as soul, funk, rhythm, and blues, raised me listening to artists like Lauryn Hill, her music always moved me the most because it directly discusses the story of the Israelites Exodus from Egypt and connects this story with the situation of black people in the US today. These stories from the Hebrew Bible resonate with me deeply- even more so after converting to Judaism in 2021, and *The Bible and the Blues* class helped me to see blues music's connection to the Biblical roots of the practice of lamentation that many fans of the genre already recognized. This connection immediately made me think of Hill, whose music expresses the power of lament in her album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

This project hopes to give more attention to the many other scholars in the field of theology who have discussed the blues' overall significance in black music. I am white and will never understand the experience of racism but having grown up in South Texas in a highly racially and economically segregated city, San Antonio, I was still brought up hearing people at school say that The Civil War was about “state’s rights.” This is just one of many convenient lies about the history of race in our country- like all the lies that make up the ultimate falsehood of White supremacy. This project hopes to provide analysis and give attention to the work of black female musicians and the way their music functions as public theology. The musical, lyrical, and cultural genius of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* deserves to be analyzed academically through a theological lens because her music often carries deep, complex theological messages to the masses in ways that theologians never have. This music *can* and often *does* serve as a lamentation, thus contributing to healing through the recognition of the painful reality that is racism in the U.S.

I. Introduction

According to the noted activist and writer Angela Davis, the history of Black liberation (and this paper argues, liberation theology) is intimately intertwined with African-American popular music, and she specifically recalls famous artists such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday's music.¹ These women are argued to lament the experience of brokenness, evil, and suffering that Black women and Black people as a whole face in the United States (U.S.) at the hand of racist injustices. Although these artists have been considered in previous literature on this topic for their theological lyrics and writing,² the use of images by Lauryn Hill that imagine Black liberation explicitly in terms of her Christian faith stands apart from previous artists, and arguable provide lamentations that illuminate the Black experience. It is apparent that this has only been analyzed seriously by one scholar, Dr. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, whose work has been indispensable to this project and is cited heavily throughout my writing here. In *Creating Ourselves: African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression* (2009), Kirk-Duggan comments that Hill's "Artistry and her gender made her achievements in a male-dominated arena even more important. Dubbed the queen of hip-hop, Lauryn Hill writes songs of spiritual uplift."³

Lauryn Hill's iconic album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* has not only been nominated for five Grammys since its release in 1998, but it is still considered one of the top ten greatest albums of all time by Rolling Stone.⁴ Mary J. Blige is quoted calling *The Miseducation*

¹ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. (New York: Vintage Books by Random House, 1998), 3.

² Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. *Creating Ourselves, African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression*, (Duke University Press, 2020), 212.

³ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. *Creating Ourselves, African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression*, (Duke University Press, 2020), 212.

⁴ Brett Schewitz. "#10 Lauryn Hill, The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill, 1998." Rolling Stone, 500 Greatest Albums of All Time. <https://www.rs500albums.com/50-1/10>.

“one of the greatest albums ever made.”⁵ Lauryn Hill’s identification with the archetypal stories of the Old Testament in her music provides a powerful Theology situated within the Black American musical tradition, and her cultural contributions deserve to be studied. Hill’s music has had a significant impact on individuals from diverse walks of life, both Black and White because of its well-written cultural commentary and spiritual message; but her music does more than that, it laments the reality of racism and sexism experienced by Black people in the U.S.

Methodology

Themes in this paper are examined through the framework of liberation theology, and more specifically Womanist and Black theology, as these are the most relevant sub-disciplines to the subject of liberative theology in Hill’s album *Miseducation*. The goal of examining this topic is to look at *how The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* serves as a contemporary Lamentation that carries the message of Black liberation. As James Cone as written, the music of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, and later, Lauryn Hill’s asks:

What is the meaning of unspeakable black suffering – suffering so deep, so painful and enduring those words cannot begin to describe it? Only the song, dance, and shout- voices raised to high heavens and people swaying their bodies from side to side- can express both the wretchedness and the transcendent spirit of empowerment that kept black people from going under, as they struggled, against all odds, to acknowledge humanity denied.⁶

The methodology for this project will be approached through the perspective of liberation theology, the overarching conceptual umbrella under which Black theology and Womanist theology can be found. Much of the literature, especially Cone’s seminal work *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), treats the early blues women’s musical work in terms of lamentations.

⁵ Laura Checkoway. “Inside *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.” 2008. Rolling Stone. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/inside-the-miseducation-of-lauryn-hill-252219/>.

⁶ James Cone. *The Spirituals and the Blues*. (Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York, 1972). 124.

There are some womanist scholars who have also written on the topic and proved helpful to my research such as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, M. Shawn Copeland, and Kelly Brown Douglas. As mentioned in my introduction, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan's work *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals* (1997) and her essay on Hill's Theo-poetic ethics in the anthology *Creating Ourselves* (2009) both help in examining the theological meaning of Lauryn Hill's *Miseducation*. In looking at this topic, I turn first to ideas of the Black theologians and thinkers who have commented on the meaning of Black liberation from sexist oppression in the context of Feminist thought. The late and great bell hooks, an iconic feminist theorist whose work guides this project, writes, regarding feminist movement and theory, that

to develop political solidarity among women, feminist activists cannot bond on the terms set by the dominant ideology of the culture. We must define our own terms. Rather than bond based on shared victimization or in response to a false enemy, we can bond based on our political commitment to a feminist movement that aims to end sexist oppression.⁷

Here hooks points out the importance of using terms defined by Womanist thinkers that share this political commitment to end racism, sexism, and class oppression. This project will utilize these frameworks and the work of theologians such as M. Shawn Copeland and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan who both contribute writings on this topic that seek the liberation of all - but prioritizes the liberation of Black women. As Cheryl Kirk-Duggan points out in her work *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*, "Womanist theology champions Black women's struggle for freedom,"⁸ which is precisely what makes Womanist theology one of the perfect avenues through which to study the musical works of these iconic Black female artists.

⁷ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. Second Edition. (South End Press Classics, 2000). 47.

⁸ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. 1997. *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*. Orbis Books. 140.

Cheryl Kirk-Duggan defines Womanist theory as “theory that exposes the oppressions of race, gender, and class, and embodies reformation. Such reformation confronts the many complex problems of evil, suffering, oppression, and injustice to reflect a vision of theodicy that champions immediacy and inclusivity.”⁹ This immediacy and inclusivity helps us to see the three-fold oppression of gender, class, and misogyny, and are some of the many reasons theological analysis of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* necessitates the Womanist perspective. Further, this project employs the Womanist perspective because, according to Kirk-Duggan,

the Womanist perspective seeks to make the invisible visible through theology of empowerment. Womanist thought is part of the fight for the rights of all women, of all people, and is sensitive to oppression in narrative and in society.¹⁰

Another discipline relates to these studies as well, namely the study of laments as a literary form in the Bible. Biblical studies analyze the use of lamentations, both from the historical critical perspective and from the liberation theology perspective. Alongside the focus in liberation theology, I will also be focusing on the biblical studies element to make my definitions and arguments about the nature of lamentations. An author who has served as a significant influence for me in this discipline is Kathleen O’Connor, specifically her work *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (2002).

Thesis

With the help of Black Theology, Womanist/Feminist Theology, and Biblical Studies, I argue that naming one’s oppressive reality through lamentations is a healing act, and that musical lamentations in particular act to carry forth their community and help provide healing. The act of acknowledging and lamenting the suffering of a marginalized community is liberative in and of

⁹ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. 1997. *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*. Orbis Books. 137.

¹⁰ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. 1997. *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*. Orbis Books. 139.

itself. This act of lamenting serves, then, as an act of truth-telling, that refuses to deny the pain that is caused by systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism.

Overview

Part I, the Introduction of this paper tackles the problem and scope of my project, asserts my thesis, and provides an overview of each part of my paper. **Part II. Lamentations**, introduces the theological concept of lamentations and provides context to understand the disciplines I employ to categorize how contemporary music like Hill's can be considered lamentations. This section also provides explanation and background on the intellectual anchors of this project who are scholars in biblical studies, liberation theology and more specifically the subdisciplines of liberation theology - both Black theology and Womanist theology. The section **Lamentations** comes in two parts, **Part A: Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible**, focusing on Biblical studies, and **Part B: The Spirituals and the Blues as Lamentations** which discusses the history of Black theology in Black music such as the spirituals and the blues. In **Part III., *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*** is considered through the lens of what miseducation has meant historically and what that concept means for the social, spiritual, and theological meaning in the album. **IV. *Forgive them Father*** presents an analysis of lyrics in the song *Forgive them Father* and how the song has been seen as a continuation of Black music that provides resistance to racism, considering other famous songs such as Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*. Finally, **Part V. *Everything is Everything*** beholds the message of Hill's song *Everything is Everything* and discusses theological themes of spiritual and political transcendence through lamentations found in Black music from the Womanist perspective. **Part VI. The Conclusion and Epilogue** restates

my thesis and then suggests further research on the vast and complex topics covered in Hill's *Miseducation*.

II. Lamentations

IIA. Lamentations of the Hebrew Bible

To begin we must define what is meant by 'lament' and lamentations. Writing in her classic work of 2004, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, Kathleen O'Connor states that... "a lamentation is a witness that comforts the oppressed and the wounded."¹¹ Here, O'Connor explains not only how lamentations functioned in the context of the Biblical Book of Lamentations but also how the act of lamenting is powerful in any oppressive context because it is testament to a painful reality. John Collins explains in *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* that most scholars agree "The book of Lamentations was composed shortly after the fall of the ancient city of Jerusalem when grief was still fresh."¹² The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was followed by forced exile and enslavement, and book contains many descriptions of acts we would now consider through the lens of trauma studies because of the descriptions of intense destruction and violence it contains. Collins argues that "The book of Lamentations is cherished mainly for its poetic expression of unspeakable horror. As such, it has lent itself readily to recurring situations in every century, not least the twentieth."¹³ This is the context of the Biblical book of lamentations, and the context for Black people during and after American slavery. Lamentations say: I am in pain! This is so unfair, unjust, and not right! How could God let this happen? O'Connor continues, arguing that:

¹¹ Kathleen O'Connor. 2002. *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*. (Maryknoll, N.Y, 2002). Online version, Epilogue to Part I.

¹² Collins, John J. *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible and the Deutero-Canonical Books*. Third Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2018. 378.

¹³ Ibid, 380.

Lamentation's angry cries leave pain open for view, like a wound exposed to air and light. Its metaphoric language enables it to embrace other sorrows, other losses, other catastrophes. And its embrace of sorrow runs deep and wide. Lamentations refuse denial and practice truth-telling.¹⁴

This is part of the argument that O'Connor makes in her widely cited work on *Lamentations*, which I build upon. Here, O'Connor states that "Lamentations provides the rudiments of a theology of witness with consequences for personal flourishing, for mission and ministry, and for political reconciliation."¹⁵ Not only do I agree with her but would add that many marginalized communities use these lamentations found in popular music for spiritual, emotional, personal, and communal healing. O'Connor's work in Biblical Studies can be directly applied to works of poetic witness that comfort the oppressed across different genres, such as the spirituals and the blues and subsequently rap and hip hop. Many scholars across different fields and disciplines have recognized the spiritual powers of lamentation. Spiritual teachers Evelyn and James Whitehead argue that while "anger can lead to action in pursuit of justice, lamentation and the expression of grief can open us to genuine hope."¹⁶

Further, the essential nature of the lamentation is privy to the eschatological element in liberation theology: we lament not only for the brokenness of our current world but also out of hope, desire, and longing for the 'world to come.' Eschatology is the study of "last things," which is often thought of in layman's terms as a 'world to come' where God liberates us all from the sins of the world. The beautiful thing about the way liberation theology approaches eschatology is that it demands we fix our sinful behavior and strive for a more equal society *now*, not waiting for God to change things for us, nor placing *all* our precious hope in the afterlife, in

¹⁴ Kathleen O'Connor. 2002. *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*. (Maryknoll, N.Y, 2002). Online version, Epilogue to Part I.

¹⁵ Ibid. Online version, found in the epilogue to part I.

¹⁶ Whiteheads, Evelyn, and James. *Transforming Our Painful Emotions: Spiritual Resources in Anger, Shame Grief, Fear, and Loneliness*. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York. 2010. 5.

heaven, hell, or the world-to-come. Often called the father of liberation theology, Dominican Priest Gustavo Gutiérrez explains:

Therefore, sin is not only an impediment to salvation in the afterlife. Insofar as it constitutes a break with God, sin is a historical reality, it is a breach of the communion of persons with each other, it is a turning in of individuals on themselves which manifests itself in a multifaceted withdrawal from others.¹⁷

Eschatology is an element of theological study that is essential to understanding Christian liberation theology; literally meaning the study of ‘last things, or of endings.’ Eschatology has traditionally been associated with ideas about death, judgment rapture, heaven and hell, and the overall hope for the future ‘world to come,’ where there will be no sin, no exploitation, no betrayal, no evil, and no suffering. Here, Gutiérrez discusses the tension between ‘the world to come’ where there is no suffering, and our world today, where there is immense suffering, but people are persevering and experiencing the redemptive beauty of life, nonetheless. Gutiérrez interprets:

We consider temporal progress as a continuation of the work of creation and explore its connection with redemptive action. Redemption implies a direct relation to sin, and sin—the breach of friendship with God and others—is a human, social, and historical reality which originates in a socially and historically situated freedom.¹⁸

The “work of creation” and “redemptive action” are essential components of any liberation theology, not only that of Gutiérrez, but also that of the Black and Womanist theologians who discuss the eschatology of the spirituals and the blues. In liberation theology and in the music of Lauryn Hill, eschatology takes on an especially hopeful connotation. Music like the spirituals and the blues often adopts this eschatological tone by looking forward to a reality where there is no longer evil, subjugation, and multiple systems of oppression working

¹⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: ORBIS, 1988). Online Version, Chapter 9.

¹⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: ORBIS, 1988). Online Version, Chapter 9.

against Black people. Citing Kirk-Duggan again, “Womanist insight and critique create a way of seeing that is eschatological or goal-oriented and concerns the holistic or total health and liberation of the individual and the communal mind/soul, spirit, and body.”¹⁹ Womanist theology and specifically its eschatology is looking forward to this total health and liberation for individuals, but also for their community. This element of Womanism is present in the theology of Lauryn Hill in the way she hopefully considers liberation not only for the individual, but for the community.

IIB. The Spirituals and the Blues as Lamentations

To truly understand how the legacy of slavery in the U.S. influences Black music today, we must understand the hand the United States has had in the slavery of African Americans, which even predates the founding of the country and the establishment of the Thirteen Colonies. Second, we must understand that the damage caused by slavery is ever-present. The historical and ancestral trauma of American slavery is so relevant to this study on modern lamentations because the after-effects of slavery are ever-present in our society, and there are other forms of injustice comparable to slavery that remain in its place. Incarceration rates, lack of access to good education, lack of access to acceptable medical care, all sorts of forms of discrimination, the death of Black men and women at the hands of police, and others with impunity are some of the many forms of racism Black people and others face today. Injustices that some would argue are merely slavery by another name. The reason I look at the musical works of Lauryn Hill and others through the perspective of lamentations is because of the relative allusions between the lived experience of the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible and that of Black people in the U.S. Not

¹⁹ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. 1997. *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*. Orbis Books. 140.

only were African Descendants enslaved in the U.S. until 1865 but White supremacy and White fragility continue to evade accountability for current systems of inequality against Black people.

As James Cone has articulated, “the blues are statements of and for black people who are condemned to live in an extreme situation of oppression without the political leverage for defining their existence.”²⁰ Cone goes on to explain the context from which the blues materialize, touching on many of the topics at hand in the consideration of Black music as

Lamentations:

The blues gives structure to black existence in a context where having colored skin means rejection and humiliation. Suffering and its relation to blackness are inseparable from the meaning of the blues. Without pain and suffering, and what that meant for black people in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas, there would have been no blues. The blues means sorrow, frustration, despair, and black people’s attempt to take these existential realities upon themselves and not lose their sanity.²¹

Musical lamentations such as the spirituals and the blues deal not only with Black existence post-Reconstruction, but they also naturally lament the legacy of slavery and the harsh grip it still holds on to the lives of Black people through the form of the many remaining institutions of oppression in the U.S. Racism in the U.S is not accurately taught in the majority of U.S public schools, instead favoring narratives that minimize the extent to which Black people were enslaved throughout history. According to a critically acclaimed New York Times project that commemorated the four-hundred-year anniversary of slavery beginning in the U.S. called *the 1619 Project*, “In August of 1619, a ship appeared near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the English Colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were ‘sold’ to the colonists. No aspect of the country later formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed.”²² This little-known knowledge about the origins of slavery in the U.S. is vital to

²⁰ James Cone, *the Spirituals, and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 119.

²¹ James Cone, *the Spirituals, and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 110.

²² The 1619 Project, *The New York Times*, 2019. Accessed Online, March 31, 2022.

understanding the long-term struggle for Black liberation against racism and injustice that continues today. This history isn't well-known in our country because it is intentionally hidden, swept under the rug, and replaced with lessons about 'the great American melting pot,' and how the U.S. is a shining example of diversity, inclusion, and equality. As many of us eventually realize after being misled about the history of racism in the U.S. throughout our education, history is almost always told from the perspective of the 'winners,' while all other versions of history are rendered invisible by those in power. However, this is propaganda, given to American schoolchildren to deny our racist history as a nation. The denial of the continued brutality and injustice faced by Black people and others in our society is explained in part by Karen Teel, in her book *Racism and the Image of God*:

This denial signifies and discloses the contradictions within American law, cultural mores, and practice. Historically, the signers of the Declaration of Independence posited that 'all men are created equal, and it was understood that men referred to white (Anglo-Saxon) male, non-Catholic landowners. Equality was not for African Americans, women, non-Christians, non-Whites, or White men who did not own property.'²³

Thus, it is obvious that not all people in American society are considered equal — in fact, we never have been. During slavery, this denial was specifically about denying the humanity of Black people, and this sort of atrocity was only possible after years of denial which aided in the creation of an elaborate ideology of White supremacy that is formed over time. Karen Teel explains,

The concept of race as we know it today did not exist in the United States (U.S.) before the colonies. Europeans had long tended to see people in groups other than our own as inferior to ourselves, but the idea that these groups would be divided along color lines was a product of the U.S. system of slavery. Slave traders and owners invented the concept of race to justify slavery.²⁴

²³ Karen Teel, *Racism, and the Image of God*, (Palgrave MacMillan 2010), 16.

²⁴ Karen Teel, *Racism, and the Image of God*, (Palgrave MacMillan 2010), 16.

In theology, the concept of *imago dei* means the image of God, specifically that humans are created in the ‘image and likeness of God,’ an idea which comes from the Biblical book of Genesis and the Christian creation story in which God creates humans in the Garden of Eden. The reality of racism which declares only *some* are created in the image and likeness of God, or *imago dei*, has been reinforced over centuries by the institution of the Church, and has miseducated us repeatedly by convincing us that anyone aside from a cis-gendered, heterosexual white man is not made in the image of God. This is a racist conception drilled into us repeatedly, asserting that Black people are not made in the image and likeness of God, especially not Black women. However, Womanist theology uses the concept of *imago dei* (the image and likeness of God) through a liberative lens, as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan argues:

To be created *imago Dei* means all God’s creations stand equal before God and have the possibility of being inactive, loving relationships with God and other human beings... This racist evil was a paradox: a country founded on the belief that all humans have inherent natural rights given to them by their Creator, denied, by its practices and laws, these moral and legal rights to persons of color.²⁵

The concept that Blacks people were ‘other’ and less than human was used to justify slavery. However, these attitudes have unfortunately continued in more insidious ways since slavery ended, especially during Reconstruction. This deep-seeded racist rhetoric continues to this day; however, it is important to understand its history to fully understand the weight of music that discusses these issues. Offering a definition of Reconstruction, Teel says

The years from the end of the Civil War to 1877 are referred to as Reconstruction. As our tattered nation endeavored to rebuild, freed people made various attempts to begin their new lives. Some hoped that African Americans would achieve equality as full members of society, and both the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands or Freedmen’s Bureau, and black churches... however, despite these efforts, most whites did not support Reconstruction’s quest for equal civil rights, and it ultimately failed. Not

²⁵Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1997), 4.

until the formal civil rights movement in the 1960s did African Americans obtain a *measure* of equality under the law.²⁶

It is in the wake of Reconstruction in the U.S. that the blues divas- both Ma Rainey (born 1886, died 1939) and Bessie Smith (born 1894 and died in 1937) emerge as the queens of this burgeoning genre, setting the stage for their contemporary, Billie Holiday. However, this also the period that lynching became a prevalent form of assault and terror, especially in the American South, which becomes an even more important topic in the study of Billie Holiday's music, especially analysis of her song *Strange Fruit*. James Cone explains:

Lynching as primarily mob violence and torture directed at blacks began to increase after the Civil War and the end of slavery, when the 1867 Congress passed the Reconstruction Act, granting black men the franchise and citizenship rights of participation in the affairs of government. Most Southern whites were furious at the very idea of granting ex-slaves (sic) social, political, and economic freedom.²⁷

While my project focuses on the work of renowned Black female musicians and approaches issues of White supremacy, it is relevant to mention that lynching in the Southern half of the U.S. was used to target other groups as well- Jewish people, Chinese people, Mexicans, and other minority groups were all subjected to this horrific, murderous brutality. However, this paper focuses primarily on the influence of lynching in the realm of blues music and subsequently, the later hip-hop of Lauryn Hill. Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland helps racism, and more specifically the oppression of Black women who are marginalized not only on account of their race but also their gender, class, and sexuality (which is the case for all women of color). Copeland helps define racism further in her book *Enfleshing Freedom, Body Race and Being*, saying

it is both an ideology and a set of practices. It does not rely on the choices or actions of a few individuals; rather, racism infiltrates, permeates, and deforms the institutions of

²⁶ Karen Teel, *Racism, and the Image of God*, (Palgrave MacMillan 2010), 28.

²⁷ James Cone, *the Spirituals, and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 4.

politics, economy, culture, and even religion. Racism exploits the interdependence of individuals in and upon society through the formulation of ideology.²⁸

Lauryn Hill's music follows in a long tradition of Black women's music asserting political resistance to misogynoir, the intersectional oppression of Black women specifically for being both Black and female. Although the intersectional discrimination women experience because of multiple identities (race, ethnicity, culture, sexuality) is common experience of all women of color, the term misogynoir, coined by Moya Bailey, refers specifically to the discrimination of Black women.

Copeland then helps define oppression is by looking at it in terms of the origins of U.S. racism and current oppression and marginalization- slavery. "Slavery was a business, a way of life, but most basically, it was a lie. Nearly everyone touched by slavery learned to live with it by learning to live with that lie- a monstrous moral fiction that insulted God and human nature."²⁹ In his towering theological work *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman explains the constant frustration and terror that surrounds the oppressed (both the Hebrew people and Black people in America),

In such physical violence, the contemptuous disregard for personhood is the fact that is degrading. If a man knows that he is the object of deliberately organized violence, in which care has been exercised to secure the most powerful and deadly weapon to destroy him, there may be something great and stimulating about his end.³⁰

This is what makes the work of Hill and others before her so revolutionary. No one should have to live under the threat of violence, but these women did, and they expressed themselves- both their pain and their humanity, despite it. This is the essence of the concept of

²⁸ M. Shawn Copeland. *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 109.

²⁹ Ibid, 26.

³⁰ Howard Thurman, *Jesus, and the Disinherited*. 50-51.

resistance- to resist oppression even under the threat of violence. This threat of violence is what makes bold and deep expression of musical lamentations throughout history so powerful.

Further, this study expands upon Kathleen O'Connor's argument that lamentation refuses denial, practices truth-telling, and reverses cultural and societal amnesia. This includes the lies that our society insists upon telling us about race, most primarily the lie of White supremacy: that white people are better than non-white people, and further, the lie that different 'races' even exist at all- there is only one human race. As Copeland writes, "everyone touched by slavery had to learn with this lie"- the lie that Black people were non-human, that they could be bought or sold like property. It is not often we see anyone tell lies this blatantly racist, but these sentiments still exist all over the country.

The Spirituals

With a clear understanding of how Lamentations functioned for the Israelite people in the times of the Hebrew Bible, one can begin to see how a similar purpose and function could be served through the Spirituals during slavery and Reconstruction in the U.S. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan points out

The spirituals, as narratives, exposed oppression in covert ways and empowered the oppressed, making them a natural for womanist studies. From narratives and from life itself, Womanists seek to identify relevant issues and resources, to uncover discrepancies, to right the wrongs of gender, class, and race oppression, and to make Black women visible.³¹

The spirituals are a genre of music that have developed in direct relation to the experiences of enslaved Black American over generations. They are a collection of "sing songs" and "work songs" or "planation songs" that later developed into the Blues. All forms of Black

³¹ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. 1997. *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*. Orbis Books. 139.

popular music can be traced in some way or another to the spirituals and the blues, for example, what we now call “R&B” is an acronym for rhythm and blues. The spirituals served as a cathartic beacon of communal hope during the time of slavery- an expression of lament. This music has served as a lamentation of the reality of Black people in the U.S., and by acknowledging this reality, calling it what it is, especially when it is done as a community, lamentation becomes a healing act. Individuals and communities cannot pursue and achieve liberation without first lamenting their reality. Since lamentation is a form of public truth-telling, it is a step in the process of freeing oneself to heal from injustice committed against them and asserting their innocence. Namely, lamentations are one of the most basic steps towards healing for oppressed groups, because lamentations expose the truths of systemic injustice and allow people to process that pain without internalizing self-hatred and self-blame (victim-blaming).

The Blues

Blues is a genre of music directly derived from the lineage of African American Spirituals. The Blues often shares the call and response style of the Spirituals as well as the aspect of communal lamentations of shared oppression. Cone defines the scope, context, and backdrop for the blues by saying that they are not only an expression of inexpressible Black suffering, but also that they are cathartic and serve a particular purpose-- towards making meaning. Not only does this definition point to the deeper historical narrative of the blues, but it also extends beyond these historical instances back into the history of the spirituals as well into our present day, to look at rap and hip-hop. In looking as recently as the music of Lauryn Hill, we see how this definition of blues can evolve to fit the present landscape of other genres of Black music. Kelly Brown Douglas asserts that

Blues does not begin with ideas in the head, but with the experience of the body. Blues do not intellectualize those experiences; rather, it passionately expresses them. Blues listen to the call of the body and responds by conveying what the body is communicating, making what is invisible visible... blues expresses the feelings of pain, sorrow, loneliness, and desire as well as joy, happiness, solitude, pleasure, and satisfaction.³²

Here, we see how embodied experience is deeply connected to the expression of the Blues. In fact, the expression of the blues necessitates embodiment. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday's music all can be seen as doing all these things – passionately expressing the experience of the body. From the expression of sorrow to loneliness, to pleasure and joy – we see how the blues allow people to partake in a cathartic lament. Rainey, Smith, and Holiday's music is seen as lamenting the brokenness, evil, sinfulness, and suffering that Black women and Black people as a whole face in the United States (U.S.). However, while these women have been considered in some of the literature on this topic for their theological lyrics and writing, Lauryn Hill's music has yet to be more widely considered by the theological academy for the way it imagines Black liberation very explicitly in terms of her Christian faith and the way her music provides lamentations that illuminate the Black experience.

Kelly Brown Douglas argues that “The blues echoes the biblical tradition of lament. Blues is both a pastoral and prophetic activity. Like the Israelite laments, it allows Black women and men to identify crises that beset the community and recognize their role in perpetuating those crises.”³³ Here, we see the connection made between lamentations, the spirituals, and then later, the blues. Not only do the blues help oppressed people to lament their oppression, but they also provide an avenue to reflect on the nature of their own suffering to make meaning under the threat of violence during slavery and Reconstruction.

³² Kelly Brown Douglas. (Edited by Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims). *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*. 2011. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky. 117.

³³ Kelly Brown Douglas. (Edited by Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims). *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*. 2011. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky. 118.

James Cone helps us begin to focus more deeply on *what* is being lamented in the spirituals, the blues, and later forms of Black music like the rap and hip-hop of Lauryn Hill. James Cone, often referred to as the Father of Black theology, points out in his seminal work *The Spirituals and the Blues*, that the suffering of racism “created a deep religious paradox within women, challenging their faith in the justice and love of God.”³⁴ James Cone discusses his interview with a free Black woman named Nellie, from Savannah, Georgia who expressed the spiritual agony Black suffering created for her faith:

‘It has been a terrible mystery, to know why the good Lord should so long afflict my people and keep them in bondage- to be abused, and trampled down, without any rights of their own- with no ray of light in the future. Some of my folks said there wasn’t any God, for if there was, he wouldn’t let white folks do as they do for so many years.’³⁵

This suffering described by Ms. Nellie and the loss of faith many of her peers have in response is essential to understanding attitudes at play when considering Black theodicy in the face of deep-rooted racism in the U.S. This is highly relevant to the study of theology in Black music such as the spirituals and the blues. I turn now to the main subject of my analysis, the widely noted musical project *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, the ways it laments our current world, and additionally how it makes theological comments it makes on the nature of liberation.

III. The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill

To analyze the musical work, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, one must first understand what Hill means by ‘miseducation.’ The title of Hill’s album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* references an earlier work on the topic of Black liberation, Carter G. Woodson’s 1933 *The Miseducation of the Negro* – in which he argues,

³⁴ James Cone. *The Spirituals and the Blues*. (Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York, 1972). 123.

³⁵ James Cone. *The Spirituals and the Blues*. (Orbis Books, Maryknoll New York, 1972). 123.

If he could see through the propaganda which has been instilled into his mind under the pretext of education, if he would fall in love with his own people and begin to sacrifice for their uplift — if the ‘highly educated’ Negro (sic) would do these things, he could solve some of the problems now confronting the race.³⁶

Hill’s album, then, confronts the lies that Black people have been taught by our racist society and accepted inwardly about themselves, calling for self-love. Hill’s music can be seen as *lamenting* the miseducation of racism. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*’s significance can be analyzed through the lens of blues as music that (according to Cone) “expresses a Black perspective on the incongruity of life and the attempt to achieve meaning in a situation fraught with contradictions.”³⁷ The lies of White supremacy, misogyny and classism are confronted head-on by artists like Hill because she is unashamed of herself, her race, her sexuality, and ultimately her spirituality and theological message. The powerful work of female musicians like Hill resonates with people as a communal lamentation because it delivers messages of freedom, liberation, and love, through the appealing aesthetic medium of music. The way Hill delivers her theological message surely reaches much farther and wider than many womanist theologians have in the past- perhaps because of the attractiveness of her artistic medium.

Lauryn Hill was born in 1975 in South Orange, New Jersey.³⁸ Her album *Miseducation* remains critically acclaimed, in the top ten of Rolling Stones’ top 500 greatest albums of all time.³⁹ “Despite only releasing a single solo album, Lauryn Hill is frequently cited as one of the greatest rappers of all time. From her work in the Fugees in the 1990s to a string of more recent singles, Hill has created her own melodic blend of hip-hop, R&B, soul, and reggae that no other

³⁶ Namwali Serpell. “How *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* Taught Me to Love Blackness.” National Public Radio (NPR). July 7, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/07/1013351060/how-the-miseducation-of-lauryn-hill-taught-me-to-love-blackness>.

³⁷ James Cone, *The Spirituals, and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 103.

³⁸ Touré, Tore. “The Mystery of Lauryn Hill.” Rolling Stone. Rolling Stone, April 4, 2021. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-mystery-of-lauryn-hill-249020/>.

³⁹ Brett Schewitz. “#10 Lauryn Hill, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, 1998.” Rolling Stone, 500 Greatest Albums of All Time. <https://www.rs500albums.com/50-1/10>.

artist has ever been able to execute so flawlessly.”⁴⁰ Hill’s lyrics look both forward and backward, beckoning a new reality into existence while lamenting the present reality of injustice. Her song *Every Ghetto, Every City*, does this especially explicitly, as she sings: “every ghetto, every city, and suburban place I been, make me recall my days in the New Jerusalem.”⁴¹

The musical lamentations in *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* provide healing because the act of acknowledging and lamenting the suffering of a marginalized community is liberative in and of itself. Lauryn Hill is far from the first Black female American artist to channel lamentations into her music, but she is one of, if not *the* most relevant to this tradition of deeply political/spiritual music because her music remains both popular and critically acclaimed today. By means of a theological analysis of her most critically acclaimed album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* – we see how Hill’s music provides liberative lamentations by the means of calling out the miseducation of racism and White supremacy. Lamentations help to lament the multitude of systems of oppression that oppress Black women -namely racism, sexism, and classism. bell hooks points out how “Black women with no institutionalized ‘other’ that we may discriminate against, exploit, or oppress often have a lived experience that directly challenges the classist, sexist, racist social structure, and its concomitant ideology.”⁴² Further, misogynoir exposes Black women to a plethora of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination that often shows them the intimate interconnectedness of all these systems of oppression.

Kirk-Duggan asserts, “society tells an African American woman that because she is not *really* made in God’s image, she is either servile or a sexual thing, either a scrubber of floors or an erotic fantasy. Many people choose to see her Blackness, her gender, and her class to control

⁴⁰ Luke Weidemoyer. “Greatest Albums of All Time: The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.” The First Edition.

⁴¹ “Lauryn Hill – “Every Ghetto, Every City,” Genius (Album: The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.), accessed March 31, 2022, <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-everything-is-everything-lyrics>.

⁴² bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. Second Edition. (South End Press Classics, 2000), 16.

her.”⁴³ This lived experience at the intersection of different systems of oppression is something that Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and then Lauryn Hill, all have in common. This of course informs their music and is why their music is so readily examined through the womanist perspective. It is not only because of Rainey, Smith, Holiday, and Hill’s Blackness that they have life experiences and struggles in common, but also because of their gender. This two-fold oppression of Black women (and all other non-white women, but that is not the topic at hand) is a harsh reality that these women survived and expressed in their music.

Liberation theology deals with miseducation by tackling the evil and suffering in our world while looking to the Bible for the ideals that we strive towards in the fight for Black liberation. The obvious ethical and theological necessity of freedom from both slavery and poverty that began in the Jewish tradition within the Hebrew Bible and continues to be a source of strength Christians today. Gutiérrez explains about the Prophetic Tradition in the Hebrew Bible,

In their rejection of poverty, the prophets, who were heirs to the Mosaic ideal, referred to the past, to the origins of the people; there they sought the inspiration for the construction of a just society. To accept poverty and injustice is to fall back into the conditions of servitude which existed before the liberation from Egypt. It is to retrogress.⁴⁴

Further, Gutiérrez points out the obvious prohibition against slavery in the tradition. Although this may seem obvious to some, Gutiérrez points out the importance of recognizing the explicit ethical mandates that declare slavery’s evil. Throughout history and not only in the United States, but we have also seen the Bible used as justification for slavery. This is what makes the spirituals so powerful as resistance for these teachings, and what makes them a wonderful example of liberation theology. Gutiérrez continues,

⁴³ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. 1997. *Exorcising Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*. Orbis Books. 139.

^{44m} Gustavo Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: ORBIS, 1988). Online Version, Chapter 9.

The second reason for the repudiation of the state of slavery and exploitation of the Jewish people in Egypt is that it goes against the mandate of Genesis (1:26; 2:15). Humankind is created in the image and likeness of God and is destined to dominate the earth. Humankind fulfills itself only by transforming nature and thus entering relationships with other persons. Only in this way do persons come to a full consciousness of themselves as subjects of creative freedom which is realized through work. The exploitation and injustice implicit in poverty make work into something servile and dehumanizing.⁴⁵

Further, Gutiérrez's comment here propels forward some of the most essential assertions of Womanist theology, that *humankind*, regardless of our skin color, is made in the image and likeness of God. Just as Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt and saw themselves as free people made by God to love and serve God, it can be seen in Black and Womanist theology that Black people are made born free, liberated by God, and made in God's image and likeness, subject to no earthly "masters."

A theologian who continues to write cutting-edge work on the theology of Lauryn Hill's music is Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, who explains the importance of Hill's album *Miseducation* by echoing O'Connor's argument about the nature of lamentations,

The music of Hill embodies theo-poetics. The nature of the music and songs speaks to the connections between the divine and the human, both as individual and community... Hill invites us to resist denial and fantasy and see reality- good, bad and the in-between. She wants us to understand the importance of relationships, personal and beyond, particularly in the lives of children and the poor who often have no one to advocate for them. The spirituality of Hill has universal appeal and is rooted in faith and freedom. Her music calls for us to be aware that our actions have consequences, both intended and unintended. With life and the interaction in our families and societies, we have choices to make and service to give. Ultimately Hill presses for nonviolence and being one's authentic and a true self... and she expresses her desire for us to know peace, compassion, and hope without being hypocritical.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: ORBIS, 1988). Online Version, Chapter 9.

⁴⁶ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. *Creating Ourselves, African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression*, (Duke University Press, 2020), 221.

Like the situation of the Hebrew people in ancient times, Hill's music, which is also a poetry of lamentation, doesn't necessarily lead to liberation, but it is made up of an inherently liberating quality: truth-telling resistance. The truth, as seen in the liberation theology of Gutiérrez and the Womanist theology of Kirk-Duggan, is that all people are made spiritually free by their own faith in God. This faith connects the divine with the human, pointing out that humans are not only made in the image and likeness of God (*imago dei*) but that we all have access to this connection to the divine through our own faith that recognizes the divine presence in humanity. This belief in the felt presence of God is one of the things that separates the sentiments of the spirituals from that of the blues. "Unlike the spirituals, the hope of the blues is not located in the concept of heaven."⁴⁷ Rather, Cone asserts.

When the blues people are 'standin' here looking one thousand miles away,' they are looking for a home that is both earthly *and* eschatological. Home would always be more than a plot of land. More than a lover, family, and friends- though it would include all these. Home would be the unrestricted affirmation of self and the will to protect oneself from those who would destroy them. Home would be self-reliance and self-respect. In short, the home could only be freedom, and the will to create a new world for the people I love.⁴⁸

Further, it is this concept of home, freedom, and survival described by Cone that is the essence which I am describing Hill's album *Miseducation* is imbued with. To make the comparison at hand in this paper explicitly clear, the empires that ruled over the Jewish people throughout biblical times are comparable to America oppressing Black people and other people of color in the U.S. in contemporary times. The Babylonian Empire, Greek, Persian and Roman Empires are just a few examples of the Kingdoms that conquered and ruled over the Jews in ancient times. Jewish people were enslaved, mistreated, and overall oppressed. They likely felt deep fear of being persecuted for being Jewish. Parallel to this experience is what Howard

⁴⁷ James Cone, *the Spirituals, and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 126.

⁴⁸ James Cone, *The Spirituals, and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 126.

Thurman says about the constant threat of racism Black people live under; “in such physical violence, the contemptuous disregard for personhood is the fact that is degrading.” Ultimately, this is done to one end, to incite fear in Black people and all non-white people in America, and to make them feel ‘other’ and less than human.

Hill’s perspective often laments the realities of Black people, as did many of the blues artists before her, because her theological lyrics display an unabashed commitment to Black liberation which help create meaning for listeners. Hill even expresses this on her website, writing that,

Like many Black people, I work to reconcile my own generational PTSD. I do my best to Love, pursue freedom in body, Spirit, and mind... and confront. To repress everything in the name of ‘getting along’ is to deny our right to healing. It’s an ugly, distorting, and complicated history at best. We’ve been shaped by it for better or worse. I just choose not to pretend that it’s not there to maintain public approval and gain economic advantage. My true white friends and colleagues and I discuss these schemes and machinations, and the distrust that people of color would naturally have toward such a system and towards those who agree with it. We don’t run from those conversations, we run into them, which is why I can call them friends and colleagues. Within these relationships, I can be my complete self, and not a splintered individual/soul repressing the truth about generations and generations of abuse.⁴⁹

Here, Hill discusses her spirituality in partially Womanist terms, by saying she does her best ‘to Love, pursue freedom in body, Spirit, and Mind’ as well as to confront the repressed past of racism and generational trauma Black people endure. While Lauryn Hill’s identification with the archetypal stories of the Old Testament in her music provides powerful theology situated within the Black American musical tradition and it deserves to be studied for her contribution to the culture, her contribution to the classification of Black women’s music as lamentations must also be emphasized. Hill’s music is so impactful because of its well-written cultural commentary and spiritual message; but her it does more than that, it serves as Lamentations, a resource that

⁴⁹ Ms. Lauryn Hill. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://mslaurynhill.com/>

helps communities begin the process of recognizing this trauma. Here we see how merely the naming of one's reality through lamentations is a healing act, and that musical lamentations in particular act to carry forth their community and provide healing because the act of acknowledging and lamenting the suffering of a marginalized community is liberative in and of itself. This act of lamenting serves, then, as an act of truth telling, that refuses denial of the pain that is caused by systems of oppression. O'Connor explains,

The biblical book of Lamentations and further the act of lamentation *refuses* denial, practices truth-telling, and *reverses* amnesia. It invites readers into pain, chaos, and brutality, both human and divine. It conveys the effects of trauma, loss, and grief beyond tears. Because God's voice is absent, it gives primacy to suffering voices like no other biblical book.⁵⁰

Lauryn Hill's music expresses a theology of lament, in which the lamentation itself serves a healing purpose. In the situation of a people's oppression, for instance of the Hebrew people being oppressed during Babylonian Exile or slavery in Egypt, they were made to feel powerless and afraid. They were terrorized and enslaved- their reality was denied. When people are disenfranchised and discouraged from discussing their experiences of oppression to the extent that discussing and acknowledging these things at all can be dangerous, it is healing to lament these injustices!

IV. *Forgive Them Father* and *Strange Fruit* as Lamentations

Lauryn Hill's iconic song *Forgive Them Father* laments betrayal- both personal and within the business realm. This section analyzes Hill's song *Forgive them Father*, looking at it as a continuation of the tradition of resistance to racism in Black music, particularly Holiday's famous song *Strange Fruit*. Like Hill, Billie Holiday's music draws from her own personal

⁵⁰ Kathleen O'Connor. 2002. *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*. Maryknoll, N.Y. Online.

experiences while simultaneously speaking to the larger, collective social reality of Black people. Like much of the blues, these songs focus on evil, betrayal, death, and the suffering Black people endure. Kirk-Duggan analyzes Hill's iconic song *Forgive them Father*, saying

Hill explicitly names the divine figure in her song that echoes Jesus' words of Luke 23:24. This song 'Forgive Them Father' incorporates the words of Jesus' utterances as he hung on a cross between the two thieves on the place called the Skull (Golgotha). In a ballad-like fashion in a feeling of four, with mainly percussion and guitar accompaniment, Hill intones over and over, 'forgive them, father, for they know not what they do.' The matter of not knowing what we do presses the need to be aware of the danger and false intentions of others. Hill reminds us of the need to work in the community, towards balance, and she questions why people need to be greedy and jealous. She invites listeners to avoid deception, pretense, and lies. One should not lie to others or to God. In naming dyads, she sees as the backstabbing and break of relationships in the stories of 'Cain and Abel, Cesar and Brutus, Jesus and Judas.' Three times she sings the chorus of forgiveness. Above all, in her songs and in this one especially, Hill sings of life, freedom, relationships, and wholeness.⁵¹

Hill exclaims in the song *Forgive them Father*, "if I treat you kindly, doesn't mean that I'm weak, you hear me speak and think I won't take it to the streets? I know enough cats that don't turn the other cheek, but I try to keep it civilized like Menelik."⁵² Hill's commitment to the Christian ethic of pacifism shines through. Hill is saying that although she knows so many people in the rap 'game' who would never 'turn the other cheek' as Jesus says, she tries to treat people with kindness, asserting that this doesn't mean she's weak. About race, racism and the accusations that have been made towards her and her personal views on the matter – Hill proclaims on her website,

Just to clear up an old urban legend that somehow people still believe; I do not hate white people. I do, however, despise a system of entitlement and oppression set up to exploit people who are different. I do loathe the promotion and preservation of said system at the expense of other people, and the racist and entitled attitudes it gives rise to. The lengthy history of unfairness and brutality towards people of color, especially Black people, has not been fully acknowledged or corrected. The expectation is for us to live with abuse,

⁵¹(Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin, Editors). Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. *Creating Ourselves, African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression*, (Duke University Press, 2020), 218.

⁵²Lauryn Hill – "Forgive them Father," Genius (Album: The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.), accessed March 31, 2022, <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-everything-is-everything-lyrics>.

distortion, and deliberate policies, meant to outright control and contain us—like we’re not aware of our basic right to freedom. I resist and reject THESE ideas completely.⁵³

The non-violent ethic of Hill’s music can be seen by comparing the message of *Forgive them Father* by Lauryn Hill to *Strange Fruit* by Billie Holiday. Here, we see the courageousness of Hill’s invoking of Jesus’ otherworldly forgiveness on the cross as a response to the injustices of racism, and *even* the lynching and horrors discussed in *Strange Fruit*. Hill asks for God to forgive those who have trespassed against us, lauding forgiveness, and non-violence even while simultaneously recognizing the impetus for Black people to defend themselves. Cone’s point that “*Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus...* When white Christians realize they can meet Jesus only in the crucified people in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross.”⁵⁴ This is the sort of poetic theology that is built up in our minds as we listen to Holiday’s *Strange Fruit*.

Now, we come to Billie Holiday’s *Strange Fruit*. Despite many urban legends surrounding the writing of *Strange Fruit*, Tracy Fessenden, author of *Religion Around Billie Holiday* (2018) explains that

The lyrics of ‘*Strange Fruit*’ were written in the early 1930s by Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allen), a white Jewish school teacher from New York City, who later adopted the two sons of convicted spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Upon seeing the well-known Lawrence Beitlers photograph of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana (1930) Meeropol became so incensed that he wrote a poem to express what he felt. ‘It... haunted me for days,’ he recalled later. ‘I wrote ‘*Strange Fruit*’ because I hate lynching and I hate injustice and I hate the people who perpetuate it.’⁵⁵

So, although Holiday didn’t write the song herself, she certainly understood and agreed with its sentiment, otherwise she would not have performed, re-crafted and owned it throughout her career. *Strange Fruit* ‘fits the bill’ of lamentations perfectly, because it so explicitly, in the

⁵³ Ms. Lauryn Hill. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://mslaurynhill.com/>.

⁵⁴ Tracy Fessenden. *Religion Around Billie Holiday*. (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018). 155.

⁵⁵ James Cone, (*The Cross, and the Lynching Tree*), 135.

words of O'Connor, 'refuses denial and practices truth telling.' In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone muses,

With its vivid and horrific imagery, deep and disturbing emotions, Billie Holiday's rendition of 'Strange Fruit' forced white listeners to wrestle with the violent truth of white supremacy. No white person could listen to Billie sing this song without feeling indicted and exposed by the sound of truth and contempt in her voice. She made whites look at the brutality they wanted to forget. That is why 'Strange Fruit' was often banned from many radio stations and several clubs would not let Billie sing it, especially when whites walked out, claiming it was not entertainment. Those who stayed to listen were eerily quiet as Billie told the story of lynching in the South. Billie's record company, Columbia, refused to record it, fearing the South would boycott it.⁵⁶

Although many people incorrectly considered Holiday to be unintelligent, and who incorrectly assumed that she couldn't possibly understand the deeply political meaning of her own music, M. Shawn Copeland and Angela Davis tell a different story about the deeper meaning in Holiday's music and *Strange Fruit* in particular. "Billie Holiday called 'strange fruit' her personal protest, not only against lynching but also against the myriad physical and psychic humiliations inflicted daily on Black bodies. While strange fruit emerged from historical and social circumstances, the song evokes resonance with a most potent sacred symbol of Christianity- the cross."⁵⁷ Here, Copeland recognizes the powerful religious imagery of *Strange Fruit* and how it can be related to the deeper struggle for liberation by Black Christians. This haunting song is considered too, by Angela Davis, who sees Holiday's image and status as completely transformed by the song. "She (Holiday) had previously been acknowledged by her contemporaries on the jazz scene as a brilliant and innovative musician, but her performance of *Strange Fruit* firmly established her as a pivotal figure in a new tendency in Black musical culture that directly addressed issues of racial injustice."⁵⁸ James Cone points out that "Holiday's

⁵⁶ Ibid, 136.

⁵⁷ M. Shawn Copeland. *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 121.

⁵⁸ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. (New York: Vintage Books by Random House, 1998), 181.

singing and recording of ‘Strange Fruit’ in 1939 was a cultural event that raised the political consciousness that would hit its high-water mark with Nina Simone’s *Mississippi Goddam*, and Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Goin’ On?* ‘When Holiday recorded it,’ the drummer Max Roach said, ‘it was more than revolutionary.’”⁵⁹

Here, we see how hugely revolutionary Holiday’s performance of *Strange Fruit* truly was- and how successful the song became- despite the way it called attention to one of the most horrifying manifestations of racism in our country’s history. What is most powerful about Holiday’s *Strange Fruit*, however, is how it confronted the complicity of white people in U.S. racism. Karen Teel asserts that “White Christians’ complicity in this brutal history of lynching is undeniable.” And continues in her book *Racism and the Image of God*, pointing out

Klan members were Christians, singing hymns at meetings and burning crosses as warnings to black people. Lynching was often carried out by a few people who left the bodies for passersby to see. But in cases when a trial was held, entire towns would turn out for the execution of a ‘convicted’ black criminal as though it were entertainment. Some even commemorated these events with pictures by sending postcards. One may argue that Klan members were not truly Christians, but the crowds of white people who turned out to witness lynching, sometimes after church on Sunday, were ordinary Christians who failed to notice the profound similarity, captured in Billie Holiday’s song *Strange Fruit*, between Jesus’ body and lynched bodies.⁶⁰

Lauryn Hill’s *Miseducation* and the song *Forgive them Father* laments the evils of racism in a memorable way that left a mark on our culture comparable to the ever-significant *Strange Fruit* by Billie Holiday. However, one of the things that sets Hill’s song apart from other protest songs and songs about ‘the miseducation’ like *Strange Fruit* is its nonviolent message that muses on the theme of forgiveness like the divine forgiveness God gives us – as Hill sings, quoting The Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ James Cone, *The Cross, and the Lynching Tree*, 137.

⁶⁰ Karen Teel, *Racism, and the Image of God*, (Palgrave MacMillan 2010), 30.

⁶¹ Lauryn Hill – “Forgive them Father,” Genius (Album: The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.), accessed March 31, 2022, <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-everything-is-everything-lyrics>.

V. Everything is Everything

This section looks more closely at the way these musical lamentations can enable spiritual and political transcendence through Black music, specifically in the work of Hill's song *Everything is Everything*. Focusing on themes of transcendence and subsequently the religious hope for liberation found in Hill's music, we turn to her song by the existential name *Everything is Everything*. Here, Hill sings "let's love ourselves and we can't fail – to make a better situation. Tomorrow our seeds will grow, all we need is dedication."⁶² These lyrics point to optimism that makes this song such an uplifting anthem for those listening. Not only is this song memorable and iconic, with remaining a present influence on hip hop culture, but it also carries an energy—as Kirk Duggan asserts the entire *Miseducation* album does, of 'spiritual uplift.'⁶³

Writing about *Everything is Everything* for NPR Music in 2021, Namwali Serpell points out that, "as Hill puns in *Everything is Everything*, we can 'develop a negative into a positive picture,' because blackness is truly a blessing, a vast ocean of knowledge, of learning, that we can splash into and swim around in."⁶⁴ Serpell articulates just a piece of the many meanings this song has carried for so many people – especially the Black women listening. Even in *Everything is Everything* Hill points to the systems of oppression that disadvantage Black people in our society from the moment they're born, singing "I wrote these words for everyone who struggles in their youth / Who won't accept deception, instead of what is truth. It seems we lose the game / Before we even start to play."⁶⁵ Hill nods here to those who won't accept the deception and miseducation of White supremacy, the lies of racism that privilege those in power and value

⁶² Lauryn Hill – Everything Is Everything," Genius (Album: The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.), accessed March 31, 2022, <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-everything-is-everything-lyrics>.

⁶³ Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. *Creating Ourselves, African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression*, (Duke University Press, 2020), 212.

⁶⁴ Namwali Serpell. "How *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* Taught Me to Love Blackness." National Public Radio (NPR). July 7, 2021.

⁶⁵ Lauryn Hill – Everything Is Everything," Genius (Album: The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.), accessed March 31, 2022, <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-everything-is-everything-lyrics>.

white lives over Black lives. Hill is basically shouting out to these young people who see the deception and this miseducation. James Cone addresses this reality, lamenting that “deception was present not only during slavery but is still with us today, and it will continue to exist as long as there are white people in power who define law and order according to White supremacy and black inferiority.”⁶⁶

Everything is Everything off Hill’s album *Miseducation* proclaims, “Now hear this mixture, where hip-hop meets scripture, develop a negative into a positive picture.”⁶⁷ Hill’s music continually displays a depth and self-awareness as well as a deeper critical knowledge of scripture and a sensitive and keen understanding of her own spiritual connection to the biblical stories she references in her music.

Liberation theology helps us to see the greater sentiment of liberation we hear in the lyrics of Lauryn Hill’s *Miseducation*. When Hill claims that the song is where we can ‘develop a negative into a positive picture’ she is, in a way, pointing to the inherently transformative aspects of lamenting. While *Everything is Everything* laments the racist systems that hold back Black youth, it also carries a supportive and encouraging message for them that points back to the rich eschatology of some of her music. This eschatological energy found between the lines of her lyrics is where she recognizes her belief in an all-powerful and all-loving God that gives her faith to persevere in a world of evil, injustice, and suffering. Liberation theology helps remind us that the Christian Bible itself has inherently liberative messages, histories, and theologies for us to draw upon. Gustavo Gutiérrez points out the inherently liberative qualities of the theology found in the Hebrew Bible and later, the Christian community. Gutiérrez explains

⁶⁶ James Cone, *the Spirituals, and the Blues* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 119.

⁶⁷ “Lauryn Hill – Everything Is Everything,” Genius (Album: *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.), accessed March 31, 2022, <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-everything-is-everything-lyrics>.

The rejection of the exploitation of some by others is found in the very roots of the people of Israel. God is the only owner of the land given to people (Lev. 25:23, 38); God is the one Lord who saves the people from servitude and will not allow them to be subjected to it again (Deut. 5:15; 16:22; Lev. 25:42; 26:13). And thus, Deuteronomy speaks of "the ideal of a brotherhood where there was no poverty."⁶⁸

Here and in much of the work of liberation theology, we see the character of the Jewish *and* Christian traditions, but in the context of this paper, the Christian tradition to be inherently liberating, and concerned with the care and treatment of others as well as their freedom. This is the same message we see in *Everything Is Everything*, where Hill embraces the mystical spirituality of *imago dei*, insisting that when one takes responsibility for seeing themselves as being made in the image and likeness of God—*imago dei*, an internal transformation occurs. Hill's music embodies this transformation- emboldened spiritually, politically, and socially by her faith, we see the importance of taking responsibility for our own miseducation, meaning, the lies of White supremacy. In doing this, one unlearns the lies that tell us Black people are not made in the image of God. With faith like Hill's, we are encouraged to keep our own faith in Black liberation and the liberation of others who suffer at the hands of systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, and all other forms of hatred. Hill encourages us when she sings "Everything is everything / What is meant to be, will be. After winter, must come spring. Change, it comes eventually."⁶⁹ This reminds listeners that faith is a powerful tool of resistance to systems of oppression, because it is a source of strength and hope that comes from outside us.

⁶⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: ORBIS, 1988). Online Version, Chapter 9.

⁶⁹ Lauryn Hill – "Everything Is Everything," Genius (Album: *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.), accessed March 31, 2022, <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-everything-is-everything-lyrics>.

VI. Conclusion

The music of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and the focus of this project, Lauryn Hill, can be seen through the theological lens of *Lamentation* because their music refuses the miseducation of White supremacy, practices truth-telling, and expresses the pain people experience at the hands of systems of oppression such as racism and sexism. The expression of this pain by members of a marginalized community together, referred to as *Lamentation*, is an essential step in the process of communal grieving and healing. Communal lamentation has been a source of catharsis and healing for many marginalized groups throughout history, beginning with the Jewish people in the Ancient Near East during their enslavement and oppression by various groups. Communal lamentation continued as an act of resistance for Black people during slavery in the United States through their singing of the spirituals and subsequently the Blues and now later expressions in Black music, such as the hip hop and rap of Ms. Lauryn Hill. Hill's album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* is an iconic album that laments the miseducation of White supremacy and racism in our society. This lamentation contains a liberative message of spiritual uplift that can be analyzed through the lenses of Black and Womanist theology as done so in this project which considers the album *Miseducation* to be an example of lamentations which carry messages of Black liberation.

VII. Epilogue

The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill is an iconic album, and I did not even get to scratch the surface of all the issues discussed in its lyrics. For those doing further research on this album's deeper theological meaning and cultural significance to Black theology and liberation theology, I would suggest you analyze two songs that I couldn't discuss here, *Doo Op (That Thing)* and *To Zion (featuring Carlos Santana)*. *Doo Op (That Thing)* discusses sex and dating in

a way none of the other songs on this album do, and it is one of the most popular songs off the album to this day. The complex commentary this song provides on womanhood, friendship, femininity, sexuality, and what can be seen in retrospect as burgeoning ‘hook up culture’ should be examined through the feminist and more specifically Womanist theological lens. Not only does *Doo Op (That Thing)* discuss many of the aspects of these dynamics I listed but it also displays Hill’s attitude and opinions towards some of these issues that may be deemed less than feminist by contemporary (post 1998) standards. Further, the song *To Zion (featuring Carlos Santana)* discusses Hill’s pregnancy and the choice to have her baby. This song deserves to be examined through the feminist lens as well, especially because it has lyrics that have been coopted by numbers of the “Pro-life” (meaning anti-abortion) movement, because they allude to the beauty of the world-to-come that can be experienced through the holy, otherworldly, and scared experiencing of giving birth.

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