



“Da Art of (Abortion) Storytelling”: Listening for reproductive justice in Black popular music

Jordan Ealey

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Black women have approached and continue to approach the topic of reproductive justice with equal parts nuance, care, and play. The candid way in which contemporary Black women rappers express their experiences with abortion and reproductive care sets up the grounds upon which this article stands. In this article, I explore Black popular music by artists such as Digable Planets, Coco Peila, Lauryn Hill, and Noname to examine the presence of reproductive justice and bodily autonomy. I argue that Black musical artists use storytelling as a method to lay claim to their personal agency and provide nuance to the divisive nature of the politics of abortion. Additionally, the focus on storytelling offers individual listeners both healing and communal connection. Drawing on Black feminist theory, hip-hop feminism, and sound studies, I contend that these songs fall into three forms: the anthem, the testimony, and the elegy. I identify these songwriting styles as contributing to a larger history of Black artists, especially Black women, using music as a form of political protest and struggle. These diverse forms offer complexity to “abortion stories” and create a new kind of protest music—one filled with a Black feminist ethic of care and sociopolitical resistance. **Keywords:** reproductive justice, popular music, Black feminist theory, hip-hop, sound studies.

Introduction

In this article, I take up abortion storytelling in Black popular music, specifically focusing on hip-hop. I listen to what I consider to be abortion songs across the Black musical archive—specifically focusing on the genres of R&B and hip-hop. These abortion songs are not merely songs *about* abortion as a concept but are also songs that represent the full and holistic experience of what it means to access personal liberty among institutional enclosure and sociopolitical pressures. Margaret Ronda, Jeannette Schollaert, and Jena DiMaggio characterize the potential of abortion stories as “outlin[ing] a politic, dissect[ing] an emotion, and experiment[ing] with storytelling methods to circulate knowledge about abortion, particularly in contexts of state criminalization and lack of abortion access” (Ronda, Schollaert, and DiMaggio). In considering the form of the abortion story, I put forth an examination in this article of what may be considered the abortion song.

I work against solely evaluating the explicit political messaging of each song. I accomplish this through an examination of what I identify as three different songwriting forms—anthem, testimony, and elegy—to theorize the political and artistic diversity that abortion songs take. I listen for themes of reproductive justice in songs by hip-hop artists Digable Planets, Coco Peila, Lauryn Hill, and Noname to consider the political efficacy of intimate storytelling in service of political change. Following the well-known, second-wave feminist proclamation of “the personal is political”, I listen to the ways each artist employs narrativity as a method of reproductive justice. Grounded in Black feminist theory, sound studies, and reproductive justice, I argue that the songs I examine in this article nuance dialogue, language, and emotions around abortion and can extend and expand what is considered to be protest music, making the case for Black women’s interiority through intimate storytelling as an efficacious avenue for social, political, and communal change.

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Methodological impulses: Reproductive justice and Black feminist theory

Despite the misconceptions of the public representations of the reproductive rights and justice movement, Black feminist theory and Black women have been a central component in the struggle for complete bodily autonomy. In 1990, a group of 16 African American women formed African American Women for Reproductive Freedom, an organization dedicated to supporting the “Jane Roe” in *Roe v. Wade*, a landmark decision by the US Supreme Court that federally protected abortion. Members of the group included Faye Wattleton (the first African American woman to serve as the president of Planned Parenthood) and Shirley Chisholm (the first African American woman to run for president of the United States). Chisholm’s 1995 essay, “Facing the Abortion Question”, acknowledges the tensions around the abortion debate, specifically in many Black communities, that family planning methods such as birth control and abortion are a form of genocide for Black people (395). These observations also recall the criticism playwright and poet Angelina Weld Grimké received from Black audiences in response to her 1916 anti-lynching drama, *Rachel*, in which the titular character questions motherhood as a result of losing her family members to lynching. Grimké was criticized for allegedly advocating for “race suicide”—a criticism she addressed and refuted, according to Black feminist literary critic Koritha Mitchell (59). Acclaimed sociologist Dorothy E. Roberts reports that, during the same time period, fellow playwright Mary Burrill published her play, *They That Sit in Darkness* in *Birth Control Review* (1919). This was the premiere publication of Planned Parenthood. The organization’s founder, Margaret Sanger, had ties to the eugenics movement, which added to the skepticism and schism between family planning methods such as birth control and the Black community (Roberts 66). Due to a confluence of distrust in the Western medical system and a deep tie to Christianity, Black Americans are often represented as leaning conservatively on certain issues such as abortion and LGBTQIA rights.

In this article, I ground my sonic, lyrical, and performance analysis in the framework of reproductive justice to examine some Black women’s experiences with abortion, some of which are shaped through state-mandated policy and religious indoctrination. The term “reproductive justice” is a portmanteau of “reproductive rights” and “social justice” and emerged from a group of 12 Black women at a pro-choice conference in Chicago in June 1994. Loretta J. Ross, one of the founders of the framework and a prominent activist and scholar, explains the tenets of reproductive justice:

Reproductive justice is based on three interconnected sets of human rights: (1) the right to have a child under the conditions of one’s choosing; (2) the right not to have a child using birth control, abortion, or abstinence; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments free from violence by individuals or the state. [...] As a concrete example of intersectional praxis, the reproductive justice framework includes sexual freedom and bodily autonomy, making visible the material consequences of embodiment. (Ross 291)

As a Black feminist concept, reproductive justice examines synchronic systems of oppression and how they create the sociopolitical position that marginalizes Black women. It understands bodily autonomy outside of simply personal choice and, instead, connects it to a larger appraisal of a white, patriarchal, colonial infrastructure that restricts gender minorities through reproductive control but also through economics, healthcare, environment, and more.

Music, storytelling, and protest

This article’s title is borrowed from the celebrated 1999 song, “Da Art of Storytelling” (Part 1) by Atlanta hip-hop duo Outkast. In the song’s hook, they offer a phrase—“*story rap*”—that nearly captures the potency of hip-hop as a creative medium: its capacity for storytelling. As noted by Derrick P. Aldridge and James B. Stewart, hip-hop is more than a genre; it is also a “way of looking at the world” (190). This distinct worldview manifests in a specific form of storytelling through rhyme, flow, intimacy, and honesty. In turn, hip-hop’s ability to transform topical conversations into personal reflections elevates its ability to create connections and have a lasting effect on listeners.

My exegesis is supported by the methods of listening and storytelling as twin pillars of engaging with popular music through the prism of reproductive justice. This focus on storytelling in particular emerges from its prominence in reproductive justice movements as noted by Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger: “Storytelling is a core aspect of reproductive justice practice because attending to someone else’s story invites us to shift the lens—that is, to imagine the life of another person and to reexamine our own realities and reimagine our own possibilities” (49). In her book, *We Are Pregnant With Freedom: Black Feminist Storytelling for Reproductive Justice*

(2025), literary scholar and Black feminist critic Stacie McCormick argues for the significance of Black feminist storytelling practices for “throw[ing] a light on an archive of both injury and survival, a counter to the institutional medical record, and a vision for the future rooted in freedom” (McCormick 4). McCormick introduces her term, Black gynecological publics, which are writing, organizing, and focus groups that advance “racial justice” through advocacy, confronting historical erasure, and affirming Black life (McCormick 13). The songs under examination in this article might be considered a part of Black gynecological publics as they work to reframe narratives around abortion and other forms of bodily autonomy through personal perspectives. Abortion storytelling through song is an exercise in the critical work of imagination, Black feminist self-definition, and collective dreaming.

A crucial aspect of story work is listening. It illustrates the power and principles of performance; while the embodied act of sharing is important, an engaged and attentive audience is equally significant. Telling and listening undergird the history of feminist networks, seen especially in phenomena such as consciousness-raising (CR) groups—informal gatherings where women discussed issues related to race and gender that led to cognizance of white and patriarchal power, which allowed transformative movements to emerge. Black women created their own gatherings that had a similar goal but an intersectional approach. As elucidated by the Combahee River Collective in their infamous “A Black Feminist Statement”: “In our consciousness-raising sessions [...] we have in many ways gone beyond white women’s revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex. Even our black women’s style of talking/testifying in black language about what we have experienced has a resonance that is both cultural and political” (240).

Storytelling takes individual courage but is a collective practice. It encompasses the bravery of sharing, the craft of creating, and a willingness to be attentive and engaged. By both telling and listening to stories, Black women challenge dominant, harmful narratives and build community with one another.

Inasmuch as I am concerned with the creative power, skill, and craft of Black wordsmiths in this article, I also equally consider the storytelling inherent in the sound and performance in the songs that might only be uncovered through listening. As an engagement with music and sound, listening is an efficacious modality. I borrow approaches from sound studies—namely, listening—in order to account for the embodied practices bound up in producing sound and the sensations it creates. I follow Alexandra T. Vasquez’s method of “listening in detail” as she argues that listening is an interactive process (9). This interaction aims not to be prescriptive or to overdetermine sonic enactments, but instead, to engage its possibilities. This recalls Tina Campt’s imperative to “listen to images” as she frames listening as a counterintuitive process wherein one might hear quiet refusal in the otherwise assumed still photograph. Listening, then, unsettles overreliance on visibility and takes seriously the potential for resistance through withholding (Campt 5). Thus, I employ listening as a way to hear what is underneath; what may remain unsaid, but still present. Listening is also an embodied act in and of itself, as it is an active and dynamic process. As a performance studies scholar, I use listening to highlight the constant flux embedded in music and sound. What one hears the first time may shift the next time; new sounds may reveal themselves when revisiting a song in a different period. In this way, too, listening requires an attentiveness to positionality. Like Daphne A. Brooks, I, too, “take seriously the centrality of sound in Black women’s lives as a foundation for developing and sustaining pivotal, profoundly meaningful worldmaking sociocultural networks and forms of intimacy with one another” (Brooks 12). By listening for reproductive justice, I contend that one must acknowledge and understand the overlapping vectors of oppression and identity that impact the sociopolitical position of Black women in order to unlock the sonic possibilities of abortion songs.

Music serves as a critical medium for raising awareness and advancing movements for social justice. As cultural critic T. V. Reed contends, culture “[has] a deeper and more widespread impact on our lives than do political or economic forces” (Reed xix). Though a “cultural impact” may be more difficult to track than its more empirical counterparts, its influence is often deeply felt. This phenomenon brings to mind the general impact of music and sound; sometimes an angular lyric, a cracked note, a guttural scream, or a funky bass line touches you in ways that are indescribable. Its power lies in its ability to activate an inner emotional life. From sorrow songs to spirituals to work songs to the blues to afrobeats to hip-hop and more, Black music is a liberatory medium. For example, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States often relied on music as a practical and useful tool for their political aims, found in the genre of freedom songs. Reed additionally explains that freedom songs are communal experiences, created intentionally to foster a collective investment in political struggle (Reed 14). Additionally, the songs under consideration in this article may not all fall within the normalized category of protest music. Dorian Lynskey acknowledges the problematics behind the term, outlining the pitfalls of protest

music being “didactic, crass, or plain boring” but simultaneously offers that “the best protest songs are [...] living conundrums”, existing outside of a particular temporal scope (xiv). I read, listen to, and situate the songs here within a continuum of protest music.

Tracing reproductive justice through popular music is understudied and undertheorized in (Black) feminist theory, music, and Black studies. Thus, my study is meant to expand our collective understanding of what constitutes reproductive justice alongside a more holistic appraisal of the ways that Black women have employed music as a site of both intimacy and politics. Singers and musicians have employed music to specifically write about their reproductive experiences in songs such as Sweet Honey in the Rock’s “Ella’s Song”, Loretta Lynn’s “The Pill”, Cyndi Lauper’s “Sally’s Pigeons”, Whitney Houston’s “Miracle”, Sinéad O’Connor’s “My Special Child”, and Ani DiFranco’s “Baby Roe”, to name a few. Influential pop music critic and author Ann Powers, during a guest appearance on the podcast *Switched on Pop*, notes that exploring abortion in popular music began to emerge around the time of Roe v. Wade’s ruling in 1973. Many of these songs were anthems coming from the women’s liberation movement and not necessarily chart-topping hits (Sloan and Harding). Acknowledging that not all of the artists themselves may align with the reproductive justice movement or abortion rights writ large or even consider themselves to be within the genre of protest art, I use the capacious and holistic framework gifted to us by reproductive justice to hear its possibilities.

Black women, in particular, have been crucial to the history of using music in service of cultural, political, and social change. Classic artists such as Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone, and Aretha Franklin, to more contemporary creators like Jamila Woods and Rapsody, lend their songwriting skills and vocal talent as the creative arm for ongoing struggle. Music scholar Shana Redmond brings light to a lesser known but deeply felt history of everyday Black women who were responsible for turning the spiritual “We Shall Overcome” into a civil rights anthem (142). Salamishah Tillet offers “sonic black radicalism” as she encounters it in the music and sound of Nina Simone, who became “a sonic ideal for hip-hop artists who want to engage in aesthetic experimentation and launch a sociopolitical critique against the long history of black disenfranchisement” (120). Though these are only a few examples, they demonstrate the impact that Black women have had in shifting and shaping public culture through music and sound.

By focusing on hip-hop and reproductive justice in this article, my work here is indebted to the perspective of hip-hop feminism, a term coined by renowned journalist and academic Joan Morgan. Hip-hop feminism refers to a specific analysis of race, gender, and sexuality through a lens of hip-hop. It oscillates between stringent, incisive, and precise critique of the male-dominated, patriarchal viewpoint in the genre while also being moved by cultural, sonic, and emotional power of the music itself. Acknowledging the complex racial and gender politics that shaped the burgeoning hip-hop generation of which she was a part, Morgan states that she “needed a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays” (Morgan 59). The impetus to “fuck with the grays” underscores the ambivalent politics often associated with abortion; pro- and anti-choice legislators, politicians, religious leaders, and civilians want to push a black/white dichotomy concerning abortion, usually concerning what they consider to be the moral failings of the abortion seeker and those who assist them. But by listening and analyzing abortion songs through the lens of reproductive justice, they live in the gray. Since Morgan’s original 1999 publication, hip-hop feminism has grown and expanded. Another significant intervention in hip-hop feminist theory is from Gwendolyn D. Pough. Pough introduces the concept of “bringing wreck” which she describes as how “Black participants in the public sphere [...] [reshape] the public gaze in such a way as to be recognized as human beings—as functioning and worthwhile members of society—and not to be shut out of or pushed away from the public sphere” (17). This concept largely resonates with Black women’s public and political participation, but specifically with reproductive justice movements and the songs in this article. As a genre of popular music, hip-hop is itself being created and shared in public. And as Black women perform in and for the public, they are able to take up space and demand to be both seen and heard.

I now turn to the three song forms of the anthem, the testimony, and the elegy to examine some of the diverse ways that reproductive justice emerges in Black popular music. In analysing the songs “I Am Jane Roe” by Peila, RyanNicole, and Aima the Dreamer; “La Femme Fetal” by Digable Planets; “To Zion” by Lauryn Hill; and “Bye Bye Baby” by Noname, I demonstrate the purpose and power of intimate and personal abortion storytelling through music as an efficacious method for representing Black women’s reproductive experiences, and as both loud and quiet demands for bodily autonomy.

Anthem

In 2022, Peila, Aima the Dreamer, and RyanNicole dropped their single “I Am Jane Roe”. Unfortunately, the single was timely as the reproductive justice movement experienced one of the largest blows in decades when the United States Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022 and devastated millions of women, girls, and gender minorities. Twenty years prior, “La Femme Fetal” by Dignable Planets provided another sonic and lyrical perspective on the abortion anthem. With their signature jazz sound and smooth flow, the song mixes “story rap” with an explicitly political imperative to be inspired to transform narrative into social action. These two anthems most obviously align with how protest music is typically understood: an unequivocal message in support of a specific ideology, action, or both. Redmond describes anthems as songs that “demand something of their listeners”. She continues that anthems “require subscription to a system of beliefs that stir and organize the receivers of the music”, noting that “the vision of freedom represented in the song’s lyrics and/or history are worth fighting for in the contemporary moment” (Redmond 2). Both “I Am Jane Roe” and “La Femme Fetal” epitomize these contentions, as each song explicitly proclaims its politics, which I contend is meant to galvanize listeners into advocacy and action.

Dignable Planets is a hip-hop trio that first came together in 1987 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Comprised of Ishmael “Butterfly” Butler, Mariana “Ladybug Mecca” Viera, and Craig “Doodlebug” Irving, the group is known for their unique sound, which made way for alternative hip-hop. Though their most well-known song is their 1992 hit “Rebirth of Slick (Cool Like Dat)”, Dignable Planets does not shy away from exploring history, theory, and politics in their music. Other songs from the group, such as “Black Ego” (1994), incorporate politics, specifically through spoken word. Sonically, their music is well known for what musicologist Justin A. Williams characterizes as “jazz rap”, though he notes that the term reinscribes a dichotomy between high and low culture that divides hip-hop music (437). Their music, with its distinctive bebop influence and intelligent poetic lyrics, feels like a natural fit for exploring the “gray” politics of reproductive justice.

“La Femme Fetal” begins with an abortion story. From the song’s first measure, the group’s signature jazzy sound is heard: a smooth blend of a trumpet and bass ushers us into the song, giving way to the poetry to come. Butterfly begins his verse:

It was 8:49 on a beautiful ninth day of July
There was not a cloud to speak of, so the orange sun hung
Lonely in the sky

These bars set a gorgeous sunny scene in a slight juxtaposition with what the song’s speaker (assumed to be Butterfly since he is named in the lyrics) is going to experience over the course of the song. He tells us about Nikki, who has discovered that she is pregnant, as Butterfly raps:

Due to our youth and economic state, we wish to terminate
About this we don’t feel great, but baby that’s how it is
But the feds have dissed me
They ignored and dismissed me
The pro-lifers harass me outside the clinic
And call me a murderer, now that’s hate

Here, Butterfly outlines a set of issues that abortion seekers often face. One of the difficulties that often comes up when someone is considering whether or not to end their pregnancy is age. If a young person faces an unplanned pregnancy, their major concern (and the concern of those around them) is their level of maturity and financial situation, which Butterfly gestures to with the lyrics “[d]ue to our youth and economic state”. Furthermore, the manufactured moral panic by anti-choice politicians and lobbying groups about children and teens seeking abortion, violating so-called “parental rights”, distracts from the issue that women and gender minorities’ bodily autonomy is being completely compromised. Feminist critic Jessica Valenti reminds us that, by zeroing in on minors, “[anti-choice] legislators hope that feigning concern over children will distract Americans from the terror their laws are causing” (Valenti 106). It’s a similar issue as the attacks against transgender youth in the United States and the restricting of their access to gender-affirming healthcare and participation in recreational and competitive sports. To represent the complexity outlined here, Butterfly does not deliver it in a way that is

too “on-the-nose”. Rather, through his concise poetic lyrics and centering Nikki’s story, we can understand and empathize.

Another thing that Butterfly points to in his verse, through Nikki, is how abortion seekers are harassed outside of clinics. They refer to Nikki as a “murderer”. This aligns with the reality of the rhetoric of the anti-choice protesters that often refer to abortion as murder. This very emotion-based rhetoric serves to make potential abortion seekers fearful of going through with the procedure, as it may make them believe that what they’re doing is akin to taking a life. Nikki addresses this inner turmoil, saying that she is in “a mental state of debate”. Thus, Butterfly is catching her now, right as she and her partner are considering whether or not they will go through with the abortion. Offering comforting words to Nikki, Butterfly explains the political motivation behind these decisions through lyrics such as: “They don’t really give a damn about life, they just don’t want women to have a right to choose”. Butterfly questions the “life” in the so-called “pro-life” movement, as many people who oppose abortion are okay with doing so, even when the procedure could save the life of a mother or parent.

As mentioned above, rapping about abortion is not new. But in contrast to other songs in this article, “La Femme Fetal” is the only one whose abortion storytelling is delivered exclusively by men. Though Ladybug Mecca forms part of Digable Planets, her voice is not heard in the song until the very last post-chorus, a musical characteristic ubiquitous to their sound. However, she does comment on abortion rights in another song of theirs, “Examination of What”, in which she proclaims:

Peace, this is Mecca the Ladybug and I’m sayin’ though
What is really what if I can’t even get comfortable
‘Cause the Supreme Court is, like, all in my uterus?

These brief yet powerful lyrics underscore a significant question regarding bodily autonomy, as she reveals that the laws against abortion are impeding her ability to live her life. This also aligns with Butterfly’s explicit naming in “La Femme Fetal” of Supreme Court justices David Souter and Clarence Thomas, who were among those who voted in favor of *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey*. Digable Planets’ explicit naming of political issues through storytelling brings the juridical to a human level. Like Redmond’s aforementioned definition of the anthem, “La Femme Fetal” demands its listeners’ attention and awareness.

“I Am Jane Roe” by Peila, Aima the Dreamer, and RyanNicole takes a different approach to the same goal of advocating for reproductive justice. With its blaring beats and catchy hook, thanks to captivating production by Shy’an G, the song could fit in just as well on a party playlist as at a protest, which feels precisely like its goal. One hears the influence of the hyphy sound of the Bay Area, where all of the artists on the song are based, though slightly compressed, so as not to take away from the importance of the song’s messaging. The hook’s lyrics are able to capture the aims of the reproductive justice movement succinctly and infectiously:

—Lifting up every voice
Our bodies, our choice
Our rights and wombs
don’t belong to the courtroom

Each rapper says “I am Jane Roe” individually, then they collectively end the hook saying it together. In my view, this choice functions almost as a sonic idiom for the twinned individual and collective experiences that abortion seekers (and women and gender minorities’ reproductive experiences in general) have. Though each encounter is idiosyncratic and private, it is not isolated. It recognizes, too, that any one of us could and likely might “be Jane Roe” at any point: one never knows if and when they will need any type of reproductive care, even abortion.

The use of “lifting up every voice” in the hook also brings to mind “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, the hymn by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson that would eventually become the African American national anthem. I contend that this, in turn, roots the song in an explicitly Black feminist ethic.

Peila has stated part of her mission “is to help transform this society into one in which no human is ever exploited, oppressed, or mistreated in any way from a place of joy, and celebration of life”. “I Am Jane Roe” is a track that Peila has characterized as addressing a dearth in hip-hop around reproductive justice. She remarked: “And when we do try to address it [...] it gets dismissed—‘That’s corny’ or ‘That’s weak’, or whatever”, echoing Lynskey’s aforementioned sentiments around why some artists are wary of characterizing their songs under the umbrella of protest music (Harshaw). This also aligns with observations previously made by Black feminist critic

and prominent hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose, who notes that commercialism limits hip-hop music's topics for storytelling (12). Explicitly characterizing political messaging, especially issues that affect women and gender minorities, and characterizing issues that affect women and gender minorities as "corny" or "weak" is another way to consolidate patriarchal power and center cisgender, heterosexual, and male perspectives as the only perspectives that matter. Unlike "La Femme Fetal", "I Am Jane Roe" is not so interested in the specifics around one person's experience; rather, the three rappers make the topic of reproductive rights something that is collective. This is heard in the hook where, in addition to the main lyrics, each woman says, "I am Jane Roe". It speaks to how reproductive rights are something that affects a large majority of women, femmes, and gender minorities, and in the wake of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, it connects how widely felt this issue is, too.

Delving deeper into the song's content, the rappers all cleverly blend in activist slogans, phrases about empowerment, and civil and human rights icons within the context of reproductive rights. In the first verse, the lyrics "I'm every woman" appear, signaling the 1989 hit by Chaka Khan (later covered by Whitney Houston), which is widely agreed to be a feminist anthem due to its empowering lyrics. People such as Ruth Bader Ginsburg are also mentioned in the song, as she is considered a feminist heroine who is known for standing up for women's rights.

I also want to pause briefly on a musical technique used in "I Am Jane Roe". A commonly used sonic motif in trap—a subgenre of hip-hop, which originated in the South of the United States—is the adlib. The adlib occurs when rappers use sounds or short phrases to punctuate a lyric and serve as its own internal hype. This appears in the song's first verse: "Oh, they wanna strike down Roe?" is asked in the background of the verse. Though the question can be heard as rhetorical, it makes the issue colloquial and quotidian, further adding to the song's appeal as both a feminist anthem and pop hit.

The initial release of "I Am Jane Roe" was accompanied by a social media challenge (blackgoldmovement). Utilizing the hashtag "#IAMJaneRoe", participants were encouraged to record themselves adding a verse to the song's instrumental and encouraged to donate to SisterSong, a Black-led, women of color organization centering reproductive justice. This component adds to the song's goal of being rooted specifically in activism and solidifies its status as a bona fide anthem.

Testimony

Carlos Santana's melodic, warm, and shimmery guitar riffs are the opening strums that set the tone for the joyous narrative to come. A steady military march unfurls slowly on the record to accompany Santana's guitar, grounding the ethereal sound, like a fantasy crashing into reality, but as a complement more than an interruption. The song, "To Zion", arrives in our collective ears as a celebration of motherhood, adding another layer to bodily autonomy and reproductive justice. Like "I Am Jane Roe", Hill's "To Zion" is considered an anthem (69). I choose, however, to listen to the song as testimony, where Hill employs songwriting and singing to tell her story and deliver her "why". Oftentimes, in mainstream conversations, the conversation concerning reproductive rights and justice begins and ends at abortion, mostly because it is the most politically incisive. But focusing on Hill's song speaks to another, just as important, aspect of reproductive justice: the right to have a child.

The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill is nothing short of a cultural behemoth. Its lead single, "Doo Wop (That Thing)", topped the Billboard Hot 100—in the process, it made Hill the first rapper to debut at number one on the charts, and it was the first debut single to premiere at number one. The song also garnered nearly universal critical acclaim. It won Best R&B Vocal Performance and Best R&B Song at the 41st Grammy Awards. The album itself is widely considered one of the greatest albums in popular music history. Hill became the first hip-hop artist to win Album of the Year (and until 2025, she was the sole Black woman to win the honor), *Rolling Stone* listed the album on its 500 Greatest Albums of All Time, and it came in at number two on NPR's series *Turning the Tables: The 150 Greatest Albums Made By Women* ("The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time"; NPR). This list is but a short recounting of the honors this album received; it was culture-shifting.

In the tradition of many women musical artists such as Joni Mitchell, Aretha Franklin, and Carole King, *Miseducation* is largely personal and confessional, pulling from Hill's life experiences. "To Zion" set the stage for what Hill would explore in this album, as it was one of the first songs she wrote and produced for it. I listen to this song as a testimony. I draw specifically from the tradition of Black religious practice, where the delivery of testimony is a significant aspect in the Black Christian church, especially in the United States. Many also refer to this practice as testifying, and entire sections of church service might be dedicated to it. Cultural historian

Jerma A. Jackson notes: “[...] testifying did not eliminate the call-and-response that ensued between leader and congregation. Rather, it made the call-and-response structure more fluid and spontaneous. [...]. Testifying encouraged individuals to display the divine gifts they possessed [...]” (22). It also recalls the aforementioned work of consciousness-raising groups as theorized by Combahee River Collective, where Black women’s unique way of testifying helps to foster and nourish community. I argue that “To Zion” mirrors this process of testifying and delivering testimony; though the act of having a recorded and produced song might eliminate the spontaneous quality, the feel of the song aligns with hearing testimony in a church service. According to Hill’s collaborator and friend, Jayson Jackson, the record company, especially producer Tommy Motolla, met the song with an icy reception because “they wanted a Fugees record without the guys”. This is referring to Hill’s membership in The Fugees with Wyclef Jean and Pras. Jackson remembers Hill being devastated by the reaction to this song because “[t]he record was so personal to her” (Morgan 69). When one listens to the song, the profound emotional depth is apparent and poignant. Hill’s testimony begins:

Unsure of what the balance held
I touch my belly,
overwhelmed
By what I had been chosen to perform

These lyrics do not simply tell us about Hill’s physical condition, but also place them within a divine, spiritual context; she is not just pregnant, she was *chosen* to be a mother. Going further in the verse, Hill lays out her circumstance:

Woe this crazy circumstance
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

Here, Hill explains that she was visited by an angel, who told her of her destiny to have a son. But people in her life encouraged her to end her pregnancy, especially to keep her burgeoning career intact. Prior to writing and producing the record, Hill was not public about her pregnancy. It was not until the news was outed by radio personality Wendy Williams that it became known, and many in her life were “less than supportive” (Morgan 68). In this case, then, “using your head” is not so subtle coded language to describe the fact that others advised Hill to get an abortion. But Hill refused, choosing to “use [her] heart” and follow the path to motherhood.

To read and listen to this as a feminist could present a multitude of contradictions, as Hill’s testimony could easily be situated within an explicitly pro-life/anti-choice narrative. But I argue that a framework of reproductive justice suggests a more complex listening. In the United States, Black motherhood is constantly under attack and policed through juridical, legal, medical, and interpersonal mechanisms. In her instructive and foundational essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”, literary critic Hortense Spillers argues that Black motherhood is important in understanding Black female ontology. She writes: “even though the enslaved female reproduced other enslaved persons, we do not read ‘birth’ in this instance as a reproduction of mothering precisely because the female [...] has been robbed of the parental right, the parental function” (Spillers 78). Enslaved Black women were systematically alienated from their children and, thus, not given an opportunity to be mothers to them.

The stereotype of the welfare queen, a “controlling image” as named by Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, is pervasive in the media and public representations of Black mothers as lazy, irresponsible, and unfit (Collins 80). Jennifer C. Nash looks to the contemporary moment—specifically one that took shape following the emergence of Black Lives Matter—and names this as “Black mothers living *in crisis*” (4). Given this context, then, one might be able to see ways in which the choice to become a mother for Black women is, in itself, a powerful act of agency and resistance.

In “To Zion”, the hook itself is simple: “Now the joy of my world is in Zion”. Zion is both the name of her first child and has a biblical meaning, as it refers to a summit in Jerusalem and signifies the kingdom of heaven. The song’s structure mimics, perhaps, the testifying one finds in a Black church service. As listeners, we bear witness to Hill’s testimony about her decision to choose motherhood and fully wield her bodily autonomy and personal

agency. The song's outro, which comprises nearly three minutes of the six-minute recording, includes a church choir repeating "Marching to beautiful, beautiful Zion". In tandem, Hill marches to her own lyrical drum as she continually sings "my joy" over and over until the song's end. We hear Hill's ecstasy in reveling in her newfound love for her son Zion and her role as a mother, as well as the vocal imperfection shown through the cracked notes. In my view, these imperfections are not the mark of bad technique, but rather an authentic performance of testimony. Like the Black politics of abortion, Hill, too, remains a contradiction.

Elegy

"Bye Bye Baby" by Noname has a quality that diverges from the sonic landscape of Hill's celebratory, joyous testimony. Noname's introspective and poetic rapping demonstrates what Nash characterizes as "*how Black feminists write now* [...]" in a beautiful voice, one that we find essential to staying close to what has become our central preoccupation: loss" (Nash 5). By acknowledging the sonically resonant and soul-tugging magic of her lyrics and sounds, Noname elucidates and embodies how, for Black women and gender minorities, "[b]eauty is not a luxury" (Hartman 60). The careful craft of their melodic storytelling highlights the skill of Black feminists' narration. How Black women *rap* now is beautiful and painful. As a Black feminist listener, I find myself caught between veneration of Noname's pen and grief at the loss.

"Bye Bye Baby" is a part of Noname's 2016 mixtape, *Telefone*, which was also the Chicago rapper's solo debut. *Telefone* is a gorgeous collection of songs that epitomize Black girlhood and nostalgia; it is also a beautiful love letter to the city that raised her. With her signature euphonic rapping, "Bye Bye Baby" functions as part elegy, part lullaby. I listen to the record as elegy, aligning with Fred Moten's contention of elegy as "the mechanism by which hopelessly fragile singularity [...] is regenerated in the form of a call to the spirit of a totality that is no longer, that has perhaps never been, one" (99). I understand Moten's argument as grief at the splintering of totality as "singularity always implies an end, a break, a radical interruption" (99). This break is heard in "Bye Bye Baby" as we listen to the separation of the abortion seeker and the unborn child.

The storytelling in the song mirrors what we in theatre might call a "two-hander", where the cast of characters is a would-be mother having a conversation with her could-have-been child. I hesitate to personify the fetus, keenly aware that conservative attacks on abortion depend upon the ability to argue for a fetus to be a human. However, just as I listen to Hill's joyful testimony following her decision to carry her pregnancy to term and become a mother, I offer Noname's speaker a similar Black feminist nuance that she experiences a wide range of emotions alongside feeling her grief fully. Noname herself treats the topic with complex care. She notes in an interview:

[P]eople think I'm talking about my own personal experience. That's not what that song is. It's a personification of a mother who has had an abortion, and the baby. What I tried to do is make a love song for them. I feel like whenever I hear people talking about abortion, they typically take the love out of it, as if it can never be a loving act—as if it's only done out of hate or desperation. I know women who have gone through that experience. And there hasn't been like, a song for them, or a moment of catharsis and healing for them in music [...] especially not in hip-hop. I want them to be able to have this because there's been songs that have been healing for me in other ways. That shit was just important to me as a woman, as someone who cares about these women. (Noname and Fitzgerald)

I quote this at length because it beautifully demonstrates both Noname's intentionality behind the song and the complexity with which she understands this topic. Categorizing this as a love song, one that is rooted in "catharsis and healing", emphasizes the holistic and comprehensive framework of reproductive justice.

The opening piano notes slowly usher us into the song's first verse, which is from the abortion seeker's perspective. The first few bars feel like we are almost in a dream-like state, as she reminisces on times with her partner, what led to her pregnancy, noting that her "tummy almost got ready / for biddy-baby spaghetti and teddy bear in my window now". Later in the song, we hear from the unborn child who comments on the almost-mother:

Ask me why she said goodbye [...]

Ask me why she hesitated, almost waited, waiting room

[...]

Some give presents before they're even ready
I could see that she loves me
I know her heart is heavy

Here, the unborn child extends grace and compassion to the abortion seeker by saying that they understand the decision that has to be made, even though it is one that hurts. Following Noname's intention to write an abortion love song, this exchange feels like a healthy breakup, in which neither party wants to go through with it, even if they know it's for the best.

There is a strategic dissonance between the sound and the lyrics; the lullaby-like quality underscores the abortion seeker's hesitation and lament about their choice to have an abortion. The song's structure does not reflect the widely accepted form of many songs in contemporary popular music, including hip-hop. There is no clear delineation between the verses, separated by a clear hook, perhaps followed by a bridge, and concluding with an outro. Noname gestures to this dissonance in an interview with Grant Brydon: "[...] I just find melancholy in music that makes me happy because I listen to it so much. I think I just like happy beats generally, I don't really like to listen to instrumentation that's innately sad sounding all the time" (Noname and Brydon).

Listening to the "happy beat" also serves to deepen the perspective of the abortion seeker. Part of her lyrics are:

bye bye blue
somebody let the yellow in
I'm gonna fall in love again.

In some ways, this creates a call-and-response between Hill and Noname. Inside the abortion seeker's proclamation of "I'm gonna fall in love again" on Noname's "Bye Bye Baby", we might hear echoes of Hill's own declaration, upon the arrival of baby Zion, that she'd "never been in love like this before". Further, there are clear religious motifs in both songs. In "Bye Bye Baby", at one point the abortion seeker reaches out via lyric to the unborn child, asking them to "help [her] testify". Amileah Sutliff notes: "Noname made a healing embrace for those who need to be lifted out of the continuing scars of oppression in their daily lives, and an urgent alarm at the systematic loss of beautiful human lives for those with the privilege to ignore it". Noname's song cannot simply be reduced to a problematic personification of fetuses that reinforces conservative, Christian nationalist arguments around viability; instead, her elegiac lullaby initiates a dialogue between the would-be parent and their would-be child, promising their unity in another world "on the lonely road where happiness leads us".

Conclusion: The story continues

The stakes for abortion storytelling and working toward both fighting for reproductive justice and bodily autonomy and destigmatizing could not be higher and more urgent. At the time of writing, President Donald Trump has signed five executive orders targeting reproductive rights, from rescinding Biden-era protections to reinstating the Global Gag Rule, which restricts international non-governmental agencies that receive money from the United States from obtaining any services, information, or referrals for abortion (National Women's Law Center). The Global Gag Rule and Trump's resulting reinstatement of it reeks of imperialism, a sobering reminder that the United States' status as a global superpower imbues it with the power to control the fates of abortion seekers all over the world. Candi Miller, Amber Nicole Thurman, Portia Ngumezi, Adriana Smith, and Tierra Walker—Black women who have perished from lack of access to reproductive care— never got to share their abortion stories. Instead, their abortion stories became national headlines, evidence that the Post-Roe restrictive abortion laws are actively killing people. As Valenti writes: "All abortions create something. Paths forward, lives lived, connections made. Some are hard, some are beautiful, but all are chosen" (Valenti 9). But what happens when "choice"—that thing we are all allegedly promised—is significantly limited by policies out of your control? Black women primarily bear the brunt of the brutality and cruelty inflicted upon women and birthing people following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. When we listen to their abortion stories, I contend we are affirming the value of Black women and gender minorities' lives.

Music remains a critical and accessible medium through which Black women and gender minorities express themselves, assert their personal agency, and challenge sociopolitical realities. In the span of this article, I have argued that the songs I've referenced by Black musical artists are diverse and complex representations of bodily

autonomy and reproductive justice. By centering Blackness in this global conversation, scholars, artists, and thinkers are forced to account for contradictory political conditions and less overdetermined responses to those same conditions. I demonstrate the powerful work of Black women's musical storytelling to aid in the ongoing struggle for full access to reproductive freedom. Though stories and songs cannot themselves change social and political contexts or instantiate liberation, they *can* foster space to share experiences, challenge racial and gender oppression, and nourish community with other Black women and gender minorities. And isn't that a kind of liberation?

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