

Social Psychological Violence through the Control of Musical Freedom

In his examination of the systems of abuse that threaten the lives and well being of African Americans, theorist David G. Gil designates six categories of human needs, each of which were violated in Antebellum and Jim Crow America. Gil's explanation of social-structural violence links oppressive regimes throughout history. Gil posits that in order for humans to thrive, they need both their biological needs to be met as well as "mental processes of thought, abstraction, memory, *reflection, imagination, language and communication*" (25). These needs are closely linked to social-psychological needs, defined by Gil as "stable, meaningful social relations and a sense of belonging to a community, involving mutual respect, acceptance, affirmation, care and love, and opportunities for self-discovery and for emergence of a positive sense of identity" (26). Without the ability to express creatively, exercise imagination, and communicate openly, one's capacity to function at their highest potential is compromised. Since the first enslaved people were brought to America in 1619, African Americans have used music, dance, and rhythm as a means of communication, creative expression and to imagine a way forward (Morris). Therefore rhythm, dance and song have served as a tool for liberation (Sweet Honey in the Rock). Whites, beginning with those who stole Native Africans from their homeland and brought them over on slave ships, have used forced performance as well as the control of musical and creative expression to limit the freedom of African Americans. These actions were taken in order to enforce white supremacy and prevent a pathway to freedom through music. When the first enslaved people were brought from Africa, drums were forbidden because they were known to be tools for communication and mobilization (Sweet Honey). Later, in the Antebellum period, slaveholders forbid certain songs or lyrics from being sung for fear

that they would inspire uprisings or resistance (Sanger). However, the idea that a slave that sang or danced was happy and willing to be enslaved permeated White American society, further perpetuating forced performance on plantations and making way for the harm of minstrel shows. These acts of forced performance and control over creative expression were intended to strip African Americans of control over their own self-definition, depriving them of hope, perseverance and intellectual freedom. For example, “Without a Song,” a popular song from the 1930s, by lyricist Edward Eliscu, demonstrates that music can be a powerful liberation tool while also acknowledging the complicity of White men in the control exercised over African Americans’ creative expression (Shirley). Through the forced performance and control of African American music, Whites were able to manipulate African Americans' right to use music as a tool for communication and liberation, resulting in social psychological violence.

The control exercised over African American music by Whites is clearly demonstrated in the song, “Without a Song” whose lyrics were written by Edward Eliscu, a White American composer, lyricist, playwright, producer and actor who lived from 1902 to 1998 (“Edward Eliscu”). The words go to a tune written by Vincent Youmans, a White American Songwriter who lived from 1898 to 1946 (Editors). “Without a Song” was released as a part of the musical *Great Day* in 1929, which ran for only thirty-six shows and was then discontinued(Shirley). *Great Day* was Eliscu’s first musical to be performed and began a longer collaboration with Youmans which resulted in the better-known musical *Flying Down to Rio* a few years later. Although *Great Day* was not a great success, a few of the songs we still know today including “More Than You Know” and “Without a Song.” *Great Day* is set in Louisiana where a southern white girl is trying to save her plantation (Upperco). “Without a Song” was

written to be sung by a plantation hand accompanied by the Jubilee Ensemble, in the performances of *Great Day*. “Without a Song” tells a story of life without a song. It begins with a verse that dictates the more passive consequences to the psyche, then goes to the second verse which covers the more concrete results that affect body motivation. It then goes to a bridge which reassures and brings hope, and the last verse calls for humility and reinforces the conclusion that without a song there would be no love, hope, or will to persevere. Although “Great Day” was not technically a minstrel show, “Without a Song” has several elements of minstrelsy which perpetuate stereotypes about African Americans.

Forced performance can be seen in both the recorded performances from slave ships, forced performances on plantations, and later in what some call the first form of American entertainment, minstrel shows. Although the plantation hand character’s performance of “Without a Song” in *Great Day* was voluntary, it represented the prolific stereotype that African Americans who sang and danced were happy and healthy and would be submissive to the system of oppression which governed them. This harmful rhetoric that was used to alleviate guilt on the part of White slavers and White society in general, originated on slave ships coming over from Africa. As Katrina Thompson submits in her book, “the tradition of dancing the captives, interlaced with violence, rape, and subjugation, was a cruel but common act that took place for 150 years of the Atlantic slave trade” (44). This dehumanizing act subjugated enslaved people to social-psychological violence by creating distrust, blocking the formation of meaningful relations and community-forming, and hindering a positive sense of identity. White slavers would order enslaved Africans to perform for their entertainment, and if they disobeyed, they would be flogged or worse. This began the tradition of African American forced performance for

the pleasure of White audiences. On plantations, enslaved people were encouraged to perform in order to make-believe that they were happy slaves. As Kerran L. Sanger argues in their article, “the songs of the slaves seemed to be evidence to whites that their slaves were content and were not plotting resistance or revolution” (180). While this may have been misinterpreted as musical freedom it ultimately served as a further way to control African Americans’ musical expression. Even after the ratification of the 13th Amendment following the Civil War, African Americans were relegated to acting in minstrel shows, and forced to play dehumanizing caricatures of themselves (*Ethnic Notions*). Whites used the power of performance to spread propaganda through false stereotypes about African Americans, forcing them to participate in their own degradation. By exercising control over this plantation hand’s performance, Eliscu and Youmans manipulated both public perceptions of how African Americans thought and acted as well as hindering African American performers’ rights to express creatively through music, which impeded their fulfillment of social psychological needs.

The control Whites have exercised over African American musical expression is made plain by the deeper meaning behind the lyrics of “Without a Song.” During slavery one of the first forms of American music was born out of plantations: spirituals. Sanger posits that, “singing spirituals provided slaves with one way to reclaim rhetorical power in their lives, communicating among themselves an affirming and positive self-definition” (178). Spirituals supported social-psychological needs by encouraging self affirmation, and the creation of meaningful relationships. Spirituals are songs that were performed in the fields often by a large group of enslaved people all together. They were rhythmic, repetitive, and often had a call and response element. Spirituals are a collaborative form of musical creation which celebrate the individual

“caller” who shifts among the group, and the “responders” who reinforce and support the “caller” (Sanger 182). In Sanger’s words, “The sharing of responsibility in creating a song encouraged a strong sense of identification and community among slaves” (182). This aspect of spirituals sustained social-psychological needs by providing a strong sense of community, and mutual support. “Without a Song” was written to be sung by a plantation hand, which suggests that Eliscu and Youmans were attempting to replicate the spiritual style when writing it.

However, the cadence, words, and context in which the plantation hand sang did not completely resemble the traditional performance of a spiritual. The intentional personification exemplified through the lyrics of “Without a Song” through the use of African American dialect, syntax, and diction, demonstrate Eliscu and Youmans’ attempt at controlling public perceptions of African Americans. The ain’t contraction and double negatives are used to suggest a lack of education. This attempt at an authentic spiritual gave itself away because while the lyrics themselves attempted to recreate an authentic spiritual, the decisions made in regards to the performance were not equally representative. Sanger suggests that while it may be expected that spirituals would use personal pronouns such as “we” and “our” the pronouns used much more frequently were “I” and “you” (182-3). While the singing of spirituals was encouraged, it was also heavily monitored by the White slave owners and the use of personal pronouns such as “we” and “our” were thought to encourage uprisings. Youmans and Eliscu followed these guidelines however they chose to only have a single soloist backed by a chorus instead of following the traditional call and response where the caller would shift among the group. The solo and chorus set up imposes a hierarchy among the performers which inhibits community building, thereby reinforcing individualistic ideals of White America. It also isolates the experience of each

individual slave instead of creating a collective feeling of liberation further playing to the hands of White Slavers wishing to limit the power of song.

By writing the lyrics of “Without a Song” harkening hope, faith, and perseverance through song and forcing them to be sung by a Black performer, Eliscu and Youmans manipulated African Americans' freedom of personal expression through music and compromised the social psychological needs of African Americans. Although these attempts at limiting African Americans' potential for musical expression compromised their needs, they did not ultimately succeed in preventing black liberation and freedom through music. Throughout American history, while Whites have encouraged performance under their supervision, African Americans have found a way to create community, build meaningful relationships, and enforce positive self-image and definition despite the constant battle to undermine their existence. Cultural appropriation has allowed for White Americans to claim musical innovations such as Jazz and Rock and Roll as their own. However, some would say that African Americans are in fact responsible for almost all forms of American music beginning with spirituals, then blues and ragtime which led to jazz, then rock and roll, R&B, hip hop, rap, and so many more (Morris). Beginning with the passage of the first ships transporting enslaved people, music and performance have served as a double-edged sword. They were used by Whites to control and take away power by forcing performance in their image, but used by African Americans to create positive self-image, disguise strong lines of communication and ultimately to lead historically marginalized peoples towards liberation and freedom.

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