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# Liberation Music Therapy

**An emancipatory practice to community  
music-making, healing, and revolutionary  
transformation**

Dorian Wallace

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[www.dorianwallace.com](http://www.dorianwallace.com)  
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We experience life through vibrations. Music has been a vital part of our evolution since the Paleolithic era and is an integral part of our history. Music can bring people together, encourage social, political, economic, or environmental change, facilitate healing, and illuminate human transcendence through peace and solidarity. In other words, music can connect with the human psyche in ways that, when practiced with focused intention, have the potential to treat entire communities that have undergone transgenerational trauma at the assault of colonialism and Capitalism.

My name is Dorian Wallace, and I am both a composer and a music therapist, concentrating on existential and sociopolitical issues from a socialistic perspective. In a colonialist definition, music therapy is the clinical and evidence-based practice of music interventions within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional. While there are valid reasons to maintain accountability procedures for monitoring practices and interventions affecting the human psyche, there is also a valid cri-

tique of the current paradigm we use and how it consciously and unconsciously targets specific groups of people for oppression. Given that modern psychology was built within a colonizer paradigm, it is reasonable to suspect that an innate bias exists within its structure. Let us consider that this structure elevates the colonizer while depressing the colonized. What are we to do?

I want to acknowledge that modern psychology has a substantial body of work and outcomes that have helped many individuals manage mental health concerns. I also want to acknowledge that most, if not all, mental health professionals are doing good work and serving those in need to the best of their ability. Nonetheless, as a society, we often only consider someone “healed” if one can effectively engage in Capitalism, and if they cannot, we incarcerate them. By existing within a colonialist model, there are inherent biases that keep certain people oppressed. We must remember that psychology is simply the scientific study of the mind and behavior and that the Eurocentric model does not solely define the discipline. A synthesis from diverse cultural orientations could provide more significant insights into the mind and communal consciousness.

Liberation psychology is a school of thought that originated amongst a body of psychologists in Latin America in the 1970s as a direct response to the colonialist conception of individuality present in much of modern psychology. Spanish-born Jesuit priest and social psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró is considered the founder of liberation psychology due to his writing on the subject. With a concentration on the perspectives, expertise, and movements of those who have been alienated and marginalized, it addresses the implications of colonial power and institutions on oppressed people and the lived experiences of poverty, social injustice, suppression, persecution, and violence. Liberation psychologists strive to absorb, amplify, and integrate the genius of people most afflicted by various forms of oppression into theory and practice, going beyond a clini-

cal response to trauma, connecting people's emotional experiences with societal struggles against impunity and for ethical, social transformation.

Since long before the beginning of British imperialism, music has been a part of the healing process and has traditionally been a practice to elicit a therapeutic reverie through rhythm and song, serving as a means of sublimation in civilizations around the planet. Sufi mystics and other spiritual practices worldwide have realized the significance of music in transporting them to another sense of consciousness that contributes to higher comprehension. The rhythmic heartbeat of a drum induces an awakened state in persons involved in various shamanic practices. Drumming elicits consciousness and keeps a person in the mental space while rites and rituals occur. Chanting, which commonly applies the recitation of a mantra, can also contribute to this state, as seen in Hindu, Buddhist, and Celtic traditions. Chanting and singing can also be holistic medicinal songs within many shamanic practices, inviting those seeking treatment to examine themselves to see what the music signifies to them. Chanting and vocalizing can involve overtones and harmonics as part of their spiritual technologies to attain a non-ordinary state. Trance music is a result of the contemporary rave cultures. European classical music or neo-indigenous art forms like hip hop or reggae can serve to create an experience of elevation. Seeing an orchestral or a hip-hop performance firsthand can be mesmerizing and existentially stimulating.

The connection between music and politics cannot be understated and lives in many cultures. Music can express anti-establishment and pro-establishment sentiments, and communities can use music to portray specific political messages. We can consider all music political from a cultural perspective, regardless of political content, simply by its presence within a specific time, space, and place. Interpretive readings of lyrics and performances strongly emphasize historical contexts and

links to social groups. Consider the concept of “artivism,” a hybrid term uniting art and activism popularized through a 1997 convergence between Chicano artists from East Los Angeles and the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. Artivists utilize art to elevate political objectives in multiple contexts, emphasizing improving social, environmental, and technological awareness.

As activist M. K. Asante puts it, “The activist uses her artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression—by any medium necessary. The activist merges commitment to freedom and justice with the pen, the lens, the brush, the voice, the body, and the imagination. The activist knows that to make an observation is to have an obligation.”

Given the right historical circumstances, cultural conditions, and aesthetic connotations, popular music can help bring people together to form effective political movements. Music may productively address the deep understanding of what it is to be sentient, tackling the message of the material needs of the popular majority while integrating with the spiritual nourishment that art provides—communal cohesion for the community and self-expression for the individuals involved. A liberation-oriented music therapist must consider all of these factors. We use music simultaneously as a function of art, ritual, therapy, and politics, all within a cipher of lived experience and cultural genius. From this perspective, a liberation music therapist is less of a clinician but more of a cultural practitioner.

Concientización is a sociological concept promoted by Brazilian pedagogue and theorist Paulo Freire. It translates as “consciousness raising” or “critical consciousness.” The term derives from a French term, *conscienciser*, coined by the French psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon in his 1952 book, *Black Skins, White Masks*. It focuses on developing a deep and adaptable comprehension of one’s existence, allowing one to uncover their positionality within socioeconomic and cultural paradoxes and take action against

to think, “You unionize them! Solidarity is the most effective way to combat bigotry!”

Realize that human beings are complex. We must recognize that the bulk of these complexities is generated and exacerbated by Capitalism, as human beings and the environment will always be commodities, resulting in irrational conflict among the proletariat. Accountability is vital while organizing movements, and conflicts will arise; however, we must commit to this practice with empathy from a liberation music therapist perspective. I hope that this brief essay initiates a more expansive dialogue and action on music’s role in creative expression, community engagement, social justice, and mental health. We cannot have one without the other. Consider these words by stic.man of the hip-hop duo dead prez, from his verse in *Police State* off their 2000 album *Let’s Get Free*.

*I want to be free to live, able to have what I need  
to live  
Bring the power back to the street where the  
people live  
We sick of working for crumbs and filling up  
the prisons  
Dying over money and relying on religion  
For help. We do for self like ants in a colony  
Organize the wealth into a socialist economy  
A way of life based off the common need  
And all my comrades is ready, we’re just  
spreading the seed*

*As I write this essay, the line that strikes me the most  
is,  
“You look even stupider  
Tryna impress them people in power when  
power abusin’ us  
For 44 dollars a hour, you coward they using  
ya  
Is it self-hate that made you send me upstate?”*

Although this passage is explicitly about intraracial conflict, it also reveals how colonial power applies pressure and force upon those who should otherwise understand the struggle. Individuals impaired by a colonial worldview will often act dismissively toward others who should be their comrades. Self-hatred develops over time due to past trauma, feelings of inadequacy, unrealistic expectations, social criticisms, and habitual behaviors. Whatever line is made in the sand, whether class, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, orientation, political convictions, or other distinctions, there is a need to see past the resistance a person might put up and reach them where they authentically are.

I’ve witnessed unnecessary clashes amongst anarchists, Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists, and Social Democrats, often over minor ideological differences that all involved could sort out productively if everyone took time to cool down. Leftists will often bash liberals for being ignorant of the struggle of working people, and liberals will accuse leftists of being too idealistic. How can we build solidarity if we cannot keep ourselves in order? Anti-racist activists will, with good reason, reject bigots entirely. However, to achieve true solidarity, we must develop ways to communicate with those who hold harmful ideas and beliefs. I once attended an Industrial Workers of the World Organizing Training 101 class when a participant asked, “What do you do if there is a bigot in the workplace?” Before responding, the facilitator took a moment

authoritarian forces in one’s life. Music, specifically lyrics, can support in more effortlessly and intimately identifying these paradoxes. Activist and writer Audre Lorde wrote poetry to communicate for women of color activists and resistance groups.

A technique used in music therapy is lyric analysis. A lyric analysis involves using existing songs to facilitate meaningful discussion. Use songs that are popular within a community, as music frequently reflects who a community is and how they see themselves in the world. Take this song by American rapper Meek Mill, “Trauma,” which I frequently use when working with people in custody at Rikers Island. Here is the first verse and chorus.

...

*My mama used to pray that she’d see me in  
Yale  
It’s f\*\*ked up she gotta see me in jail  
On the visit with Lil Papi, it hurt even though  
I seemed to be well  
They got a smoker with a key to my cell, damn  
And even worst, my judge black don’t wanna  
see me do well  
It’s either that or black people for sale  
Gave me two to four years like, “F\*\*k your life,  
meet me in hell”  
And let it burn like Lucifer, you look even  
stupider  
Tryna impress them people in power when  
power abusin’ us  
For 44 dollars a hour, you coward they using  
ya  
Is it self-hate that made you send me upstate?  
This where the so-called “real n\*\*\*as” sweeping  
up for cupcakes*

*And that's your phone time, if you ain't got no  
money, you ain't online  
Hey call your son, call your daughter just to  
wish them more prime  
Oh God, don't let them streets get a hold of 'em  
Your daughter f\*\*kin' now, it's gon be a cold  
summer  
Your son trappin' and your homie givin' O's to  
him  
And if he f\*\*k that paper up, he puttin' holes  
through him  
And you just wanna make it home, so you can  
show it to him  
And them people ain't finna give no parole to  
ya  
They want blood, we all hangin' with a noose  
on our neck  
My celly mom just died, he wanna use my col-  
lect  
And he won't make it to the wake unless he give  
'em a check  
We still n\*\*\*as though, what you expect?  
I just won  
I was on the corner with the reefa  
And they got us warring for our freedom  
See my brother blood on the pavement  
How you wake up in the mornin' feelin' evil?  
Uhh, trauma  
When them drugs got a hold of your mama  
And the judge got a hold on your father  
Go to school, bullet holes in the locker*

...

Notice your response to this song. How did the rhythm affect your body? Was there any noticeable unconscious move-

ment, say a head-bobbing or foot-tapping? If so, you have just experienced entrainment, a biomusicological term for the unconscious synchronization to an externally detected rhythm. Although there are known examples of specific nonhumans experiencing entrainment, humans are the only species where all members of the species experience it. Evolutionary musicologist Joseph Jordania suggests that the forces of natural selection developed the human ability to be entrained as a vital part of achieving the specific altered state of consciousness known as battle trance. Attaining this state, in which humans forfeit their individuality, do not feel fear or pain, and are integrated with a shared collective identity to act on behalf of the community, was critical for our ancestors' survival needs against large predators. I play the music that I know is popular in the community while working with a group of persons in custody. Even when I am not verbally interacting with someone, I look for entrainment as it signifies unconscious communication. By presenting music that I know is significant to the community rather than music that I assume they should hear, I recognize their beliefs and culture on their level, showing regard, carefulness, and respect. We will not advance toward revolutionary transformation as activists until we meet communities where they are psychologically, intellectually, and spiritually. The liberation music therapist must be an active participant in the proletariat struggle, not just another brainwashed colonialist clone pushing decisions from their ivory tower. Real will always recognize real, and projecting an artificial, imposed, self-centered, inconsiderate, or entitled posture decreases the chances of authentic class solidarity.

What lyrics stood out to you in this song? Were there any moments that communicated a *concientización* position? Are there any lyrics that increase awareness of your specific positionality within the socioeconomic landscape you and your community inhabit? What can you do with this knowledge?