

“This Is America”: A Cultural Critique on Black Subjectivity in Performance, the Role of  
Surveillance, and Witnessing Black Victimization

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## Abstract

In 2018, hip-hop artist, writer, and comedian Donald Glover (1983), who also performs under the name Childish Gambino, released his “This Is America” video, which quickly became a viral sensation. Gambino used his racialized body and hypnotic lyrics to bring awareness to the fragility of black existence in America. In this thesis, I argue Gambino created “This Is America” as a critique centered around cultural practices and violence towards African Americans using allusions to encourage witnessing of black victims. The video also reminds the viewer of the impact racialized surveillance has on African Americans, especially within spaces that forcibly define black identities as criminal.

Gambino's performance captivates the audience as a source of entertainment and public outcry. “This Is America” comments on the trauma associated with early forms of black entertainment and white spectatorship which is discussed in Chapter Two: Black Subjectivity in Performance. Furthermore, I unpack what “This Is America” suggests about the white gaze and the history of racialized surveillance of African Americans in Chapter Three: Surveillance of the Black Body. Applying critical social theory and critical race theory to “This Is America” helps to analyze how the video functions as a cultural critique. The goal of my research is to shed light on America’s receptiveness towards black victimhood by examining the impact viral imagery of racial violence, as seen in “This Is America,” has on audiences in terms of activism and witnessing.

Keywords: black masculinity, cultural critique, Otherness, intersectionality, surveillance, white gaze, minstrelsy, critical social theory, critical race theory, black subjectivity, hip-hop, gun violence, witnessing, black performance

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### Overview

“This Is America” confronts the viewer with a narrative driven by graphic violence and thought-provoking content. As black bodies entertain and fill the screen, scenes interrupted by jump cuts are tied together by a persistent theme of fear and death. The overwhelming violence shown in the video is jolting; this isn’t your average hip-hop video promoting glamorized bravado and gangsterism for the sake of impressing an attractive female. Instead, the video offers cultural and social messaging with cinematic drama. Through movement, facial expressions (fig. 1), and lyrics, Gambino illustrates to the viewer a climate that has reached a fever pitch. Throughout the video, elements of danger lurk as people are seen running frantically from all directions. Rioters jump out of and onto stalled cars, adding to the suspense. Midway through the video, a man plummets from the second floor onto the ground. Burning fires and flashing lights from police cars are scattered throughout the warehouse. In the midst of the commotion, a child proudly stands on the roof of a car spewing money from a hand-held machine. Gambino’s muscular body dances into scenes causing the viewer’s eyes to be guided from left to right. The viewer sees the storyline as a continuum with the help of continuity editing. The video unfolds like an operatic stage play meant to demonstrate a limited black experience.

“This is America” is layered with meaning. On a mezzanine, children with covered faces dressed in their school uniforms record the chaos on their phones. I will elaborate more on the children standing on the mezzanine in Chapter Three as I discuss how their actions relate to surveillance. Oblivious to the violence occurring around them, the children appear innocent,

vulnerable, and out of place as they perform choreographed dances (fig. 2) alongside Gambino. As the camera whip pans from scene to scene, social and cultural references emerge among the madness. One such reference is a white-masked gentleman running past a police vehicle, an allusion to the biblical scripture in Revelation 6:8 that describes the presence of death appearing on a pale white horse. Gambino's clothing, specifically his pants, are also historical nods to the past. The placement of buttons, color, and high waist design resemble uniforms worn by Confederate soldiers during the Southern Antebellum period. The sequence of images is significant to the messaging Gambino promotes. For example, the very last scene captures Gambino running in fear as he flees from an angry mob, leaving the viewer to assume the willing participants of mass murder and mayhem all have conspired to attack the original source of trauma.

The video presents an overarching theme centered around black demise and degradation. "This Is America" conveys the normalization of black pain and suffering, but also demonstrates how violence towards black bodies has been excused. In the dilapidated warehouse where the video is set, rioting erupts in the background as people, many of whom are of color, act out violently as a means to be both heard and seen. Gambino's lyrics—"This Is America, don't catch you slippin up, look what I'm whippin up"—serve as a warning to the devastation happening in American cities. These lyrics can be interpreted in multiple ways; I view them as Gambino reminding black people that the racism and economic struggle that existed in America's past is still prevalent today. The word *America* in the title also seems to refer to a white hierarchy. In *The White Racial Frame*, Joe Feagin explains how numerous studies provide evidence that the word "American" often refers to white people.<sup>1</sup> Video footage of police brutality on social media

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (London: Routledge, 2013), 93.



has captured what has transpired for decades in many African American communities. *In Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, Henry Louis Gates contends to be a black man in twentieth-century America is to be an heir to a set of anxieties.<sup>2</sup> Those anxieties stem from racial hostilities that forced Africans into the institution of slavery and continue to cause trauma as the threat of gun violence from police officers and over-zealous citizens is shared through social media.

Gambino captures the audience's attention by using guns to inflict violence and murder. The gun is a prop used for one sole purpose in the video: the killing of black people. Immediately after each shooting, Gambino hands the murder weapon to a child to conceal. By showing children with not only access but also responsibility for the disposal of guns, Gambino is commenting on the connection African American children have to gun violence. Despite the rioting and violence in the background, children continue to dance while he raps. In the opening scene, Gambino shoots a hooded man in the back of the head at point-blank range (fig. 3). A minute later, he guns down a gospel choir (fig. 4) with a semi-automatic assault rifle. The graphic scene involving the gospel choir is a haunting echo of the Charleston church massacre on June 17, 2015. This re-enactment illustrates the intimidation and torment forced upon African Americans within their communities. Within the context of the video, Gambino is acting as someone who has adopted a pattern of reckless and violent behavior.

Gambino is a dominant force who exhibits movements displayed by black performers in minstrelsy; he is playing a familiar role birthed from the imagination of white America and a culture obsessed with gun violence, spectatorship of the black body, and the demise of African

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Vintage, 2011), xvii.

Americans. As early as the 1920s minstrels delivered their performances with a particular physicality conveyed through dance, bulging eyes, and a host of facial expressions which helped to create racial tropes and stereotypes. Gambino does not wear the typical white gloves worn by minstrel performers, yet he demonstrates exaggerated hand gestures coupled with exuberant laughter and street slang which suggest he is emulating past minstrels.

Through performance and violence, Gambino brings attention to the ongoing failure of race relations in America. The killings he carries out seem to reflect learned behavior stemming from oppression and conditioning. Through critique, Gambino has placed a mirror in front of America's transgressions against black people and made apparent what is often sensationalized and objectified in the media: narratives that African Americans are dangerous and untrustworthy.

"This is America" demonstrates negative attributes assigned to the black body where violence is a byproduct of being a black man. The intrinsic value associated with color reinforces ideas and values regarding race and politics. Also, by emphasizing race, the video addresses systemic challenges while subsequently addressing inequalities that exist for those outside of the identity of white male, which is often seen as the standard of decency.

#### Literature Review & Methodology

Scholars who research critical race theory have analyzed the challenges many African Americans face socially and politically. Current scholarly conversations on critical race theory lack contributions from both black theorists and non-traditional scholars who are able to speak from lived experiences. Black theorists seem to need validation from traditionally vetted white scholars and institutions in order for their research and voice to be valued. In this research, I will explore what new discoveries can emerge when I view research from the era of the Civil Rights Movement alongside research examining hip-hop culture's role in social justice movements.

Linking these two veins of critical race theory will give validity to why and how a hip-hop video like “This Is America” effectively creates social discourse as a critique on race relations and an opportunity for creatives and black intellectuals to comment on racial disparities who may not necessarily fit within academia as conventional theorists.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a writer who discusses the current political climate, race relations, and social justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his book, *Between the World and Me*, Coates confronts white supremacy’s stronghold over systemic practices that lead to police brutality and explains how black males are mindful of the political and social consequences around physical space. His analysis is important to my research because he is informed as a social thinker who is writing about race and more specifically about African American youth. As someone who grew up in Baltimore during the height of hip-hop culture, Coates is able to link the writings and racial discourse of James Baldwin into a contemporary story involving policy and policing of black youth in terms of social justice. The lineage of social justice in America can be traced to the ideology, writings, and activism of Martin Luther King, an American icon whose teachings and theory are often quoted in popular culture but are conspicuously missing from academic discourse. Coates addresses common fears and trauma black people experience when dealing with police interactions and encountering microaggressions as specific talking points reserved for black youth. What Coates makes plain to his son, who has witnessed countless black victims on social media, is an awareness African Americans have about their black bodies: the fact that one’s social status, education, and economic influence doesn’t provide exclusion from racism. This conversation is reserved for and applies to his son because, like Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and many others, he is a young black man who can become a victim to the violent racism

reserved for African Americans. After all, these young men were surveilled and perceived as criminals or in the process of mischief, and therefore, labeled as a dangerous threat.

In her chapter titled “Branding Blackness,” Simone Browne gives insight into the surveillance of black people. The need to be branded and labeled as Other based on her assessment further examines how biometrics undermined black identity and ownership of agency, but in a larger context, investigates unspoken rules and the ever-present watchful eye still haunting black communities. Her research of the cultural practice surrounding surveillance connects back to the inhumane treatment of enslaved people by overseers who instilled fear and established a methodology of policing black people within public spaces. In the 21st century, as social media posts go viral, surveillance has taken on a new role, playing a part in the survival of black Americans and become a strategy utilized by victims. Browne’s research alludes to the delicate dance black people are acutely aware of, which is the navigation of lived experiences that exist in a constant if not always overt power struggle between white suspicions and black fear.

In his book, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, Ronald Jackson discusses racial politics in media as well as the influence hip-hop artists like Gambino have on popular culture in America. Jackson uses critical race theory to explore how Otherness, under the guise of racist imagery, functions within the dominant culture. Furthermore, Jackson’s research helps to investigate contemporary videos and hip-hop music and analyze the social constructs that develop masculinity and identity. The intersectionality of Gambino’s racialized body in performance stems from racial politics and the commerce of the enslaved and oppressed black body. Jackson offers an engaging perspective on the monolithic narrative depicted in white mainstream media of black male hip-hop artists. What Gambino has chosen to deliver

through imagery is both dynamic and convincing, by discovering the role of narrative through the lens of racial politics he provides a deeper understanding to the relationship between black subjectivity and the white gaze.

George Yancy's theoretical framework in *Black Bodies, White Gaze: The Continuing Significance of Race* brings into focus the witnessing of black bodies from the perspectives of the imagined and lived experiences. "This Is America" presents a fictional narrative based on black suffering and victimization. Yancy claims narrative has a powerful capacity to communicate lived and imaginative dimensions of reality. The imaginative component will be elaborated upon in Chapter Three as a method of witnessing for whites and a form of resistance for African Americans. What Yancy uncovers is that storytelling, in its many forms, can advance the importance of narrative as a dynamic structure through which we weave and reweave philosophical discourse and theoretical rigor.<sup>3</sup> The narrative in "This Is America" addresses myths and stereotypes attached to Gambino's male body. Gambino uses his body and narrative as way to address intersectionality.

In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Patricia Hill Collins theorizes intersectionality as an analytical agent able to examine social inequalities. Collins understands the potential intersectionality has for understanding social challenges, yet she contends intersectionality informs social action which must be understood as a critical social theory. The connections Collins makes between intersectionality and social action explains how the video acts as a critique and response to the wake of viral videos depicting the assault on African

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<sup>3</sup> George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 34.

Americans. What Collins offers is a social theory that challenges existing social orders. Her work supports the ability of everyday people to explain the social experiences happening around them, as Ta-Nehisi Coates does in *Between the World and Me* and Gambino does in “This Is America.” Both are appealing to the layman as opposed to the scholar. Collins’ critical social theory provides a specialized language that reflects varying perspectives for readers to grasp. She focuses on intellectual resistance and provides information on how social action and platforms like hip-hop educate and transform communities.

Much like intersectionality, critical race theory is essential to my research because it approaches the concept of race, structures beliefs around racism, and relates how racial identities are crucial to understanding the dynamics and constructs at the center of Gambino’s video. In Kwame Appiah’s “Race in the Modern World: The Problem of the Color Line” and Stuart Hall’s “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” both authors approach race as a representation of beliefs intrinsically and socially constructed as a result of the implementation of white supremacy. The dominant culture during colonialism and slavery established characterizations for the black race, and further instilled social dealings that justified reasons blacks were to be thought of as inferior. This subjugation of historical and cultural institutional doctrine is a driving force behind why blacks are perceived as Others, surveilled, and dehumanized. Theories and opinions on “This Is America” reaches beyond conventional means of research.

Scholars as well as online sources provide helpful information in deciphering and understanding why Gambino chose specific imagery. Soon after the video’s release, bloggers and influential media outlets began to inquire into and speculate on Gambino’s fashion choices, choreography, and lyrics. On Blavity, a popular website among black millennials, writer Tonja Renee Stidhum discusses the importance of movement in “This Is America,” arguing it has been

universally agreed upon that one of the most captivating portions of the video revolves around dance.<sup>4</sup> Sherrie Silver, a 23-year old Rwandan born creator of the *Gwara Gwara* dance craze, choreographed the video and intentionally incorporated dances popular throughout Africa. The viral sensation of dance combined with symbolic meanings required further research for the average viewer to fully understand their significance. *Time Magazine* requested music professor Guthrie Ramsey to comment on four major parts in the video; he described the last scene where Gambino runs from an angry mob, referencing a nineteenth-century African American folklore song titled “Run N— Run” is reminiscent of slaves running for their lives.<sup>5</sup> The cultural shift “This Is America” demanded in comparison to other popular hip-hop videos required the viewer and average fan to seek explanations from blog posts and online articles.

The methods used to support my research combine critical social theory, intersectionality, and critical race theory. Through the different fields of study, I will explore learned behaviors in black culture and investigate the influence and power media has on shaping our values. As a methodology, critical race theory also aids inquiry into Otherness—the removal of agency for white fantasy and entertainment, but most importantly, why the process of maintaining a hierarchal order over the black race perpetuates violence. These theories inform through a critique of the construction of images and the politics that derive from them.

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<sup>4</sup> Tonja Stadium, “Behind Childish Gambino's Dope Dance Moves In 'This Is America' Is This 23-Year-Old Black Woman,” *Blavity*, last modified May 11, 2018, <https://blavity.com/behind-childish-gambinos-dope-dance-moves-in-this-is-america-is-this-23-year-old-black-woman?category1=trending>.

<sup>5</sup> Mahita Gajanan, “An Expert's Take on the Symbolism in Childish Gambino's Viral 'This Is America' Video,” *Time*, last modified May 7, 2018, <https://time.com/5267890/childish-gambino-this-is-america-meaning/>.

## Chapter Summaries

In Chapter Two: Black Subjectivity in Performance, I discover how Gambino's body delivers coded messages. His posturing and dancing emphasize black identity in minstrelsy. By viewing Gambino's performance as it relates to the spectacle of Josephine Baker, I explain his gestural meanings and how his movement and facial expressions create narratives built from past black tropes. Gambino's overt masculinity, like Baker's sexual appeal and transformative image, show the power of black performers' allure for white spectatorship. In Chapter Two I also break down the effects of scripted identities in hip-hop and minstrelsy by exploring the performance of "Jaybo," a cartoon character (fig. 5) in Jay-Z's *The Story of O.J.* (2017), a black and white minstrel animation. I highlight ways in which Gambino's masculinity as a hip-hop artist is in direct opposition to receiving empathy and how his callous acts create further disconnect from white witnessing.

In Chapter Three: Surveillance of the Black Body, I explain the social and political norms associated with surveillance and viewing the black body in public and in media. I'm interested in surveillance as a cultural practice beginning since slavery and its effect on the mobility and safety of African Americans. Simone Browne's *Dark Matters* lends direction on the different modes of surveillance. Jim Crow laws beginning in the 1920s invited the white gaze to monitor which spaces black people could navigate in; other tactics like signs and symbols were also used to reinforce discriminatory practices. The viral video phenomenon of the 21st century provides its own narrative, oftentimes providing a depiction different from narratives told on news media outlets. With the rise of police brutality shown on social media, cellphones, and body cameras are now used for documentation purposes and as modes of survival. I make connections to the social movements and cultural shifts that occurred with the deaths of Emmett Till in 1955 (fig. 6)



and Michael Brown in 2014 (fig. 7), which helped spark the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter Movement, respectively, after pictures of their slain bodies were shared around the world. Visual images of their deceased bodies caused emotional reactions and a call to action for social justice against systemic policies, over policing, and racism. I also elaborate on the effects of seeing black victimization in media and how the witnessing of violence against African Americans have resulted in social movements.

“This Is America” created a paradigm shift in popular culture. Protests are happening more frequently as a response to the rhetoric, rise in hate crimes, police brutality, and overall messaging perpetuated by the Trump administration. Celebrities and musicians are using social media, their music, and activism to comment on the political divisiveness and racial turmoil in America. In my research, I analyze and explain why black men in particular are feared and perceived as criminals. I speak to how their black bodies within specific spaces are seen as dangerous, while in other areas, their bodies are championed and exploited for the sake of entertainment.

## Chapter Two

### Black Subjectivity in Performance

The objective of this chapter is to analyze the characterization of Gambino in performance and explain how his gestural meanings are based on past black tropes. I will also expound on how he develops his own meaning of these tropes to enrich the narrative. Gambino's body delivers coded messages as he surveys aspects of minstrelsy, ethnography, and masculinity associated with hip-hop culture. Gambino's movements are similar to the performance of Jaybo, a cartoon character in Jay-Z's *The Story of O.J.* that emphasizes minstrelsy in black and white animation. Gambino shows his awareness of minstrelsy through posturing while demonstrating elements of ethnographic choreography. Through performance, viewers can see how Gambino's dancing is linked to ritual and helps him transcend the identity of hip-hop artist to become a performance artist. The allure of Gambino's black body can also be understood in the context of Josephine Baker's rise to stardom in 1920s Paris. His critique of America's infatuation with black subjectivity not only explores early black performances but also the way African American youth are perceived in 20th and 21st century media. Too often, news outlets and Hollywood filmmakers describe African Americans using fear-based rhetoric. "This Is America" confronts viewers' racial biases and the audience's expectations of being entertained at the expense of the black performer's body, culture, and personal narrative.

#### Cultural Mask of Minstrelsy: Historical Interpretations of Baker as a Muse

Since the days of vaudeville, the black body has been put on display for white spectatorship. During the nineteenth century, vaudeville grew into a theatrical machine throughout America, Britain, and France. What made vaudeville shows popular was that they appealed to all socioeconomic classes. Vaudeville shows were formulaic and mass produced, and like their twentieth-century analogues, their popularity depended, at least in part, on their

formulaic predictability.<sup>6</sup> Although both white and black vaudeville actors donned blackface, my research primarily focuses on the black performer. Unfortunately, black performers were on the receiving end of most jokes as comedy skits became the driving engine for vaudeville productions. Brenda Gottschild claims black vaudeville performers were forced to put on cultural masks and false identities to disguise their blackness.<sup>7</sup> The result was the introduction of blackface and the development of popular caricatures in minstrelsy. She calls their performances a reflective practice spurred by racial and social politics where black minstrels “danced in the dark.”<sup>8</sup> Black performers were limited to scripted identities that focused on mimicry and belittlement; their identities would set the tone for how they were to be treated on and off the stage. Barbara Webb discusses the influence of famous minstrel Bert Williams; she notes that in black minstrel performances “the ‘black’ character onstage occupied a space of tension, assuming the dual role of both joke-maker and the object of ridicule.”<sup>9</sup> The consciousness of performing blackness, with a racialized body meant for entertainment, is a technique which garnered success to a fault. As joke makers, black minstrels had little input in the direction of their bodies on stage; their script was created at the detriment of being black. Gambino performs in a language where his body communicates subjectivity rooted in history and oppression. Abimbola Adelakun reflected on the importance of cultural language in performance, noting, “Black performance in its ramifications is a language, and a universal one at that. This factor

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Terni, “A Genre for Early Mass Culture: French Vaudeville and the City, 1830-1848,” *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 2 (2006): 221.

<sup>7</sup> Nadine George-Graves, “Review: Untitled,” review of *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* by Brenda Dixon Gottschild *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (2001): 522.

<sup>8</sup> George-Graves, review of *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* by Brenda Dixon Gottschild, 522.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara L. Webb, “The Black Dandyism of George Walker: A Case Study in Genealogical Method.” *TDR (1988-)* 45, no. 4 (2001): 11.

makes it open to mimesis by other cultural agents.”<sup>10</sup> There is an exchange of borrowed phrases and movements when black performance is used as an aesthetic form promoting social advocacy. Adelukan speaks to the oppressive conditions of the black performer: “Since the same repressive conditions that imperil human lives are also the ones that press the human creative impulse into making the art that critiques and resists them, “This Is America” comes across to the viewer as a juxtaposition of violence and entertainment.”<sup>11</sup> “This Is America” is presented in a cultural language filled with black aesthetics; the theatrics used to capture the viewer’s attention informs as well as entertains. It is essential to first investigate the effects of black performers’ experiences in vaudeville to interpret the intricacies of the video’s visual imagery.

Movement is an essential element of Gambino’s video and to truly understand his theatrical presentation requires an understanding of the early development of black entertainment in America and abroad. During the 1920s, African American entertainers sought Paris as a place of refuge from the oppression of Jim Crow laws. African American jazz musicians and musical troupes began to flood Parisian music halls looking for an escape. In 1925, as vaudeville shows grew in popularity, Josephine Baker traveled from America to Paris with an all-black musical ensemble. For Baker, a poor, young, black teen from St. Louis, performing in Paris was deemed the opportunity of a lifetime. She found success amongst Parisian socialites as both minstrel and muse. While in Paris, Baker would work alongside two influential set designers, Paul Colin, a French poster maker, and Miguel Covarrubias, a Mexican illustrator and muralist. Colin

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<sup>10</sup> Abimbola A. Adelakun, “Black Lives Matter! Nigerian Lives Matter!: Language and Why Black Performance Matters,” *Genealogy* 3, no. 2 (2019): 19.

<sup>11</sup> Adelakun, “Black Lives Matter,” 19.

collaborated with Covarrubias and became heavily influenced by his caricature representations of black people.<sup>12</sup> Baker would become the muse for many of Colin's lithographs.

At times, Gambino borrows from Baker's tradition of feminine performance in minstrelsy as a means to create allure. Baker's impact on Parisian culture can be best summed up as performative imagery that transcended—and attempted to negate—barriers of race, class, and gender in Euro-American society.<sup>13</sup> Despite minstrelsy serving as a conduit to Baker's stardom and influence, Colin captured the black female body as a sensual medium (fig. 8). Eric Lott notes, "Dancers relied on vigorous leg and foot work, twists, turns, and slaps of toe and heel. The body was always grotesquely contorted, even when sitting; stiffness and extension of arms and legs announced themselves as unsuccessful sublimations of sexual desire."<sup>14</sup> There are seductive moments in Gambino's performance where he twists and turns with elegance and dances with raised arms above his head before settling into an emotionally charged stance. From her costume to her sexualized poses, Baker expressed femininity with flirtatious expressions to entice inquisitive onlookers. She was a catalyst in expanding African American identity in minstrelsy.

Baker was positioned on stage as a performer who possessed both exotic savagery and feminized blackness. Colin's representation of Baker lends itself to what is known as Negrophilia, from the French *négrophilie*—a term used by the Parisian avant-garde in the 1920s to affirm their love of black culture as a provocative challenge to bourgeois values.<sup>15</sup> The branding of Baker as Colin's muse was designed on the premise of racial stereotypes established

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<sup>12</sup> Mae G. Henderson, "Josephine Baker and La Revue Nègre: From Ethnography to Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2003): 120.

<sup>13</sup> Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Lott, "'The Seeming Counterfeit': Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy," *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1991): 230.

<sup>15</sup> Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London, England: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 9.

in the marketing of minstrelsy, but Baker instead used this space to express black identity, culture, and perseverance. Baker's mulatto skin offered her black body an opportunity to be reimagined. The reconditioning of Baker's image created a new way for African Americans to be seen through spectacle. Given the roles and position of African Americans post-Civil War, minstrelsy became a breeding ground to circumvent black identity, performance, and acceptance among white spectators. Baker and Gambino are influencers of their time and culture because of how their bodies convey messages to white audiences. Gambino uses minstrelsy references as a reflection on and critique of white America's failure to acknowledge repressive black subjectivity on as well as off the stage.

#### Black Performers' Appeal to the White Audience

In "This Is America," Gambino's body rolls with grace in feminized contortions and gestures. He is put on display like Baker, not just for spectacle but as a conduit communicating past inflictions under the guise of ethnographic performance. Although Gambino appropriates minstrel gestures he is not to be mistaken as a minstrel. In fact, he makes a concerted effort to exhibit violence as opposed to displaying traditional forms of parody often recognized in minstrelsy. Lott stated that "early blackface performance was one of the first constitutive discourses of the body in American culture. The commercial production of the black male body was a fundamental source of minstrelsy's threat and fascination for its predominantly white male audiences."<sup>16</sup> Most black minstrel performers failed to control the representation and identity of their bodies. To put on blackface implies a make-believe character or a characterization of blackness. Black performers applied burnt cork to their faces for overtly exaggerated facial expressions along with red lipstick to represent an aloof person. Baker in a dress and blackface

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<sup>16</sup> Lott, "The Seeming Counterfeit," 231.

became primed for visual survey by those who viewed Colin's *La Revue Nègre* poster (fig. 9). Compared to Baker's attire and sensual representation, Gambino embodies the spirit of a contemporary minstrel equipped with African movement and rhythm while maintaining the coy attitude of a hip-hop artist. It is important to note Gambino doesn't wear the typical minstrel garb of white gloves and blackface. Throughout the video, a shirtless Gambino comes across as calculated instead of sexy as he brandishes weapons before killing his victims.

Although the African body had been characterized by ethnographic exhibitions and scientific descriptions, Baker broke the mold in her appearance as a muse for the French imagination. Baker's sophistication redefined French ideals of primitivism and "romanticized" a new version of the black body. Mae Henderson notes:

Baker's performances enacted events in which both the audience and performer participated, the former compelled by a powerful voyeurism coupled by the latter's equally powerful exhibitionism—a dialectical performance reenacting the obsessive need of the colonizer to 'look' and the obsessive desire of the colonized to be 'looked at.'<sup>17</sup>

Gambino also sees his body as a way to communicate to the white imagination. Unlike Baker who was cultivated to please her viewers, Gambino challenges his viewers to look at his blackness, culture, and identity and consider how they contribute to the violence he simulates.

Baker's creative expression was based on the premise of humor. She was clothed and given direction on how to be intriguing, comedic, and objectified. By incorporating violence as opposed to humor, Gambino confronts the psyche and aptitude of his audience. He is not performing to please his audience with comedy; instead he appears to reflect the callousness projected onto African Americans and to remind Americans in general of their disregard of black victims. Through his controlled movements, Gambino becomes a disobedient, thoughtful critic

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<sup>17</sup> Mae G. Henderson and Charlane B. Regester, *Josephine Baker Critical Reader* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017), 67.

and cultural performer who negates the behavior of a conventional black minstrel. Franz Fanon, a critical theorist on the French colonized African, noted,

When the black man, who has never felt as much a ‘Negro’ as he has under white domination, decides to prove his culture and act as a cultivated person, he realizes that history imposes on him a terrain already mapped out, that history sets him along a very precise path and that he is expected to demonstrate the existence of a ‘Negro’ culture.<sup>18</sup>

For the African American, the negro culture is a response to American culture. Where the colonized African and African American intersect is in a space built out of critical analysis of the art, culture, and body of the Other. They both became subjects of phenomena aimed at developing a new set of conventions and rules. Fanon furthers this idea by stating, “Another aspect of the colonized affectivity can be seen when it is drained of energy. By the ecstasy of dance. Any study of the colonial world therefore must include an understanding of the phenomena of dance and possession.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the performance, as well as the outfit worn by Baker—a banana skirt and beads over her topless body—signified a meeting of the primitive black female body with a modernized adaptation of the African American performer (fig. 10). Baker’s metaphoric transformation deepened complexities between African and African American blackness as a social uniform. Gambino’s social uniform is his shirtless body, which signifies agency of the male hip-hop artist performing fictional portrayals of past tragic events.

#### Reflections of Violence Against Black Bodies

The shock of the violence in “This Is America” prompted the video to go viral within days of its release. Displaying violence and ideas of gangsterism isn’t outside the bounds of hip-hop videos, but what makes “This Is America” different is Gambino’s movements and historical references tied to the massacre of African Americans. Gambino performs several roles

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<sup>18</sup> Frantz Fanon et al., *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 150.

<sup>19</sup> Fanon et al., *The Wretched of the Earth*, 19.



throughout the video, including narrator, critic, and artist, nuance that is not typical of many hip-hop videos. In the beginning of “This Is America” (fig. 11) he can be seen reacting to his environment as his body and face project discomfort. Joshua Hall explores Frantz Fanon’s thought on dance and the theorization of black embodiment in racist and colonized societies. Hall notes, “The bodily schema is the experienced procedure, ‘implicit knowledge’, of making one’s way in the world as an embodied being.”<sup>20</sup> Hall is referring to Fanon’s idea of a third-person consciousness in which a black person is able to feel their body outside of themselves, as in the instance of the minstrel who is performing to the imagination of the white spectator. In “This Is America”, Gambino is aware that his body is seen as a symbol representing his race. If the audience realizes Gambino is re-enacting past atrocities, he becomes a reflection of masters and overseers of plantations and racists who see little value in black life. This realization gives Gambino even more reason to distort his face in displeasure and in resentment as he kills his own people. I will go into much more detail around this concept of re-enacting violence, the role of the overseer, and surveillance in the next chapter.

One of the messages apparent in Gambino’s performance is the idea he is a muse for white entertainment, similar to Baker. The theatricality Gambino asserts with his movements is borrowed from the style of minstrel productions, but he combines these movements with the machismo posturing often exhibited by male hip-hop artists. This second persona collides with the notion of the stereotypical dimwit. He thrusts and spins, adding to the provocative nature of his routine. Although he has great agency as a performer, Gambino is faced with a dilemma. There seems to be a contradiction with seeing Gambino’s slick moves and seeing him as a

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<sup>20</sup> Joshua M. Hall, “Revalorized Black Embodiment: Dancing with Fanon,” *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 3 (2012): 280.

violent enforcer. The type of violence Gambino exhibits with weaponry and massive killing exceeds typical slapstick humor and physical violence performed in vaudeville shows. For example, Baker leaned on parody and *call and response* tactics in body language to engage her audience. Like Baker, Gambino strikes a chord with audiences using dance; however, instead of sexuality, he implores violence as a performance quality to jolt his viewers.

### Masculinity and Coded Messages in Movement

Gambino choreographs destruction and leads those around him to join in on the murdering spree. He has no regard for his victims; a seated guitar player (fig. 3) and a gospel choir (fig. 4) are annihilated as Gambino's humanity is subsumed by the thrill of killing. After he shoots his victims, the weapons are handed to children to dispose of with red rags. By wrapping the guns in rags, the children avoid leaving fingerprints. Right after Gambino inflicts violence, a ritualistic performance ensues. His moves are enticing and communal as children begin to take on a role outside of discarding weaponry. These children become a part of a melee cheerfully dancing in syncopation; the influence and impact Gambino has on them is unsettling.

The criminal element and victimhood seen throughout the video relates to Gambino's masculinity. Adalakin notes that "Black performance is ontologically political, and it authorizes the codes that provoke the articulation of deeply sedimented attitudes and world views, particularly among subaltern populations." Unlike minstrelsy, "This Is America" uses black bodies, even those of children, to communicate the effects of ignoring black suffering. Gambino confronts the audience with violence to go beyond constructed codes of conduct. Reflecting on black performers' ability to construct codes, Adalakin observes, "These codes construct the social world and make both situations and the framed responses to them mutually comprehensible." Gambino is not merely concerned with entertainment for the sake of pleasing

his audience; rather, his movements illustrate the use of gun violence in relationship to African American youth and the role of black subjectivity in performance.

Gambino approaches the topic of subjectivity with coded messages as he glides and moves. As he dances, flexing his muscular body (fig. 1), Gambino reinforces the type of bravado and masculinity often seen displayed by hip-hop artists. Soyica Colbert comments how blackness is front and center when performers take the stage: “Historically aligned with hypervisibility, blackness places the individual on display.”<sup>21</sup> She goes on to discuss how repeated actions presented before an audience that carry with them the history of their recurrence shape viewers’ and listeners’ perceptions of blackness.<sup>22</sup> Gambino’s repetitive lyrics and overdramatized dancing engage the audience with an auditory and visual experience. Based on his disparaging routine, it is his minstrel references that signal discontent as he is trapped between the intersection of being a hip-hop artist and narrator for social change. As Gambino weaves in and out of scenes, his toned body and contorted posture create interactions that are anything but self-effacing, yet his nakedness, along with his blackness create a sense of vulnerability. Gambino is not moving to provide slapstick humor; instead, he operates with precise, abrupt, and intricate motions leading into the next scene. By guiding children to join in the performance, he shows they too can learn how to act and perform. What Gambino ultimately delivers is an aesthetic form borrowed from African traditions and subservient performances. Additionally, his performance seeks to gain both attention and empathy from his white viewers, this concept in relationship to witnessing will be expanded upon in the following chapter.

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<sup>21</sup> Soyica Colbert, “Introduction: On Black Performance,” *African American Review* 45, no. 3 (2012): 275.

<sup>22</sup> Colbert, “Introduction: On Black Performance”, 275.

There are components in Gambino's dance that communicate and describe culture. His movements and lines were created with purpose. Much of Gambino's moves were developed by Sherrie Silver, a Rwandan contemporary hip-hop dance choreographer. His performances consist of integrated ethnographic modes of action. Deborah Kapchan says, "performances are about an aesthetic practice."<sup>23</sup> Kapchan reinforces her statement by explaining that performances provide an intricate counterpoint to the unconscious practices of everyday life insofar as they are stylistically marked expressions of otherness.<sup>24</sup> Gambino's Otherness, or blackness, is stylized and rooted in the ritual of dance, in hip-hop, and in minstrelsy.

Many of the dances Gambino and the children perform are similar to routines sweeping 21st-century Africa. They blend contemporary African pop moves with minstrel gestures, all of which comment on subjectivity and historical identities established in early American entertainment. Some of their movements are reminiscent of a dance called the *cakewalk*, a social dance that was one of the first forms of black entertainment for the American establishment. Initially, it began as a dance for American black performers to subversively mock white audiences. White American and European crowds who participated were unaware of the fact that the cakewalk was rooted in practices from plantation life when enslaved people strutted in front of their owners, mocking their gestures and mimicking being rich and white.<sup>25</sup> White observers, both on plantations and during cakewalks, thought they were observing movements unique to African culture; however, there was little that was genuinely black about it. The dance was instead another instance of blacks accommodating and to some extent mocking white culture.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Deborah Kapchan, "Performance," *The Journal of American Folklore* 108, no. 430 (1995): 479.

<sup>24</sup> Kapchan, "Performance," 479.

<sup>25</sup> Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

Although the cakewalk represented a suppressed scorn amongst many American black minstrel performers, dance in “This Is America” is seen as a celebration. “This Is America” shows children gathering alongside Gambino performing the *gwara gwara*, which bridges the gap between past forms of black entertainment in minstrelsy with contemporary African pop culture. The natural progression of song and dance seen in minstrel shows encouraged spectator interaction, which stemmed from a learned behavior built in the black psyche as a means of assimilation and social conditioning. Petrine Archer-Straw describes how early performances of blacks were built into American society: “These performances stemmed from a historical imperative whereby blacks learned to perform to white needs in order to survive in white societies.”<sup>27</sup> Through song and dance, Gambino is addressing black needs in ritual and a mode of survival developed in early black entertainment.

#### The Effects of Scripted Identities in Hip-hop and Minstrelsy

Gambino expresses a structure of identities using dance, gestures, and movements. The movements he uses that express a cool and confident persona mirror characteristics hip-hop artists use to separate themselves in the music industry. Artist and rapper Jay-Z, over the past twenty years, has become a charismatic presence in hip-hop culture as a wordsmith, cultural influencer, and music mogul. His 2017 hip-hop music video, *The Story of O.J.*, exhibits a multitude of animated characters based in minstrelsy but with modern iterations. Gambino’s “This Is America” continues this conversation on what it means to be black in America, though with a much more violent and confrontational style. In his lyrics in *The Story of O.J.*, Jay-Z replaces *black* as a generalized term used to describe African Americans with the derogatory word *n—*. Positioned as a think piece on the historical identity of African Americans in the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 43.

United States, *The Story of O.J.* addresses how blackness has become a monolith built from racist identities. Ronald Jackson II describes the cultural differences manufactured with racial scripts: “A scripter is usually an institution or individual in a decision-making position who has the authority to develop and mass-distribute images.”<sup>28</sup> The institution of animated cartoons helped to disperse racist imagery.

Cartoons have traditionally been seen as juvenile and as a transient form of entertainment.<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Sammond discusses the transition of minstrelsy into the cartoon industry, contending it is important to see animators and cartoons as inheritors of and practitioners in the complex design of iconography, convention, and performance that is minstrelsy.<sup>30</sup> The fact that *The Story of O.J.* is presented in black and white (fig. 12) gives the impression of historicity. With fundamental racial tropes established in minstrelsy, *The Story of O.J.* is a contemporary version of cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, and Tom and Jerry. In addition to animation, music helps to provide context and references to racist sentiments. Jay-Z’s lyrics define blackness as a monolith comparing past and modern prejudices of African Americans. In the song he raps, “Light n—, dark n—, faux n—, real n—, Rich n—, poor n—, house n—, field n—” to describe black people in general. Sammond suggests American commercial animation did not appropriate more authentic blackface minstrelsy from the stage; instead cartoons developed emerging modes of technology and vernacular.<sup>31</sup> Since its inception, minstrelsy has relied on cultural, political, and social issues of white spectacle and fantasy. It is the white imagination that developed the minstrel in performance and narratives of

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<sup>28</sup> Ronald Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), 75.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 18.

<sup>30</sup> Sammond, *Birth of an Industry*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

racialized objectification from theatres to cartoons. Therefore, both *The Story of O.J.* and “This Is America” incorporate references to minstrelsy in order to make a statement about the history of racial objectification.

The identities Gambino exhibits include both calculated killer and laid-back, composed hip-hop artist. He switches and transitions between these characters through dance. In animation, songs signal changes in the narrative and direct the viewer’s attention. Smolko discusses Stephen Foster’s musical influence on Carl Stalling’s approach to musical scores in animation, noting, “There are also diegetic treatments of songs, as a character hums a melody or bursts into song. This technique can serve to define a character.”<sup>32</sup> The relationship to music and performance in minstrelsy is important to note, especially in shaping black identity. Smolko goes on to describe how melodic fragments were tied to character development. He explains music established drastic changes in performances through arrangement.<sup>33</sup> The historical period Jay-Z’s characters portray in his music video is vital when considering the impact songs and animation had on both minstrelsy and black characterizations.

Gambino, like Jay-Z, looks back to past representations of black identity. Whereas Gambino transforms from scene to scene through dance, in *The Story of O.J.*, Jaybo (fig. 5), an animated minstrel representation of the rapper Jay-Z, changes according to lyrics. Throughout the video, Jaybo’s appearance undergoes transformations based on past minstrel icons. The different minstrel forms of Jaybo simultaneously happen in sequence to a melodic hook, which encourages the viewer to sing along in a nursery rhyme fashion. Much like the influence of Carl Foster and Stephen Stalling on musical scores in animation that encouraged the audience to build

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<sup>32</sup> Joanna R. Smolko, “Southern Fried Foster: Representing Race and Place through Music in Looney Tunes Cartoons,” *American Music* 30, no. 3, (2012): 348.

<sup>33</sup> Smolko, “Southern Fried Foster,” 348.

relationships with arrangements and character development, Jay-Z narrates and takes on physical transformations into racial caricatures according to the music. His different characters easily blend in the inner city blight and Antebellum South. In response to the degradation and struggles around him, Jaybo gives suggestions concerning cultural prosperity by rapping about the importance of generational wealth. He is simultaneously a representation of historical minstrelsy and modern-day blackness, despite building financial means Jaybo is not immune to the suffering occurring in his environment. Jaybo is fascinating to watch as he transforms and moves throughout the screen. Historically, the minstrel had a big personality and was expected to take up space. Minstrels were in many instances encouraged to over entertain.

*The Story of O.J.* captures the tragedy of being labeled by stereotypes steeped in the tradition of minstrel entertainment. As Jaybo walks down the Brooklyn bridge at a rhythmic pace, he raps and changes into a variety of minstrel characters; switching class, status, age, and skin tone. He is perceived as the same black person in America even though he can manipulate and change his physical form. One interpretation of this part of the video, and the message of the video overall, is that Jay-Z wants to critique the way that African American people are seen as a monolith. Black masculinity is put on full display in both *The Story of O.J.* and “This Is America.” The posturing, appearance, and identity of Jaybo and Gambino are significant to hip-hop culture, and there is an obvious connection to unruly toxic black masculinity.

Jaybo and Gambino have direct similarities in their minstrel references as well as messaging. *The Story of O.J.* establishes Jaybo as an animated archetype, a hybrid of iconic cartoon characters and a popular minstrel character often referred to as “Sambo.” In the opening scene of “This is America,” Gambino mimics the iconic minstrel Jim Crow (fig. 13). Despite being derivatives of minstrels in animation and through performance, Gambino and Jaybo



represent black masculinity. When Jaybo walks through the inner city with his baggy pants and a gold necklace, he becomes susceptible to being racially profiled. Because of his demeanor, clothing, and race, he takes on the persona of a thug. The labels *thug* and *gangster* have evolved from describing a lawless individual to a word often used to describe African Americans in media.

Both Jaybo and Gambino's mannerisms reflect stereotypes developed from vaudeville. The coded messages found in Jaybo's movements and clothes display street grit; his facial expressions are nonchalant and hardened by his environment. Minstrels were not only considered lazy but untrustworthy due to their deviant and nonsensical characterizations. While Jaybo boasts a charismatic masculine bravado, Gambino is a compelling killer who lures in the viewer with his captivating movements. It is clear from Gambino's acts of assault he is not to be trusted. The gun is a prop that signals death, it isn't used as a source of protection but a tool to kill. Despite being a killer, Gambino is the center of attention and comes across at times unbothered by the unrest and violence occurring around him. Jaybo (fig. 14) walks around with confidence and communicates with his hands, pointing out all the atrocities taking place in the streets. He motions with shrugs and navigates through his neighborhood among drug addicts and dealers with ease. Jaybo, with his gloved hands, ushers in different scenes, whereas Gambino maneuvers with broad smiles and drama, creating despair and suffering. They each move in sync with the cadence of their rhymes. Miles White claims, "The ways in which rap has been perceived and consumed have arguably had a deleterious effect on how Black people are viewed not only in the United States but in other parts of the world."<sup>34</sup> Crystal Belle explains of her use of the term

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<sup>34</sup> Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap and the Performance of Masculinity* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 88.

*thug*, “When I conceptualize Black masculinity in hip-hop, there is a merging of intellectualism and the clichéd ‘thug.’ I use the term *thug* as a play on the stereotypical representations of Black men and masculinity in the media.”<sup>35</sup> Jaybo exists as a stereotypical representation of a minstrel within a contemporary context of a black masculine hip-hop artist. With the combination of hip-hop, animation, and minstrelsy, Jaybo becomes a seamless fictitious animated character through song. Gambino borrows from Jaybo by using posturing as an effective means to reference minstrelsy and hip-hop. Posturing had a significant role in minstrelsy with reoccurring archetypes like Sambo, Stepin FetchIt, Buck and Mammie, a quick smile, confused face, and slouching back promoted subservience. These were accompanied by movements such as *shucking* and *jiving* to the racially charged lyrics in popular ragtime songs, which incorporated humor and likability. After standing and positioning themselves on stage as buffoons, minstrels were expected to talk, sing, and dance their way into the hearts of the white audience. The goal was to see black entertainers as a subject to racism for white spectatorship; their bodies, performance, and actions on stage were forced to please the audience at any cost. Gambino exhibits over entertaining behavior with his diabolical actions as a killer; his behavior coupled with such a massive video production consisting of continuity editing, actors, explosions, choreography, and cinematic shots reinforce the grandiosity of his actions.

#### Critique of Racializing Bodies in Performance and Video

Gambino is not excluded from the racial complexities brought about by his performance. In his book about scripting the black male body, Ronald Jackson comments, “The indisputable and tragic reality is that Black males have been pathologized and labeled as violent/criminal, sexual and incompetent/uneducated individuals.”<sup>36</sup> These labels could easily be used to describe

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<sup>35</sup> Crystal Belle, “From Jay Z to Dead Prez,” *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 4 (2014): 289.

<sup>36</sup> Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, 128.

Gambino's performance. Explaining the subjectivity of the black figure in minstrelsy, Deborah Thompson states, "The history of Africans in America is a history of violence, invasion, and subjugation in their most extreme forms, including both literal and figurative lynchings and rapes."<sup>37</sup> The lynching of Jaybo at the end of *The Story of O.J.* (fig. 15) places identity on his animated body, informing the white spectator how to treat, disconnect themselves from, and devalue black people in general. Subjectivity in minstrelsy reflects the cruel treatment African Americans have endured in this country. According to Thompson, the promotion of violence suggests that "the history of African Americans in theatre is a history preceded by blackface minstrelsy, another kind of metaphoric rape; or, as the title of Lott's study so precisely puts it, of 'love and theft' of identity."<sup>38</sup> "This is America" has the potential to agitate and dig up cultural trauma. The video provides visual imagery for African Americans to relive the painful reality of violence and adds to the ongoing cultural memories of suffering depicted in animation, hip-hop videos, and theatrical spaces. Joe Feagin, Hernan Vera, and Pinar Batur discuss racism as a social fabric of America, noting, "Racism, however, encompasses more than the way whites view the black "others." It also involves the way whites view themselves as a result of participating in a culturally and structurally racist society."<sup>39</sup> The video challenges how white Americans view themselves by emphasizing violence in relationship to the lack of empathy shown to African Americans during times of duress.

"This Is America" can also be understood through the lens of critical race theory, a theoretical framework through which we can view race and racism in literature, art, and other forms of cultural expression. Critical race theory sees external signs of identity as superficial

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<sup>37</sup> Deborah Thompson, "Blackface, Rape, and Beyond: Rehearsing Interracial Dialogue in Sally's Rape," *Theatre Journal* 48, no. 2 (1996): 125.

<sup>38</sup> Thompson, "Blackface, Rape, and Beyond," 125.

<sup>39</sup> Joe Feagin, Hernan Vera, and Pinar Batur, *White Racism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 13.

markers of race. Kwame Anthony Appiah defines racialism as certain fundamental characteristics a group shares with one another that another race does not, in contrast to intrinsic racism and extrinsic racism.<sup>40</sup> Racializing Gambino as a male hip-hop artist who entertains with violence (in spite of the fact that he is reflecting murders committed at the hands of white Americans) places him in a category of moral and intellectual despot. A subset of scripts assigned to his black male body goes back centuries. Jackson explains, “Black bodies were inscribed with a set of meanings, which helped to perpetuate the scripter’s racial ideology. Through these scripts, race gradually became its own corporeal politics.”<sup>41</sup> Jackson also argues that black masculinist scholarship can’t afford to accept, approve, or adopt the same cultural and social agendas as traditional white masculinist scholarship.<sup>42</sup> By incorporating the feminization of Baker in his performance, Gambino initially sets out to challenge presupposed hegemony associated with masculinity and considers an alternative narrative to the mainstream presentation of critique on black masculinist scholarship. There is a deliberate design to separate and ascribe morality to specific groups of people. Oftentimes black identity in America is limited to and prematurely defined by external factors decided by the dominant culture, specifically white males.

Phrases like *black-on-black crime* serve to cement the concept of an entire race as a monolith. Jo Ellen Fair speaks to the racialization of being black especially within context of the labeling phrase *black-on-black*. She explains, “Though racialization need not be negative in impact and need not have negative meanings associated with classification schemes, it usually is

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Wake and Simon Malpas, *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2013), 134.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

a negative force for the group defined as Other.”<sup>43</sup> The complexity of Gambino’s role in “This Is America” speaks to the distinctions carved out between black and white spaces. Fair, in her article on the use of the label *black-on-black*, refers to the social and political construction of the term historically. She goes on to explain, “As a social and political category, the meaning of “black” varies through contestation over the term. Yet, in its dominant use in white American and European culture, “black” refers to a static set of trans-cultural and essentialized racial characteristics.”<sup>44</sup> The static characteristics go back to the extrinsic racialization in the messaging of Gambino as a nonchalant and immoral minstrel like figure who dances and promotes violence.

Historical and cultural objectification was a process of making black people appear distinctively different as a race. Feagin, Vera, and Pinar break down ways in which racism can exist as a ritual:

Racist rites involve minority victims, several categories of white participants (officiants, acolytes, and passive observers), a range of acts (gestures, words, avoidance, physical attacks), an assortment of instruments (workplace appraisal forms, burning crosses, police batons), and an array of myths (stereotypes about black Americans) that legitimate racist acts in perpetrator’s minds.<sup>45</sup>

Vaudeville shows highlighting the misrepresentation of black people, as well as animated cartoon characters like Jaybo, categorize individuals as objects rather than subjects separate from the dominant culture. Frantz Fanon, who wrote seminal works on post-coloniality and race theory, described racialization in these terms, “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.”<sup>46</sup> Fanon notes that the concept of blackness only exists in contrast to the concept of whiteness, showing race as purely an external identity. This is

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<sup>43</sup> Jo E. Fair, ““Black-on-Black”: Race, Space and News of Africans and African Americans,” *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 22, no. 1 (1994): 35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1166406>.

<sup>44</sup> Fair, “Black-on-Black,” 35.

<sup>45</sup> Feagin, Vera, and Pinar, *White Racism*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 110.

one explanation for why an audience would lack empathy for black victims seen in viral videos and become desensitized to their pain and suffering.

One way of proclaiming the difference between the dominant culture and the Other was to develop characterization and assignments that further promoted racial differences. Kwame Appiah defines intrinsic racism as the idea that people of the dominant race are naturally entitled to special consideration—the belief that being born into the white or dominant race means you inherently should receive privilege. Stuart Hall analyzes this notion, suggesting black people were reduced to an inferior status and placed socially and physically in servitude because of white supremacy. From this vantage point, black victimization in the 21st century is instead reframed as a result of blackness and *black-on-black* crime, excusing the dominant race from responsibility for widespread race-based violence. Since slavery, black bodies were given a specific subscript that developed systems and beliefs to impose severe injustices. Hall compares the destiny of a black person during slavery and segregation was related to their culture and nature, especially during colonial rule. He explains, “For blacks, ‘primitivism’ (Culture) and ‘blackness’ (Nature) became interchangeable.”<sup>47</sup> Also, he states, “Not only were blacks represented in terms of their essential characteristics. They were reduced to their essence. Laziness, simple fidelity, mindless ‘cooning,’ trickery, childishness belonged to blacks as a race, as a species.”<sup>48</sup> Jaybo in animation and Gambino at times during performance intrinsically become a representation of the black male in contemporary minstrel form, with a set of identities built from historical and social constructs designed to objectify them as separate and Other, and therefore deserving of whatever suffering befalls them.

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<sup>47</sup> Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2013), 245.

<sup>48</sup> Hall, Evans, and Nixon, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 245.

What makes Gambino's video unique is his use of performance to describe violence and contextualize for white audiences a need for self-reflection and witnessing. The way he moves creates suspense and speculation. While in character he initiates the detriment of black people by killing them with a handgun and semi-automatic weapon, which is a far cry from the spectacle established by traditional roles of the black minstrel. The detachment and disconnect to black bodies who are killed, violated and viewed in media furthers the desensitization and lack of acknowledgement of witnessing. Kelly Oliver writes, "Identity and difference need not be opposed. Our recognition of ourselves need not come at the expense of others. Identity need not be the result of expelling or excluding difference."<sup>49</sup> She goes on to say, "We come to ourselves through our relations with others and not against or in spite of them."<sup>50</sup> As a viral video showing African Americans being assaulted, "This Is America" makes the case that empathy and personal responsibility are required in order to create social and political change. Gambino as a hip-hop artist offers a video that allows him to exist as performer and critic. "This Is America" is a critique that positions itself in and outside the realm of music by entering into the arena of social criticism.

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<sup>49</sup> Kelly Oliver, "The Look of Love," *Hypatia* 16, No. 3: (2001), 73.

<sup>50</sup> Oliver, "The Look of Love," 73.

## Chapter Three

### Surveillance of the Black Body

In this chapter, I explore the history of racialized surveillance in the United States, how such surveillance has inspired social activism, and how the connections between surveillance and activism are portrayed in “This Is America.” The white gaze and surveillance as a cultural practice developed social and political norms for viewing African Americans in public spaces such as schools, parks, department stores, and restaurants. The way in which African Americans have been watched, and by whom, throughout the history of America has brought about anxiety, turmoil, and violence. Although surveillance can be viewed as intrusive it also can provide transparency and give context to past events. Surveillance in “This Is America” simulates black victimization in social media, suggest surveillance as a means of survival, and grapples with the result of suspicions brought about through the white gaze.

Surveillance of black bodies in America originated with the transatlantic slave trade. During this horrific time, enslaved Africans were viewed as property. The enslaved were watched and handled with cruelty under severe dehumanizing conditions. In *Dark Matters*, Simone Browne researches white slaveowners’ branding of blackness as a method of surveillance and how branding presented the enslaved as a commodity. Even after slavery ended, the effects of being treated as chattel property continued with the cultural practice of surveillance that led to segregated spaces from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 through the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s. In recent years, from Rodney King to Michael Brown, photography, video, and social media have captured the treatment African Americans have endured; as a result of both of being black and being watched.

As the action in “This Is America” takes place at ground level, children are shown recording events on cellphones from a mezzanine (fig. 16). In the 21st century, cellphones have



become documenting devices used to share experiences. Children watching videos, seeing others live stream, and viewing photographs on their phones is a commonplace practice of engagement. However, it has also become a survival mechanism for capturing police brutality. With the use of cellphones and police body cameras, surveillance is now viewed as a mode of documentation but also as a mode of survival. By showing young people recording the violent events of the video, “This Is America” suggest the social movements and cultural shifts that happen when viral videos spark public opinion about black criminalization, assault, and death. The children are looking back with an oppositional gaze through their cellphones, while Gambino looks back at the viewer between his dance sequences. His violence and oppositional gaze are direct and confronting; he wants to send a blatant message to his audience to witness the killing taking place. On witnessing the pain of others, Susan Sontag describes the effects of processing such visuals, “For photographs to accuse, and to alter conduct, they must shock.”<sup>51</sup> Due to the sudden violence in “This Is America,” surveillance, restricted mobility and victimization are brought to the forefront. Although rioting seems to be a permanent fixture in the video, it is the surveillance of children, seeing their joy, innocence, and fragility in danger that serves as a reminder of America’s violent history and adverse attitude towards African Americans.

#### History of Racialized Surveillance in America

The cultural practice of surveillance of African Americans began with slavery but has continued in various forms to the present day. Even after African Americans were no longer legally considered property, their presence in public spaces was overtly restricted during the Jim Crow era. Post-Jim Crow, African Americans still cautiously navigate public and private spaces conscious of the dangers their presence creates. In this section, I examine how current-day

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 81.

anxieties on the part of African Americans with being seen in public is the result of a centuries-long history of being constantly surveilled.

Surveillance of black bodies reaches as far back as the crossing of Africans shipped and packaged during the Transatlantic slave trade. Once on American shores, African people were handled, protected, and regulated by overseers, men whose role was to enforce harsh punishment and drive production. I feel here it is worth noting overseer includes the word “see.” Built into the plantation was a language that emphasized explicitly how enslaved Africans should be watched and surveilled. The cultural practice of branding was also applied during slavery to signify the enslaved as a commodity. According to Simone Browne, the branding of the slave was key to the historical formation of surveillance.<sup>52</sup> To mark the identity of African Americans as slaves and property, instruments like branding irons were used to create intimidation and fear. The expectation to continually watch black bodies expanded from overseers to officers to white citizens, the goal to maintain power still remains in many facets within society.

Physical and verbal branding of the enslaved allowed for overseers and white citizens to be aware of where black people belonged. After the Reconstruction Era, African Americans were still regulated by *sundown* towns, which posted signs demanding “colored people” to leave town by sundown and return to their respective neighborhoods.<sup>53</sup> This racist practice added to the immobility and surveillance of African Americans. During the Great Migration, beginning in the 1920s, African Americans searching for a better life began to migrate north. In the Midwest and on the East Coast, they would come to experience similar housing and educational restrictions that occurred in the American South. James Loewen, in his research on the misconception of the

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<sup>52</sup> Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 92.

<sup>53</sup> James W. Loewen, “Sundown Towns and Counties: Racial Exclusion in the South,” *Southern Cultures* 15, no. 1 (2009): 23.

North from 1890 to the 1960s, writes, “In Illinois, for example, 502 towns were all white or almost so, decade after decade; many still are. Research confirms the formal and informal racial policies of 219 of them. Of those, 218, or 99.5%, kept out African Americans.”<sup>54</sup> Discriminatory housing practices during Jim Crow continued to regulate African Americans into geographical segregation, which isolated their existence to specific areas and perpetuated surveillance on their movement outside of those restricted spaces. The racist and inequitable policies implemented by white realtors and banks to keep African Americans from infiltrating into white suburbs eventually lead to the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Unfortunately, the predatorial and discriminatory practice of *redlining* entailed lenders drawing a red line around neighborhoods to inform lenders on areas to avoid based on race and ethnicity began as early as 1934. Such policies deemed many African Americans unsuitable for loan and insurance policies, which in return, broadened the wealth gap amongst African Americans and their white counterparts. Sundown towns and redlining not only reinforced segregation but demonstrates how modern-day policing of predominantly black neighborhoods grew from the surveillance of overseers and sundown towns. Segregation and branding cultivated racist practices that signaled to African Americans they didn’t belong as well as educated white citizens how they should be watched. Historically, American public spaces and structures were not necessarily built with the slave nor the freed black body in mind, and thus, surveillance lead by white public sentiment helped to institutionalize laws, segregation, and severe policing of African Americans.

Cultural surveillance linked to slavery and Jim Crow has created tremendous suffering and trauma. Institutional racism has created a collective memory shared among African Americans rooted in cultural trauma and oppression. From the fight for human rights to the

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<sup>54</sup> Loewen, “Sundown Towns and Counties,” 23.

administration of geographical space, equality for African Americans is constantly weighed in public discourse. Consequently, the need to understand human rights and civil rights is a conversation that includes the economic plight in marginalized communities, environmental justice in terms of redlining, natural resources and wealth distribution, and the proximity of low-income residents to hazardous materials. These societal issues and longstanding racial oppressions impact social behaviors and pose threats of post-traumatic stress disorder for African Americans in marginalized communities. As Carolyn Finney points out in her book *Black Faces and White Spaces*, “Critical race theory and black cultural studies offer crucial insights into understanding the African American environmental consciousness and the historic contingencies that have shaped that experience/process.”<sup>55</sup> Both slavery and Jim Crow relied on and encouraged scrutiny of African American movement on micro and macro levels. African Americans were perpetually aware of the very real physical risks of being in the wrong place, as whippings and lynching were common forms of punishment for being outside the space the dominant culture had defined as appropriate for African Americans to inhabit. What was identified as “their place” was often marked and defined by signage, physical perimeters, discriminatory policies, markings on their physical bodies, or nooses hung on trees.

In the present day, physical and verbal markers of white dominance also continue to send messages to African Americans that they are being watched or that they are unwelcomed. After the Civil War, a tactic to mark the legacy of Southern culture was established with strategically placed Confederate statues and flags. There has been an ongoing debate over whether to remove such statues from public areas and place them in history museums; many Americans feel they remain as symbols of racism. Racial slurs and generalizations distinctively erased culture and

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<sup>55</sup> Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 52.

denigrated groups of people who were not white; words like "colored" and "coon" were verbal markers used to identify and classify African Americans and other races. Semantic branding has evolved, as African Americans are presently criminalized with the label of "thug." Overseeing the behavior of black bodies is no longer the explicit job of overseers, but instead is carried out with less overt authority but with similar physical and psychological consequences by police officers and white citizens.

### Racialized Surveillance and the White Gaze

The relationship between law enforcement, white mob mentality, and African American communities has been documented throughout history, and most recently relived and expressed in viral videos depicting police brutality resulting in social movements. In "This Is America," surveillance exists as a duality between the feared and fearful, troublemakers and police. For the children recording the surveillance, their movement and phones take in the sights surrounding Gambino. They are able to record other children dancing as well as the rioters and police in the background. The children on the mezzanine are alert and prepared, some have on white bandanas to cover their faces. It is possible the children who are vigilant in documenting the violence are masking their identities or mimicking what has been demonstrated from past protesters on social media. This act of documentation is in itself a form of surveillance and suggests what can happen when marginalized people begin to look back at the white gaze, record racial injustices, and capture communities fed up with being mistreated. Gambino navigating through such a volatile space visually depicts the traumatic relationship African Americans have with the white gaze. He beckons the viewer to look at him directly as a culprit to the violence taking place, as well as a reflexive agent who is telling the story of victimization of racism and gun violence.

When considering a racialized theory of black bodies from a Eurocentric gaze there is an implied knowledge base where active surveillance stems from white power, privilege, and hegemony gained from historical means of oppression. In *Black Bodies, White Gaze: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, George Yancy outlines various ways in which African Americans are seen. There can be harmful ramifications when the white gaze is promoted as a social practice. George Yancy claims, “White gazing is a violent process.”<sup>56</sup> The practice of white gazing is developed by a structure of achievements and accomplishments that normalize its practice due to the institutions, fear, values, and power it asserts.<sup>57</sup> In other words, white gazing is what Yancy describes as an embodied phenomenon, a mode of social engagement, a form of practice that presupposes a thick, historical sedimentation or encrustation of white supremacy.<sup>58</sup> When whiteness begins to gaze and survey black bodies there is an element of presumption of wrongdoing, a difference not a part of the norm. Yancy describes how whiteness is seen as un-raced and universal; anything other than whiteness is perceived as Other. However, within whiteness a lie is contained, one that is dialectically linked to the brutalization, dehumanization, and violence imposed upon black bodies and bodies of color.<sup>59</sup> The lie is formed from the notion whiteness is the standard of morality and decency, and the ultimate judge of character. The white superiority complex established with gazing forms not only difference by race, but a hierarchy where the relinquishing of power is met with formidable and violent resistance.

The cultural practice of surveillance rooted in slavery and the Jim Crow era continues to normalize whiteness and the white gaze on the racialized body. If we view Gambino and his

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<sup>56</sup> Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 243.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

fellow participants through this lens, we see them as embodying danger, as doing something illicit by default. As seen by the white gaze, as Yancey describes it, Gambino, the young children dancing, and those filming might be perceived as criminals, troublemakers, or a disturbance. Although, Gambino is a killer, once again he is re-enacting and simulating killing caused by white Americans. Viewing them this way is then used to justify violence and assault. This analysis is reflected in the fact that violence against black bodies in the video go unwitnessed as with the gospel choir and the corpses that are dragged out of the frame without comment.

Surveillance is ultimately concerned with the organization of space: the white gaze watches to see if black bodies are where they should be. Both blacks and whites in America have been presented with contested spaces which inextricably challenge and mark geography. Jim Crow, as an institution, helped to map the spatial geographies for violence to occur post-Civil War, and methods of housing discrimination practiced during *redlining* from the 1920s to 1960s continued the racial lines of separation. In her book *The Souls of White Folk*, Veronica Watson theorizes whiteness of spaces from a cultural and racial standpoint; she claims that over the past ten to fifteen years, scholars in the field of geography have come to embrace cultural studies and critical race studies to reframe the connection between race and space/place.<sup>60</sup> This shift for scholars begins to consider that space/place is a contributing factor in producing racial meaning because power becomes the means by which certain associations and spaces are assigned.<sup>61</sup> Watson's analysis indirectly explores how racial meaning and branding people within specific spaces can perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions, similar to the phrasing *black-on-black* crime, which implies a term exclusively used to label criminality specific to African Americans.

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<sup>60</sup> Veronica T. Watson, *Souls of White Folk: African American Writers Theorize Whiteness* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2013), 106.

<sup>61</sup> Watson, *Souls of White Folk*, 106.

Racialized surveillance and the white gaze are fueled by power and produce and manage spaces that assign racial meaning and ultimately place a value on human life. Yancy sums up how the black body has been gazed upon throughout history:

When one thinks about the history of the Black body within white America, the theme of racialized immobility is a salient one; it is a form of violence exercised through the corporeal and spatial policing of the Black body. The history of slavery, Black codes, Jim Crow, white neighborhood covenants, lynching, and stop-and-frisk are some of the ways in which the Black body's agency has been militated against.<sup>62</sup>

Created by the white gaze is a set of structures that restrict and limit mobility for African Americans. Navigating between unspoken rules and racist policies is what African Americans endured on plantations and still encounter in their communities.

Social, political, and economic institutionalized racism creates barriers and challenges related to space. The spatial boundaries that exist in the United States regarding black matters involves spatial matters according to Barbara Combs, who explains, "Occupying space can be an act of opposition, and as people of color continue to demand and command opportunities formerly denied them, the political and social opposition against black progress mounts."<sup>63</sup> Combs emphasizes how, as long as black and brown bodies can be "out of place," surveillance is necessary to maintain racist societies. Specifically, she proposes Jim Crow segregation was maintained through the means of excessive surveillance, containment, and policing of black bodies.<sup>64</sup> Her assertion is that white surveillance during Jim Crow maintained a system of black subordination and white dominance in social relations by incentivizing through violence, economic, and psychological coercion for black bodies to stay in their place.<sup>65</sup> Who determines

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>63</sup> Barbara Harris Combs, "Everyday Racism Is Still Racism: The Role of Place in Theorizing Continuing Racism in Modern US Society," *Phylon* 55, nos. 1 & 2 (2018): 40.

<sup>64</sup> Combs, "Everyday Racism Is Still Racism," 52.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 52.



this place and how the body arrives is a discussion filled with questions concerning space, power, intent, and societal expectations. Gambino seems to understand the importance of spatial relationship African Americans have experienced between survival, victimization, and the power structure which maintains its grip and influence on rule and dominance. “This Is America” is a cinematic critique advocating for attention.

Surveillance on black communities falsely and superfluously justifies the organization of space. “This Is America” also shows the surveillance assigned to racialized black bodies. Surveillance in “This Is America” is exercised by children, police officers, and others running amongst the destruction happening in the warehouse. White surveillance is represented by the police presence in the video. But the children recording the commotion on their cellphones from the rafters are also surveilling and recording the scene. It is important to remember that Gambino is re-enacting the racial violence thrust upon African Americans by white Americans. On the surface, the video entertains; however, with more in-depth exploration, the video takes to task many white Americans who participate in the long tradition of surveillance of the Other. As a performer, Gambino takes on the role of surveyor over the industrialized terrain. Between choreographed moments, Gambino stands transfixed and looks directly into the camera, gazing in opposition. Still, it is his dancing and the way he moves about freely that speak to the spatial concerns African Americans deal with under constant surveillance when living in marginalized communities; his dancing suggests what Combs considers to be an oppositional act to the violence. Gambino’s movement is not only filled with blackness, which is inspired by African popular dances as described in Chapter Two, but his movement and performance embody resistance and contention against the historical loss of agency felt by African Americans.

Racist rhetoric in America has created public spaces filled with tension submerged between white suspicions and black fears. In her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell hooks recalls, “In the absence of the reality of whiteness, I learned as a child that to be ‘safe’ it was important to recognize the power of whiteness, even to fear it, and to avoid encounter.”<sup>66</sup> Surveillance for African Americans historically indicates a form of psychological conditioning. There seems to be explicit as well as unspoken rules of surviving the onslaught of physical assault, gun violence, and seeking safety within public spaces, which requires an equal understanding of the fear of whiteness and the white gaze. The children on the mezzanine who begin to record the disturbance below understand survival and the importance of their cellphones, but also, how people outside their neighborhoods view them.

While theorists have articulated how the white gaze has subjected black bodies to restrictions and violence, those resisting racist ideology and practice in the United States have used the concept of “looking back” with cellphones and cameras as a strategy to regain power and draw attention to the damage the white gaze does. hooks speaks of black people possessing an oppositional gaze and desire to look back, claiming: “That all attempts to repress our/black people’s right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking we defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.’”<sup>67</sup> An approach to combat violence happening in African American communities is to look back at the white gaze with technological modes of surveillance. Since the Civil Rights Movement, photography and video helped to capture the danger and mood of those exercising their constitutional rights to protest. hooks asserts that in order to address whiteness in the black imagination, one must face written histories that erase

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<sup>66</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (London: Routledge, 2008), 98.

<sup>67</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2014), 116.

and deny, that reinvent the past to make the present vision of racial harmony and pluralism more plausible.<sup>68</sup> When children from different social and political identities record on their phones to take part in the act of looking back and come together to compare the effects of the white gaze, they are seeking the kind of plural and unified reality that hooks writes about in her book.

The children taking in the sights of violence in the video are aware of the power of surveillance and their ability to use cellphones, a ubiquitous tool for recording and storytelling, to turn the gaze back on the dominant culture. Being out of place and resisting the gaze could result in danger, for those in the dominant culture have demonstrated the power to enforce their ideas of who should move freely and even exist. A normalization of whiteness and the institutionalized histories perpetuating and promoting surveillance over those appearing different has been met with resistance. However, the children recording in “This Is America” represent a desire to challenge the white gaze with a critical eye provides exposure and an opportunity of deconstructing the power structures that stoke surveillance and violence. For the children, the need to record the disturbance on their phones and cover their faces signal defiance against power structures. With their phones, they are looking to face their opposition. What their rebellious actions also demonstrates is a need to report how white surveillance continues to violate the space they occupy. Their surveillance serves as a method of contingency in terms of survival. By identifying their phones as a means to provide evidence of black victimization, they are critically assessing danger and attempting to resist against the realities of past cultural practices of being watched and labeled.

In fact, the act of documenting atrocities—of defiant looking “to change reality,” as hooks put it—can be traced back much further than the Civil Rights movement. Teresa Goddu

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<sup>68</sup> hooks, *Belonging*, 98.

explains how visual technologies and modes of visual display helped to deploy a campaign against slavery. Goddu explains, “From its outset, the US anti-slavery movement embraced new visual technologies and modes of visual display to bring slavery into focus. Pictorial representations of slavery were central to the campaign.”<sup>69</sup> Goddu claims the bourgeois mode of seeing, the panoramic perspective provided emerging middle-class viewers a commanding point of view and mastery over the social and natural landscape.<sup>70</sup> She goes on to state, “the panoramic perspective provided the white Northern viewer access to a position of specular dominance over the landscape of slavery as well as the body of the slave.”<sup>71</sup> Goddu is describing both a need to document the brutalization of black bodies in addition to appealing to the middle-class Northern audience who possessed the power and means to create change. For example, the picture of “Whipping Peter” in 1863, an escaped slave who had his photo taken during a medical examination in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was used by abolitionists to show white northerners the brutality of slavery. Peter’s raised flesh and scarring would become a leading photograph in the campaign against slavery. The continuity found in “This Is America” is very similar to anti-slavery photographic material (fig. 17). According to Goddu, anti-slavery’s panoramic views were exhibited in two forms: the individual view of slavery and particular scenes and composite views which were assembled based on a variety of pictures on a single sheet to produce a continuous format.<sup>72</sup> The video gains value when witnessing occurs and when the video is shared. Gambino is attempting to inform and make aware the effects of gun violence and cultural practices that subject black bodies to danger and assault similar to the abolitionist anti-slavery campaigns. “This Is America” exhibits a sequence of continuous scenes that resemble in design,

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<sup>69</sup> Teresa A. Goddu, “Anti-Slavery’s Panoramic Perspective” *MELUS* 39, no. 2 (2014): 12.

<sup>70</sup> Goddu, “Anti-Slavery’s Panoramic Perspective,” 13.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

a multitude of angles and perspectives that are comparable to the panoramic perspective provided to Northern whites during slavery.

Goddu's examination of slavery images moving white observers to action highlights the importance of the white gaze *seeing* the Other's plight in order to bring about change. However, racialized spaces have become so normalized in the United States that, even when violence or inequity is visible to the white gaze, it is possible for white communities not to observe or process it. Vincent Jungkunz and Julie White speak on the white gaze and surveillance in terms of space:

Given the cultural-political milieus involved, many ordinary white subjects have been rendered blind to racial injustice and racist actions. Thus, when the white gaze "sees" nonwhite citizens in the least habitable areas of a city, it simply observes a population in its place, where it belongs.<sup>73</sup>

Based on Jungkunz and White's assessment, those who apply the white gaze to the video possibly could receive all of the violence as expected and normal. Gambino plays into this tendency for the dominant American culture to see violence and dereliction as the norm for black communities. In fact, one of the issues with the video is that white audiences might be so distracted by the over-the-top performance happening in the foreground they might possibly overlook the disaster unfolding in the background. There is a possibility Gambino is commenting how white America is obsessed with black culture in terms of entertainment as a willful distraction from the realities of systemic racism. Much like in minstrelsy, as long as the white spectator is entertained, there is no need to see or acknowledge the black subjectivity of the performer as problematic, especially when the black body becomes an object of desire. The abandoned warehouse in which the video is set coincides with the type of degradation and

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<sup>73</sup> Vincent Jungkunz and Julie White, "Ignorance, Innocence, and Democratic Responsibility: Seeing Race, Hearing Racism," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 438.

economic downfall that occurs with white flight. The growth of suburbs in the late 1940s subsequently expanded the underdevelopment of marginalized communities as whites began to flee inner cities taking along jobs and economic opportunities. White flight coupled with the discriminatory housing practice of *redlining* during the Great Migration makes it more apparent how marginalized communities were established. Plus, the warehouse reinforces the dominant culture's notion of what it means to exist in poor neighborhoods: in the background, people are shown as dangerous, desperate, and unruly. The fictional conditions happening in the video provides a backdrop of people running with weapons, dragging dead bodies, and setting cars ablaze, which also gives justification for the cultural practice of surveillance and over policing. Those who are able to witness "This Is America" are made aware of the power in the white gaze and potentially the power it has on African American communities.

Artists and every day citizens have used media to make others aware of how African Americans are viewed in public. Surveillance that occurs in public and private spaces can become problematic. Both public and private surveillance are related parts of the same problem rather than wholly discrete.<sup>74</sup> The problem between the viewer and the viewed often relates to power structures established by cultural practices. Torin Monahan comments on the cultural practice of surveillance, states, "Artistic works or performances, which enroll others as witnesses or actors, can also serve as vital agents of social change."<sup>75</sup> Monahan points out the agency of the watched is a crucial aspect of inquiry into surveillance as a cultural practice.<sup>76</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, black subjectivity is demanding on the black performer and artists. Yet, Gambino somehow simulates racial violence, looks back into the screen in opposition, and

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<sup>74</sup> Neil M. Richards, "The Dangers of Surveillance," *Harvard Law Review* 126, no. 7 (2013): 1935.

<sup>75</sup> Torin Monahan, "Surveillance as Cultural Practice," *The Sociological Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2011): 501.

<sup>76</sup> Monahan, "Surveillance as Cultural Practice," 498.

requires the attention of his viewers, all while using shock value, his lyrics, and movement to comment on the historical and racial climate of America.

“This Is America” uses performance and violence to uncover the impact surveillance has on the spectator, also it brings about an awareness and alternative way of seeing and witnessing African Americans as victims. Granted “This Is America” primarily focuses on Gambino, the spatial development of the video is aimed at sharing multiple points of view. The surveillance occurring in the video is easy to connect with due to continuity cutting, a seamless narrative is developed but it is the interaction with children and swift action constantly fleeing from the picture plane that offers critical exploration for the spectator. As the video proceeds, there are bodies being carried off the screen, massacred, and left behind as if they were disposable. George Yancy describes the identity politics associated with surveillance, “In America, whiteness is the so-called norm, the universal standard against which nonwhite bodies are particularized as raced, as ersatz, as trouble.”<sup>77</sup> He also states, “The association of whiteness with terror vis-à-vis the black body is not limited to a bygone past, but exists as a contemporary reality within a context where whiteness continues to perform both discursive and nondiscursive acts that demonize the black body, tear it asunder, and delimit its mobility.”<sup>78</sup> If these acts of demonizing happen without witnessing and empathy during surveillance or viewing, then the victimization of African Americans will continue with little inquiry or critique. Surveillance as a cultural practice has to go beyond racialized stereotypes, fears, and generalizations in order to acknowledge African American experiences. In order for change to happen, the viewer must consider the circumstances and conditions that allow for such unrest to exist.

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<sup>77</sup> Carol E. Henderson, *America and the Black Body: Identity Politics in Print and Visual Culture* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), 268.

<sup>78</sup> Henderson, *America and the Black Body*, 268.

## Social Movements Inspired by Black Victimization

Identifying parallels between various disenfranchised groups labeled as Other has brought about discourse around intersectionality and the suffering, exploitation, and injustices African Americans have endured. Community engagement efforts such as the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter movements have resulted in social and political coordination against institutionalized powers and racism. Being seen as separate from the dominant culture has led to massive amounts of brutality and unthinkable terror for African Americans. The genocide of America's indigenous and African people brought to this country during slavery created a social and racial caste system rooted in surveillance, torture, and bloodshed. "This Is America" allows for viewers to see surveillance from varying perspectives. The video positions people being surveilled throughout the industrial space: there are police officers attempting to keep order, children documenting and watching Gambino dance and kill, and rioters who are causing violent disruptions. Gambino's video provides material for analysis and a platform for critical social theory to contextualize what happens when desensitized black bodies go unwitnessed. Images of slain African Americans, shared around the world on social media, have conjured up a collective need to act against racist individuals, systems, and ideas that contribute to, and benefit from, African American suffering.

Discourse on visual culture continues to grow as technology and imagery merge and conjure past sentiments, reflect current realities, and project future understandings of the world. Gambino's ability to include subjectivity, performance, and gun violence bridges social constructs, speaks to race as well as gender regarding masculinity, and positions hip-hop as a catalyst for research, especially on the subject of critical social theory. Kimberlé Crenshaw's article *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of*



*Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (1989) on intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry and praxis shifted the relationship between activist and academic communities.<sup>79</sup> Although, Gambino isn't claiming the title of activist, he has developed a video filled with violent content and suggestive portrayals of racially charged imagery to be a source of criticism. Not only did the video cause a paradigm shift culturally, it also implied a need for awareness and accountability within American society.

In Chapter Two, I investigated black subjectivity in performance and the use of gun violence in Gambino's video, but here I want to address how hip-hop as a social platform and social movements prompted by visual aides can influence and connect surveillance, the white gaze, and disregard of African Americans as victims. Patricia Collins, who writes about black feminism and critical social theory, offers an analysis on the contributions of intersectionality and its significance in producing ideas, concerns, and ability to foster social change. Collins talks about intersectionality as a knowledge project with a history of critical theorizing built in. She writes:

Theorizing resistance has been essential to the knowledge projects of oppressed peoples. Such projects aim to address the deep-seated concerns of people who are subordinated within domestic and global expressions of racism, sexism, capitalism, colonialism, and similar systems of political domination and economic exploitation.<sup>80</sup>

Analyzing how marginalized communities resist racism through scholarship is crucial to understanding how race is studied and critiqued in theory and through lived experiences.

Intersectionality is at the core of what Collins also describes as racial projects. These knowledge based and racial projects intersect to form important sites of contestation.<sup>81</sup> For

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24. <sup>79</sup> Patricia H. Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>80</sup> Collins, *Intersectionality As Critical Social Theory*, 88.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

example, these sites can manifest in social movements and hip-hop videos. Collins goes so far as to claim hip-hop as a racial project for disenfranchised youth in a global context, one where black and brown youth claim a voice in popular culture.<sup>82</sup> As a racial project, it is similar to the critical race theory of the 1990s that advanced multicultural and antiracist initiatives.<sup>83</sup> “This Is America” as a framework or racial project comments on a multitude of issues. There is an intersectionality of identity politics occurring between Gambino’s masculine black body as performer and the surrounding environment of violence. An effective component in the video is the black body; the way it is observed, looked at, and treated articulates sentiments from disenfranchised youth. Gambino and the children who record with their phones give voice to the suppression African Americans experience. With such overwhelming and shocking violence, Gambino sends a message to the viewer they can no longer remain impervious to the obvious mistreatment of African Americans.

One of the most controversial videos related to the treatment of African Americans and the police was filmed on March 3, 1991. Broadcast into the homes of America was a video of Rodney King (fig. 18), shown balled up in a fetal position bleeding profusely from his head as four police officers heralded blows with batons during a routine traffic stop.<sup>84</sup> King’s video would create a racial divide and eventually set the city of Los Angeles on fire, as African Americans in Los Angeles began to riot in the streets after hearing a non-guilty verdict read in the trial of King’s assailants. There is a parallel between the real-life violence that was seen after the King trial and the pandemonium of rioting, burning cars, people running with weapons, and

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>84</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, “Street/Crime: From Rodney King's Beating to Michael Brown's Shooting.” *Cultural Critique* 90 (2015): 144.

the chaos happening in “This Is America.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a non-violent leader of the Civil Rights Movement, and arguably one of the foremost theorists on racial equality and social justice stated during a 1966 interview with Mike Wallace for *60-Minutes*, “I think we’ve got to see that a riot is the language of the unheard. And, what is that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the economic plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years.”<sup>85</sup> Rioting can cause alarm and questions about its validity and effectiveness, but those who feel unheard, according to King, are communicating through unrest an attempt to bring attention to concerns and problems often ignored.

Relationships with those who have authority and abuse their power has been part of the African American experience for centuries. A more recent example of this relationship is the stop-and-frisk policy, a New York City police practice that disproportionately detained and questioned citizens of color. This policy, carried out actively from 2003 to 2013, is an example of how surveillance and over policing can fracture relationships between African American communities and the police.<sup>86</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates provides insight into the relationship African Americans have with those in positions of authority over their body. In his book *Between the World and Me*, Coates writes about the falsehoods and crises America has faced when it comes to the black body that is associated with slavery, segregation, and surveillance. Coates offers wisdom and advice in a letter to his son derived from his own experience as an African American man trying to figure out why his country is fraught with racial injustices. The information Coates provides isn’t just supported or theorized from empirical data, but represents heartfelt witnessing, and lived experiences of African Americans who are familiar with the type

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<sup>85</sup> Martin L. King, “Overtime,” Interview with Mike Wallace, *60 Minutes*, September 27, 1966.

<sup>86</sup> Michael D. White and Henry F. Fradella, *Stop and Frisk: The Use and Abuse of a Controversial Policing Tactic* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 3.

of violence shown in “This Is America.” In detailing his thoughts about a close friend who lost his life after an interaction with police officers, Coates describes the reality of knowing his son can be assaulted, violated, and destroyed. He notes,

And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy.<sup>87</sup>

If Coates is correct in his assertion, “All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible,” then Gambino with “This Is America” is targeting an audience who may not be aware of what it feels like to be destroyed by those endowed with the authority to protect, or how an unfortunate overreaction can result in death.<sup>88</sup> I think it is important to acknowledge within my research, how connections of theory and lived experiences from the Civil Rights Movement to the social discourse of African American writers and hip-hop culture intersect as detailed with the contributions of King, Coates, and Gambino. History has recorded how the white gaze has caused suspicions and surveillance to occur, but “This Is America,” seems to be an appeal for witnessing and a deeper look into victimization. Voices of voiceless black bodies continue to be captured on video and shared as a reminder of the reality many African Americans face.

Children in “This Is America” play a significant part in the performance, the disposal of Gambino’s weapons, and remind viewers of the potential dangers African American youth encounter daily. The black bodies of the children filming the action on their phones are part of a history that brings about fears in white Americans. Reflecting on what his fifteen-year-old had experienced when African Americans were devalued and destroyed because of their skin color,

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<sup>87</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 9.

<sup>88</sup> Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 9.

Coates explains to his son, “I am writing you because this year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store.”<sup>89</sup> Coates articulates the danger surveillance can have on black bodies, irrespective of age, “And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a twelve-year old child whom they were oath-bound to protect.”<sup>90</sup> There seems to be a cyclical vulnerability felt in Coates's words to his son, an impeding loss of agency in a free country and an inability to protect one's self from childhood to manhood.

“This Is America” can also be interpreted as commentary on the power of visual imagery to shock audiences into action. The killing in Gambino’s video caused people to share and respond on social media; there is a connection of cultural trauma still being visually relived from photography to video. This connection echoes important cultural moments of the past when shocking visual documentation of brutality against black bodies stoked protests and birthed a movement. For instance, a major catalyst that galvanized the Civil Rights Movement happened in August 1955 with the tragic death of Emmett Till (fig. 6).<sup>91</sup> While visiting relatives in Mississippi, Till was accused of whistling at store clerk Carolyn Bryant. Once her husband found out about the so-called offense, he and his brother dragged Till from his family in the middle of the night and proceeded to beat and shoot him, then tied a seventy-five pound metal fan around his neck and dumped his lifeless body into the Tallahatchie River.<sup>92</sup> Carolyn’s husband and brother-in-law were acquitted of Till’s murder a month later by an all-white jury. Protected by

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>91</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems, “Resurrecting Emmett Till: The Catalyst of the Modern Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998): 180.

<sup>92</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith, “The Afterimages of Emmett Till.” *American Art* 29, no. 1 (2015): 22.

double jeopardy law, after receiving a four thousand dollar payoff by *Look* magazine, the two admitted to gruesomely killing Till. After returning Till's body back to Chicago, Mamie Till-Mobley demanded an open casket for her mauled and decayed son's body. Photographed by David Jackson for *Jet* magazine and later shared in the *Chicago Defender*, the picture of Till's bloated head and half decomposed ravaged body helped to ignite the Civil Rights Movement. The 100,000 in attendance for Till's funeral marked an unofficial protest and cultural grievance for African Americans.

Shawn Smith attributes the photograph as the catalyst that generated the heartbreak of seeing Till's mutilated body. He writes, "His mother made others look."<sup>93</sup> Smith goes on to describe what Till-Mobley proclaimed, "They had to see what I had seen, The whole nation had to bear witness to this."<sup>94</sup> Smith explains the power of Emmett Till's imagery continues to have an effect on African Americans, "Emmett Till's body will not stay buried. U.S. culture is haunted by his ghost, and haunted by the covering over, too. We can't seem to lay Till's body to rest, and how could we?"<sup>95</sup> The disturbance of seeing Till's bloated face caused people to react in response to what Susan Sontag described as the power of seeing the pain of others when she observed, "For photographs to accuse, and to alter conduct, they must shock."<sup>96</sup> There aren't many things we experience as Americans more shocking than witnessing the aftermath of a child murdered.

According to Smith, Till's photographs are like traumatic memories and their reproduction repeats what could not and can never be fully fathomed.<sup>97</sup> There is a history and

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<sup>93</sup> Smith, "The Afterimages of Emmett Till," 24.

<sup>94</sup> Smith, "The Afterimages of Emmett Till," 24.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>96</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 81.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

reaction of protest and activism derived from the widely circulated image of Till that continues to resonate with African Americans. The children recording with their phones in “This Is America” symbolically carry on a sense of activism. Past photographs and videos used to incite visceral reactions authenticate injustices and provide evidence of the surveilled.

Viral images continued to encourage support for black victims in the 21st century; the photographic documentation of the death of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri motivated people to take to the streets in protest. After being approached and told to move to the sidewalk by Officer Darren Wilson, an exchange took place, and within a few minutes later, unarmed, eighteen-year old Michael Brown was shot to death (fig. 7). Brown’s body lay uncovered in the summer heat for over four hours as residents recorded and uploaded his demise in real time on social media.<sup>98</sup> Similar to the reaction to the photograph of Till, when images of Brown’s slain body circulated over social media and several news outlets, protesters and rioters mobilized through the streets of Ferguson. They were met with assault rifles and militarized police vehicles. Although Officer Wilson was acquitted of charges, the United States Justice Department investigated the Ferguson police department and found they and the city’s municipal court system had violated African American civil rights routinely.

What resulted in the aftermath of Michael Brown’s death was the chant heard around the world: “black lives matter.” Although Black Lives Matter as a movement is often traced to the death of Michael Brown, the concept of Black Lives Matter was formed years prior by three community activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The organization began as a project in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who in 2013 was acquitted for the killing of Trayvon Martin. Brown’s death set in motion the rise of the Black Lives Matter

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<sup>98</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, “Street/Crime: From Rodney King’s Beating to Michael Brown’s Shooting.” *Cultural Critique* 90 (2015): 143.

movement and raised an awareness around race relations and the disproportionate policing of black and brown communities. Patricia Collins states Black Lives Matter represented a social movement rooted in intersectionality: “Black Lives Matter points to the necessary interconnectedness of intersectionality and flexible solidarity within its own praxis as well as the continued challenges of using these ideas within broader social movements.”<sup>99</sup> The body camera of Officer Wilson and vigilance of concerned citizens who videotaped and recorded the callous attitude towards Brown’s dead body helped to bring black victimization into focus for many white Americans.

“This Is America” is able to show a continuum of victimization experienced by African Americans. As seen with Rodney King, Emmett Till, Michael Brown and many others, visual images of deceased African Americans can result in people standing up for social justice and equality. Masked children with their cellphones in “This Is America” are doing what many African American youth have done as a means of survival against racial violence, which is to record, document, and share the atrocities oftentimes occurring in their communities due to racialized surveillance. As countless people have demonstrated with the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter movements, looking back at the white gaze and into the face of potential danger is about being heard, seen, and valued. In the midst of surviving oppressive and inhumane conditions, African Americans are confronted with the same understanding Coates described to his son, a knowing of how their bodies are perceived and how their bodies can be destroyed. Throughout history, African Americans have faced the kind of dangers portrayed in “This Is America,” from the violence during Jim Crow that destroyed the lives of four little girls at 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 to the rioting of the unheard in

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<sup>99</sup> Patricia H. Collins, “On Violence, Intersectionality and Transversal Politics.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 9 (2017): 1472.



Ferguson. Gambino is commenting on what can happen if the black victim is desensitized without regard, surveilled without empathy, and restricted to spaces that cause mass suffering and violence.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusion and Reflections

My thesis in summation explores how Childish Gambino's video, "This Is America," critiques black subjectivity in performance, the role of surveillance, and the lack of witnessing black victimization. Enthralled by suspicions and fears rooted in the history of branding, labeling, and stereotyping black bodies, African Americans have existed amongst racial intolerance and turmoil for centuries. The excessive violence in the video reminds viewers of the constant threat of white power. "This Is America" was produced to cause discomfort, reflection, and encourage discourse on the social implications of a culture built around the idea that black bodies should be perpetually subjected to violence.

In Chapter Two, we come to see Gambino as more than a heartless killer; it is his performance of blackness of racialized tropes that help make the video controversial. As an entertainer and performer, he moves to bass-heavy rhythms with ethnographic dance. Gambino delivers a complex understanding of black subjectivity as he dances and entertains for white spectators. Characterizations ascribed to his body underscore the fragility of his performance as he references past minstrelsy. From the origins of slavery, black bodies have been assigned to represent an underclass in mass media.<sup>100</sup> When black men are typecast in Hollywood movies based on their physique and menacing appearance; much like the "aloof" and "stud" tropes presented in minstrelsy, they are often asked to exaggerate their blackness with slang and Ebonics. However, black men on football fields who possess similar qualities are cheered for and championed due to their physique and aggressive prowess. Ironically, the appearance of these football players outside of what is considered as entertainment can cause challenges. Those same

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<sup>100</sup> Fair, "'Black-on-Black': Race, Space and News of Africans and African Americans," 36.

football players' hair, tattoos, and demeanor in street clothes might be perceived as thuggish by the same white spectators who previously cheered for their ability to perform on the field.

In Chapter Three I discuss how the term *thug* has been used as a stereotypical representation to describe and brand black men, which carries with it an illicit and criminal tone. It seems when African Americans are grouped together by the white gaze they are accepted or received as a threat based on their ability to conform to white standards. If African Americans are deemed a threat by the white gaze, their social status, age, profession, and physique are irrelevant because racist violence presents itself as unbiased. The stories of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin, among many others, illustrate how young black men in America are rarely seen as individuals; instead, they are grouped together under a blanket stereotype that labels them as threatening and deserving of whatever violence occurs. "This Is America" attempts to make the point that when black bodies are viewed as out of place and considered a threat to the white paradigm, white privilege and comforts can have them erased and eliminated without remorse or retribution. Gambino presents himself as a hip-hop artist, as a black man with a story to express; in his performance and facial expressions, he symbolically conveys suppressed feelings of African American youth.

Lastly, in this concluding chapter, I discuss challenges many white Americans have with witnessing black victims who are otherwise thought of as inherently criminal. With the use of violence, Gambino portrays the African American male as criminal-minded even though he is acting out past murders committed by white Americans. The overall narrative considers preconceived notions of African Americans and how they are branded visually into social norms. Despite creating a fictional narrative, Gambino's body is scripted to be perceived as dangerous and criminal. Gambino's character and environment is a byproduct of American sentiment and

beliefs concerning African Americans. For instance, the warehouse where the video is set symbolizes an unkempt area. The warehouse is overrun by malicious youth rioting, which is a conventional storyline promoted by media outlets when black people from marginalized communities take to the streets to protest for social justice. As a result of racist policies and cultural practices, these particular neighborhoods lack resources and opportunities for economic growth.

Viewers are presented with imagery fraught with violence that is not socially inclusive; instead, white audiences must receive the terror Gambino creates as a reality purposefully constructed and designed for African Americans. The belief African Americans are innately criminal began in the imaginations of white Americans, those who considered themselves morally superior, because they were born white in a country that caters to and supports systems to maintain their dominance. This belief justifies the need to surveil African Americans irrespective of age and gives reason to separate and categorize African Americans as inferior and violent based on race and location, meaning community. Therefore, African Americans are criminalized as products of their environment. Despite aspects of hyperbole, the fictional violence in “This Is America” has been patterned after real-life black experiences. Tricia Rose describes a distinction between images of real-life violence and social identities. Rose touches on the idea that real violence occurs through the mediation of images. Regarding the perception of real violence, Rose says:

Deconstructing the media’s ideological perspective on Black crime does not suggest that “real” acts of violence by and against black youth do not take place. However, these real acts are not accessible to the public without critical mediation by hegemonic discourses.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Tricia Rose, “‘Fear of a Black Planet’: Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 3 (1991): 284.

How these images of violence are mediated and by whom determine the amount of attention and what level of concern black bodies will receive. Gambino speaks to a lived experience of those not given equal rights as citizens of this country. Many of whom, when seen in media and in public are prejudged and labeled as guilty and immoral. He challenges the viewer to witness his performance as a response to institutionalized racism and see the anguish in his body as frustration built up from the beliefs that continue to support racial injustices.

“This Is America” is a reaction to the portion of America that has turned a blind eye to black pain. The audience Gambino is wishing to entertain and educate is white America, his objective is for the audience to see his black body as a product of what white America created and his victims as the collateral damage of systemic and volatile suppression. I believe Gambino wants his audience to imagine how white aggression throughout America has resulted in similar real-life destruction. In “‘Black-on-Black’: Race, Space, and News of Africans and African Americans,” Jo Ellen Fair describes ways in which media assigns racial classification, constructs language, and ultimately persuades social and cultural realities. Fair raises the point that “the use of the term ‘black-on-black’ serves to remove any ambiguity of the perpetrator and victim of crime or violence. Both are black.”<sup>102</sup> Here is where Gambino’s critique eloquently provides a jarring narrative perceived as *black-on-black* crime. The phrase black-on-black crime becomes a misnomer when proximity is evaluated. As interest grew in criminal theory for ethnographic data on race differences in crime, racial meanings began to define black experiences, culture, and motives which were ultimately applied to many of the explanations of crime committed by

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<sup>102</sup> Fair “‘Black-on-Black’: Race, Space and News of Africans and African Americans,” 36.

African Americans.<sup>103</sup> This is important to consider in terms of surveillance and the criminalization of African Americans based on their socioeconomic status. In fact, early race and cultural theorists treated black crimes as they were a different and more virulent strain of crime, hence, extending racial meaning to crimes that had previously been racially unclassified.<sup>104</sup> For example, the phrase white-on-white crime is rarely used, if at all, by reporters and journalists to describe crimes committed by whites, who are the majority race in America.

Gambino is beckoning white viewers to witness through difference, as theorist Kelly Oliver notes. Oliver suggests witnessing happens when a person considers what is most valuable between themselves and someone else. Witnessing can be multilayered as Oliver explains it, “Drawing on the double meaning of witnessing as both eyewitness testimony and bearing witness to what cannot be seen” as a process of analysis and response.<sup>105</sup> Oliver describes the process of witnessing requires not only re-cognition but also imagination.<sup>106</sup> According to Oliver’s theory, the audience must first recognize what they have seen in Gambino’s video before bearing witness with empathy. But this witnessing of the video also involves using the imagination. With violence Gambino requests for his white audience to question internally and bear witness with their imaginations as to why African Americans have been treated differently, why they have been victimized. Applying the imagination is particularly noteworthy because it is the white imagination that cultivated spectatorship and formulated how black bodies were to be watched and surveilled chattel property to objects of desire such as Josephine Baker. Since the

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<sup>103</sup> Jeanette Covington, “Racial Classification in Criminology: The Reproduction of Racialized Crime.” *Sociological Forum* 10, no. 4 (1995): 551.

<sup>104</sup> Covington, “Racial Classification in Criminology,” 552.

<sup>105</sup> Kelly Oliver, “Witnessing, Recognition, and Response Ethics,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 48, no. 4 (2015): 473.

<sup>106</sup> Oliver, “Witnessing, Recognition, and Response Ethics,” 473.

beginning of American slavery, black Americans have been seen as less than human. Academics describe how African Americans were and are seen as the Other; this term represents individuals or groups of people who exist outside of the white male dominant culture. Being Other insinuates there is something intrinsically different about an individual or group, which should be a reason to celebrate instead of approach with disdain. Acknowledging diversity as a cultural asset to humanity or, as Oliver suggests, witnessing Others by recognizing they are valuable despite their difference, is a strategy to encourage social change.

An apparent message in “This Is America” is that African Americans can’t continue to go unwitnessed. I fear viral videos depicting African Americans will become commonplace on social media threads. For example, if viewers on social media dismiss viral images showing police brutality as normal activity, and casually swipe or scroll past the images without investigation, the less black victims will be shared on social media and with society at large. Some changes are being made with growing social movements inspired by videos of police brutality as with Rodney King, Michael Brown, and numerous other victims who have gone viral. However, the need to build a social movement with the slogan “black lives matter” is proof America has a long way to go in resolving race relations. The global impact of “This Is America” after being shared and watched by millions of people demonstrates how representation, as well as interpretation of black imagery, can inform viewers about racial violence while entertaining them with meaningful content. Whether the violence is fake or real, the messaging in viral videos showing black people suffering from hate crimes, police brutality, or discrimination has to be witnessed in order for widespread change to occur. Despite my concerns, Gambino’s video serves as a continuum for critique and invites an exploration of scholarly research across disciplines of study, even hip-hop.

Hip-hop is one of the most influential genres of music in the world; it has established platforms for videos like “This Is America” to question and challenge social beliefs, encourage witnessing, and spark conversations about race, culture, performance, and gun violence. Tricia Rose stresses the role hip-hop artists have played in cultural discourse. Rose writes in “‘Fear of a Black Planet’: Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics in the 1990s” that a shift has occurred: “Rap’s cultural politics lies not only in its lyrical expression but in the nature and character of its journey through the institutional and discursive territories of popular culture.”<sup>107</sup> The early nineties, considered the “golden age” of hip-hop, offered artists who were entering into social and racial discourse a more commercialized audience as Afrocentric messaging and black identity became a source of pride. “This Is America” is a continuation of thoughtful and stimulating imagery that examines racial politics and brilliantly offers a cultural critique on black subjectivity and how black victims can go unwitnessed.

Although the video at times is ambiguous in its presentation of cultural references, this ambiguity also is presumably why the video went viral. Scholars and every day social media viewers all offered their opinions and perspectives on the performance, fashion choices, and placement of actors, allowing for multiple interpretations on the video’s meaning and impact. The compelling use of gun violence, death, and mass destruction in the video has produced more questions than answers regarding race relations in America. What “This Is America” provides for its viewers to question when watching the video is possibly held in the title; it begs viewers to ask this question, is this America? If so, then, what are we refusing to see and what are we failing to witness when it comes to black victimization and violence towards African Americans? “This Is America” is necessary for reflection and critique because it delivers and prods at our ability to

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<sup>107</sup> Rose, “Fear of a Black Planet,” 276.



understand past atrocities, acknowledges a continuation of grave inequalities, and proves, through analysis of the past, a need for social change.

## Figures



Figure 1. Hiro Murai, “This Is America”, 2018. YouTube video, 4:04.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>



Figure 2. Hiro Murai, “This Is America”, 2018. YouTube video, 4:04.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>



Figure 3. Hiro Murai, “This Is America”, 2018. YouTube video, 4:04.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>



Figure 4. Hiro Murai, “This Is America”, 2018. YouTube video, 4:04.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>



Figure 5. Shawn Carter and Mark Romanek, “The Story of O.J.”, 2017. YouTube video, 4:14.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM7lw0Ovzq0>



Figure 6. David Jackson, *Emmett Till*, 1955.



Figure 7. Tiffany Mitchell, *Body of Michael Brown Taken with Camera Phone*, 2014.



Figure 8. Paul Colin, *Bal Nègre*, 1927, 169 x 120 cm, color lithograph, France.



Figure 9. Paul Colin, *La Revue Nègre*, 1925, France.



Figure 10. Stanislaus Walery, *Josephine Baker aux Folies Bergère*, 1926.



Figure 11. Hiro Murai, “This Is America”, 2018. YouTube video, 4:04.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>



Figure 12. Shawn Carter and Mark Romanek, “The Story of O.J.”, 2017. YouTube video, 4:14.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM7lw0Ovzq0>



Figure 13. *Thomas Dartmouth Rice as the Character Jim Crow*, 1830. The Image of the Black in Western Art Research Project and Photo Archive.



Figure 14. Shawn Carter and Mark Romanek, *The Story of O.J.*, 2017. YouTube video, 4:14  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM7lw0Ovzq0>

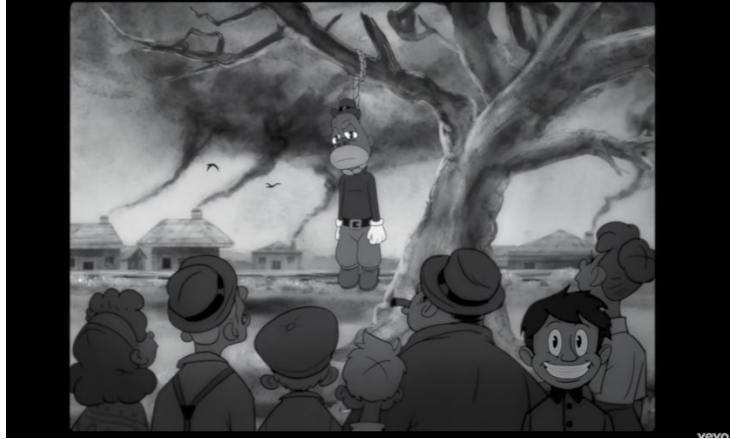


Figure 15. Shawn Carter and Mark Romanek, *The Story of O.J.*, 2017. YouTube video, 4:14  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM7lw0Ovzq0>



Figure 16. Hiro Murai, *This is America*, 2018. YouTube video, 4:04.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>





Figure 17. “Views of Slavery,” *Emancipator*, lithographic print, March 1836. Library Company of Philadelphia.

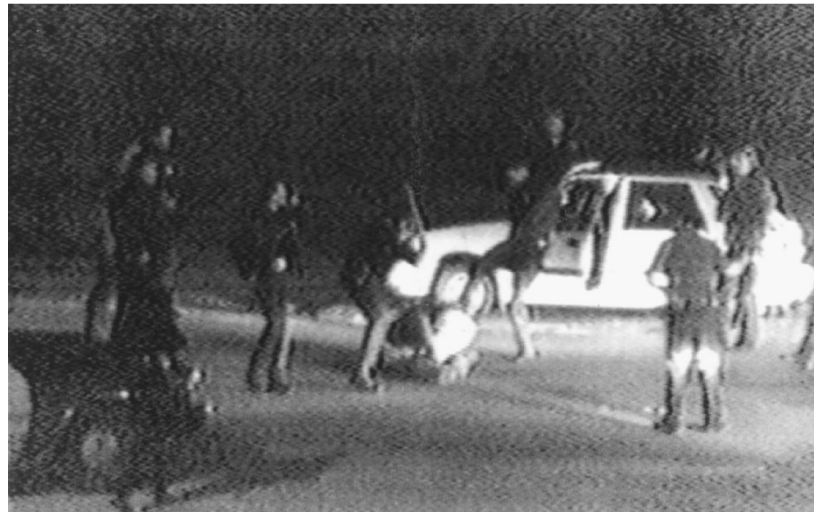


Figure 18. Still from George Holliday video of Rodney King’s beating, March 3, 1991.

## Appendix A: "This Is America" Lyrics

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, go, go away  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, go, go away  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, go, go away  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, go, go away

We just wanna party  
Party just for you  
We just want the money  
Money just for you  
I know you wanna party (yeah)  
Party just for free  
Girl, you got me dancin' (girl, you got me dancin')  
Dance and shake the frame  
We just wanna party (yeah)  
Party just for you (yeah)  
We just want the money (yeah)  
Money just for you (ooh)  
I know you wanna party (yeah)  
Party just for free (yeah)  
Girl, you got me dancin' (girl, you got me dancin')  
Dance and shake the frame (ooh)

This is America  
Don't catch you slippin' now  
Don't catch you slippin' now  
Look what I'm whippin' now  
This is America (woo)  
Don't catch you slippin' now  
Don't catch you slippin' now  
Look what I'm whippin' now

This is America (skrrt, skrrt, woo)  
Don't catch you slippin' now (ayy)  
Look at how I'm livin' now  
Police be trippin' now (woo)  
Yeah, this is America (woo, ayy)  
Guns in my area (word, my area)  
I got the strap (ayy, ayy)  
I gotta carry 'em

Yeah, yeah, I'ma go into this (ugh)  
Yeah, yeah, this is guerilla, woo  
Yeah, yeah, I'ma go get the bag  
Yeah, yeah, or I'ma get the pad  
Yeah, yeah, I'm so cold like yeah (yeah)  
I'm so dope like yeah (woo)  
We gon' blow like yeah (straight up, uh)

Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh, tell somebody  
You go tell somebody  
Grandma told me  
Get your money, black man (get your money)  
Get your money, black man (get your money)  
Get your money, black man (get your, black man)  
Get your money, black man (get your, black man)  
Black man

This is America (woo, ayy)  
Don't catch you slippin' now (woo, woo, don't catch you slippin', now)  
Don't catch you slippin' now (ayy, woah)  
Look what I'm whippin' now (Slime!)  
This is America (yeah, yeah)  
Don't catch you slippin' now (woah, ayy)  
Don't catch you slippin' now (ayy, woo)  
Look what I'm whippin' now (ayy)

Look how I'm geekin' out (hey)  
I'm so fitted (I'm so fitted, woo)  
I'm on Gucci (I'm on Gucci)  
I'm so pretty (yeah, yeah)  
I'm gon' get it (ayy, I'm gon' get it)  
Watch me move (blaow)  
This a celly (ha)  
That's a tool (yeah)  
On my Kodak (woo, Black)  
Ooh, know that (yeah, know that, hold on)  
Get it (get it, get it)  
Ooh, work it (21)  
Hunnid bands, hunnid bands, hunnid bands (hunnid bands)  
Contraband, contraband, contraband (contraband)  
I got the plug on Oaxaca (woah)  
They gonna find you like blocka (blaow)

Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh, tell somebody  
(America, I just checked my following list and)

You go tell somebody  
(You mothafuckas owe me)  
Grandma told me  
Get your money, black man (black man)  
Get your money, black man (black man)  
Get your money, black man (black man)  
Get your money, black man (black man)  
Black man (one, two, three, get down)

Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh, tell somebody  
You go tell somebody  
Grandma told me, "Get your money, " black man  
Get your money, black man (black man)  
Get your money, black man (black man)  
Get your money, black man (black man)  
Black man

You just a black man in this world  
You just a barcode, ayy  
You just a black man in this world  
Drivin' expensive foreigners, ayy  
You just a big dawg, yeah  
I kenneled him in the backyard  
No proper life to a dog  
For a big dog

Source: [LyricFind](#)

Songwriters: Donald Glover / Ludwig Goransson

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