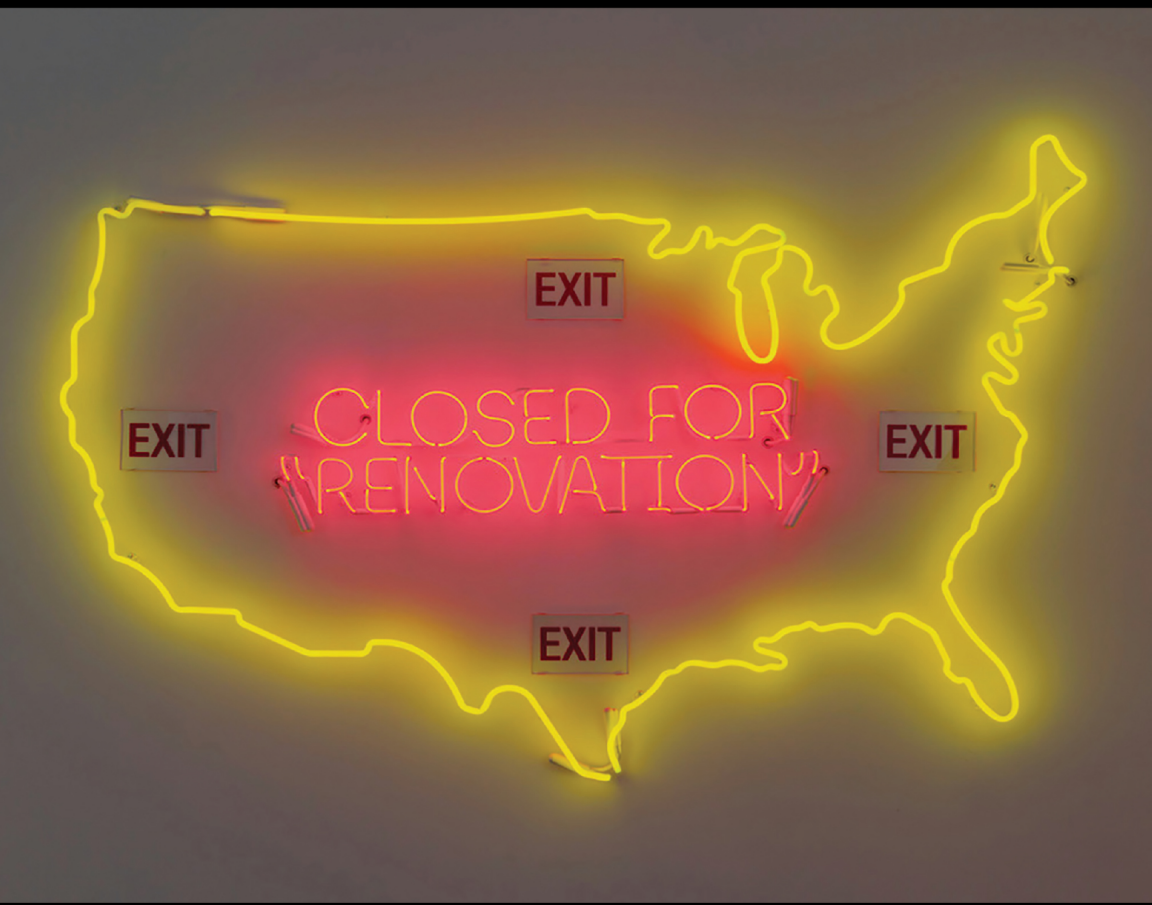
"This Is America"

Race, Gender, and Politics in America's Musical Landscape



KATIE RIOS

“This Is America”

Critical Perspectives on Music and Society

Series Editor: David Arditi, University of Texas at Arlington

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"This Is America": Race, Gender, and Politics in America's Musical Landscape by Katie Rios

"This Is America"

Race, Gender, and Politics in America's Musical Landscape

Katie Rios

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To Erik, Trinley, and Tucker

Contents

Acknowledgments

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NOTES

1. Andrew Dell'Antonio, 2020, "I doubt there are many—any?—folks in the bubble of my FB feed who don't understand why it's important to assert that #BlackLivesMatter—but maybe some of you do, and I think this is a good explanation which points to the central role generational wealth plays in success in the US, and clarifies why Black folks have been structurally hampered by the systemic racism on which the USian nation was built, politically and economically, even after they ostensibly gained equal legal standing," Facebook, September 14, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/andrew.dellantonio/posts/10116217303580500.

2. Mark Katz, 2020, "Fellow white people," Facebook, May 27, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/mark.katz.3766/posts/10158636251895962.

3. *Rage Fueled Rants of a Tired Black Girl Found Here*, https://kennediajohnson.com/blog-2/.

Introduction

When Donald Glover (b. 1983), whose performance name is Childish Gambino, released his trap Afrobeat single "This Is America" in 2018, I received dozens of emails and messages from students wanting to talk to me about the content of the music video. Even though our spring semester had drawn to a close and there were no pressing assignments to turn in, grades to worry about, or presentations to prepare, my students wanted to talk as though they were in the midst of an intense classroom discussion or final project about the urgency of Gambino's musical message. The conversations all had a similar tone: "Have you heard 'This is America'?" "You've heard the song, but have you seen the video?" "I'm in shock after watching the video; it is difficult to watch, but it is important to watch." The shift from joy to terror in the video is swift.

The video begins with an innocent tone, showing a guitar placed on a lone chair in what appears to be an empty factory as the musician Calvin Winbush (b. 1984), known as Calvin the Second, walks barefoot and picks up the guitar to play a joyful accompaniment to upbeat lyrics: "We just wanna party / Party just for you."[1] Calvin the Second is seemingly alone, until we see the camera pan to Gambino, who is turned away from our view and who until this point has been hidden by one of the warehouse pillars. Gambino stands calmly and shirtless with his arms at his side, moving very subtly, first with his head, and then turning around to face us. Calvin the Second is now out of sight for the time being. Gambino begins to move his body to groove with the music, but there is a sense that something is off: his facial contortions suggest discomfort. He walks toward Calvin the Second, back in sight, who has stopped playing the guitar and has a white cloth wrapped around his whole head. Forty-nine seconds into the video, Gambino pulls out a gun, striking a deliberate posture that evokes Jim Crow, with his right leg bent and his head

cocked to the right as he aims the gun with his right hand, at the same time that his left leg is straightened out in front of him, and his left elbow is angled out wide with his left hand placed on his left thigh, an effect that I will discuss in more detail in the fuller analysis of the video in chapter 3.[2] Four seconds later, he shoots Calvin the Second in the head before calmly looking directly in the camera and stating: "This is America." When he looks directly at the camera, he is in effect turning his gaze directly toward his audience, challenging the notion of who is watching whom.

The concept of the watcher and the one being watched in the video of "This Is America" becomes increasingly complicated given that many people have recorded YouTube videos of themselves or others watching the video for the first time. One *Atlantic* article describes the process of watching videos of people who are themselves watching a video:

> Many of these viewers sway along with Glover at first, rolling their own shoulders, nodding to the Afro folk-inspired melody as the musician twists his bare torso, revealing his own musculature and contorting his body in ways both alluring and disturbing. But the benign nature of that contagion is shattered when the first gunshot rings out fifty-three seconds in, and with the jarring transition of melody to dark, pulsing trap. In the reaction videos, mouths fall open, and people are stunned into paralysis. The shooting itself is shocking, but so is that fact that Glover carries on dancing as if nothing happened.[3]

The shock that these viewers experience echoes the questions that I received from my students. The jolt is not only in seeing the violence and experiencing it over and over again throughout the video but also in the juxtaposition of that violence with what would otherwise be innocent and joyful moments. The experience of watching the horror unfold becomes even more shocking because the video begins so happily in its tone. The relentless and merciless violence becomes normalized throughout the video, a grim reality that the video's title underscores. Gambino's example is one among countless others that draws attention to splintering fractures in American society.

Gambino's gestures, including symbolic components such as how he moves his body, how he uses his voice, and how he engages his audience directly relate to current political and social issues. Throughout this text, I explore the ways in which artists are relating to and representing underrepresented groups—especially groups that are not traditionally perceived as having a majority voice—using a variety of symbols and gestures that are repeated over time. All of the artists use encoded elements of resistance that recur across performances and video recordings so that these elements begin to become recognizable as repeated acts of resistance directed at injustices based on a number of categories, including race, gender, class, religion, and

politics. At times these categories overlap; at other times the artist focuses the audience's attention more toward one of the categories than the others. With the repetitions of resistance and the ability to attract an audience of supporters, enhanced by the digital proximity of their platforms, these artists in turn create a larger community of people who want to enact change. Examples of encoded resistance that I evaluate can include any or all of the following elements: dress/clothing; props; accessories; hairstyles; dance styles; body movements such as marching; the absence of body movement in an attention to stillness, often paired with another gesture such as kneeling or holding a fist in the air; playing with the concept of the one watching versus the one being watched; lighting effects in both visual art and in stage lighting; visual distortion such as dissimilar elements that appear simultaneously or glitches on a screen; sonic distortion such as grumbling, screaming, or fuzzy bass lines, mistuned or bent pitches; and word play, particularly playing with the meaning of words, including techniques such as call-and-response that can draw attention to the repetition and meaning of certain words.

The source material for my evaluation of these encoded gestures of resistance appears in a variety of media formats, and the role of digital media and the high likelihood of the repetition of these gestures are central in how all of the works have been promoted. With increased visibility, these gestures transform from encoded resistance to overt and normalized sociological dissonance, signs that something must change in American society. They are a direct challenge to the status quo. The normalization and regular presence of these gestures turn them into tropes that we see over and over again in music and art. These gestural and symbolic tropes offer both an interpretation and a critique of what "This is America" means for the artists who speak to America's social injustices. The musical and artistic selections that I have chosen to highlight in this book contain symbols that deepen the meaning of the words or the sentiment that is being expressed based on the way that the performer or artist communicates with and provides visual cues for the audience. All of the examples are also deliberately confrontational in some way; they are meant to provoke and to elicit a reaction. They are inherently political in this manner.

My interpretation that encoded gestures of resistance can be political draws upon recent work by the sociologist Nick Crossley, who has applied similar arguments to the field of popular music. Specifically, Crossley notes that "musical gestures can raise consciousness about and stimulate debate in relation to an issue, encouraging people to discuss and think about it, rather than necessarily persuading them of a view in and of itself."[4] Describing how the inherent political nature of music could be applied to the concept of race as an example, Crossley argues that

> If the content of songs is political, provokes a political response and engages political views and identities, moreover, then the interaction is political too: artist and audience are co-creating a political public sphere. Furthermore, if the music, for example, speaks to racial identities and draws listeners with a shared racial identity together . . . then it contributes to the "doing" of race and racial division.[5]

As another example of how Crossley examines how gestures of resistance can be encoded and repeated in such a way that pertains to race, he points to African American musical traditions that developed during slavery. Crossley argues that "music . . . became an important vehicle through which coded expressions of dissent could be shared and collective sentiment and identities created."[6] In Crossley's example, enslaved persons as encoders function as both performers and audience; they build the musical codes of dissent into the works that they create, and the repetition of these codes becomes recognizable and increasingly meaningful. All of these kinds of interactions result in a profound relationship between performer and audience. The artist's engagement with or representation of the audience is central to delivering the political message of dissent. According to Crossley, the symbiotic relationship between the artist and the audience can, in turn, have the potential to reach even broader audiences in that "Music may serve to publicize views and voices already existing and refined by way of debate and argument within particular communities, which would not otherwise be heard outside of those communities; voices of politically underrepresented groups."[7]

Crossley speaks specifically about popular music's unique abilities to channel outside support because of the accessibility of popular music that appeals to many listeners. He turns to a variety of examples of popular songs as containing "conventional formal devices" that "serve to deliver [the] content in a way which many of us find both forceful and persuasive."[8] The examples that he names include Edwin Starr's "War" (1970), with Crossley citing the rhetorical power of the lyrics "What is good for / Absolutely nothing!"; Aretha Franklin's "Respect" (1967); and Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" (2011). He does not go into much more detail about what the "conventional formal devices" are in these examples, but presumably he is including the songs for their powerful lyrical content, the individuated delivery of the content, and the resulting appeal for the audience. It is curious that he includes Lady Gaga in the mix as contrasted to the other examples that are from decades before, especially given the contrast in the lyrics of "Born This Way" that focus on acceptance of nonbinary gender and sexual identity, such as one verse that opens with the phrase "No matter gay, straight, or bi/ Lesbian, transgender life" and concludes with the refrain repeated throughout the song that affirms self-positivity: "I'm on the right track, baby."[9] All of the

songs do share the commonality that they are about rejections of stereotypes, from the notion that war does not solve America's problems, to the idea that Black women deserve respect, to the statement that gender is not binary. All of the songs are also popular and relatively well known. In the context of his discussion about popular music, he contrasts these types of examples with what he believes to be the lesser appeal of avant-garde music, because that music is not as accessible to groups outside of the "elite" who understands or seeks to understand it.[10]

In this book I broaden Crossley's argument to include a wide range of styles of art and music—both mainstream and outside the fray—that, while appealing in the respect that there is an element or combination of elements that attracts the audience's attention in the form of the encoded gestures that I listed, is at the same time deeply unsettling. We are meant to feel disturbed. We are meant to feel uncomfortable. And we are meant at the same time to feel impelled to engage. The feeling of discomfort amidst something that is also accessible aurally, visually, and often available in a wide variety of platforms suggests that something must change after the performance has been received, similar to the state of paralysis captured in the videos of people watching the video for "This Is America." It is unideal to remain in stasis, and the implication is that change must occur. The material that I include in this book is not for the deliberate purpose of entertainment but rather for the purpose of initiating action and change, something that we can recognize in the repetition of symbols.

As an example of a forceful statement that is intended to initiate change and enhanced in its delivery through encoded gestures that relate to current affairs in America, Gambino pointedly declares that "This *Is* America" (my emphasis) and shows what he believes to be America's current infractions through elements including choreographic depictions of the nineteenth-century minstrel character Jim Crow and onscreen simulations of random shootings that relate to current events in America. Perhaps one might think of Jim Crow racism as a thing of the past, but Glover suggests that it is present and alive in his use of the present tense in the song's title. At the same time that Gambino invokes Jim Crow, he simultaneously calls to mind the minstrel character Zip Coon, the more stylish and refined stereotype as contrasted to the unsophisticated Jim Crow. For example, Gambino's clothing suggests an homage to Black culture, specifically to the distinct style of the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti (1938–1997), who often dressed shirtless and in stylish pants, with gold chains around his neck.[11] The symbols of the clothing alongside the distorted movements are thus both an honoring of Black culture and a reckoning with nineteenth-century stereotypes of that culture. This symbolic negotiation of chronological space for Black people becomes further problematized in the title of the song itself. The title is not "This Was

America." There is no past America that he seeks to "make great again." In an article entitled "Donald Glover's 'This Is America' Holds Ugly Truths to Be Self-Evident," the NPR reporters Audie Cornish and Monika Evstatieva refer both to the title of the song and to words in the Declaration of Independence, with the twist that these truths are ugly and not what Americans want.[12] The trap beat begins at the moment of the first shooting, and the use of trap as a distorted sonic reference here symbolizes that America is in a state of entrapment. Opening the video and interspersed throughout are purely joyful musical moments that dissolve in the context of violence, repeated throughout in a sort of twisted feedback loop in which it seems as though the violence never happened, reinforced by the careful removing of the weapon from Gambino's hands that we see after each violent event.[13] At another moment in the video, as the popular culture historian Joel Stice points out, a "cloaked figure" on a white horse receives a full police escort; this is a "Biblical reference to the end times."[14] As the video relates to current topics in America, the discussion surrounding the repeated cycle of—and the literal protection of—gun violence in America is one example of how topical the video is.

As another example of a current event depicted in the video, Gambino includes a Black gospel choir singing that he guns down with an assault rifle, but not before first throwing his hands up in the air—the weapon not yet visible—as though he is going to join in the participatory singing and celebrating. This inclusion of the gospel choir is most likely a reference to the shooting that took place at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 27, 2015. The NPR Music hip-hop journalist Rodney Carmichael discussed the video with Cornish and Evstatieva on *All Things Considered*, explaining how "the South African melodies suddenly give way to this really dark Southern American trap music," with the rest of the video a "barrage of symbolism and chaos," including "Jim Crow imagery, dancing schoolchildren toting firearms and [the] Black gospel choir" that Glover guns down.[15] When the choir first appears and sings, the range of the material is higher than Gambino's rapping timbre and the low-bass trap accompaniment that precedes that choir's entrance. The timbral contrast of the harmonious and lively choir—singing joyfully, hands raised, hips swaying—for about sixteen seconds in what begins as sounding each pitch of a bright first-inversion diatonic chord in F major is further symbolic as a stark contrast to the violence framing the choir's appearance.[16]

The repeated symbols heighten the meaning of the art, the words, or the actions of the artist. Gambino's title, for example, might implicitly change in meaning from "This is America" to "This can not be America," because it is unimaginable and at the same time very real that atrocities disproportionately affecting disadvantaged groups continue to occur and to play out in real time in America, not just in the digital space of Gambino's video. The meaning is

made more distinct and powerful through a multiplicity of encoded gestures. When Gambino says "This is America / guns in my area" and represents it by including lighthearted and popular dances interspersed with horrific violence, he means just that: "This is America" means that America is in a staggering state of disarray. The visual markers that he includes highlight the words that he sings and raps; while they do not change the meaning, they intensify it.

In many cases, the role of social media platforms and digital media is central for these artists as they are promoting social justice while sharing content with their audience. The digital aspect broadens audience engagement in that it changes the interaction from an in-person, human-to-human experience to a human-via-machine performance seen by a human that then might share the performance with a new audience (i.e., the repetition of the trope that is being performed). In addition, while it is key to consider the persuasive role of live performance, the digital component that I include adds another layer.

With the multiple ways for artists to communicate with their audiences, the concept of audience engagement thus has several layers. Crossley describes these layers as "multivalent" given the variety of people that comprise an audience:

> I will be suggesting that musical action is *multivalent*; that is to say, in doing music we often, simultaneously and by the very same actions, do much else besides. For example, musical interactions are also often economic interactions, political interactions, bonding rituals etc. In addition, participants in musical interaction are *highly embedded*. In taking up the role of the musician or audience member they do not thereby cease to be, for example, a mother, tax payer, citizen and neighbor, and their performance of their musical roles will both influence and be influenced by these other roles.[17]

Further, Crossley's concept of multivalence takes on a new meaning when the means of social media and digital distribution are included; it is possible for an audience to consist of only one person who may in turn build another audience by sharing content or opinions of the work. As I have already argued, audience engagement can also consist of coded elements of the performance that can be interpreted by the viewers, such as items of clothing that the performer is wearing or colors that the performer chooses to highlight in the performance. As one example of how this has been applied in recent scholarship pertaining to specific musical examples, the American studies and art historian scholar Nicole Fleetwood applied the work of the French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915–1980) in order to explore how fashion could function as a semiotic indicator of identity in the 1960s, and she used this theory to explore how hip-hop artists—particularly Black and male—identify with hip-hop culture.[18] Other work featured in a collection by Toija