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**Running Away from White America:  
Challenging Patriarchal Masculinities through  
Childish Gambino's Music Video "This Is America"**

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## **Abstract**

Childish Gambino's highly successful music video "This Is America" (2018) has been thoroughly examined by its audience, critics in different magazines and even some scholars. However, little attention has been paid to the reflection it offers on African-American masculinity and the reflection on the male gender offered by its multiple covers. For this reason, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore, firstly, how hegemonic white America's discourse about African-American men is opposed in Gambino's music video "This Is America"; secondly, how the video reflects on what *America* means from the point of view of the African-American man; and finally, how it has boosted a reflection on masculinity and patriarchy in different contexts.

Hence, I argue that "This Is America" challenges the repression of African-American men by satirizing and finally escaping from the representation that the white hegemonic USA has created for them and that this video has also fostered an anti-patriarchal conversation about masculinity from other countries' perspectives. Firstly, through a close reading of "This Is America" it will be claimed that the music video, as an example of popular culture, resists the power of white patriarchal and racist America. To accomplish this goal, the heuristic presented by Walton (206), based on Cultural Studies, will be followed. Secondly, the impact of the video will be considered by analyzing three of its covers and I will propose that other artists have continued with the reflection on masculinity and patriarchy initiated by Gambino. Finally, it will be concluded that Gambino's "This Is America" fostered a valuable lesson about subordination and masculinity as a production.

**Keywords:** "This Is America", Childish Gambino, music video, African-American culture, masculinity, race, hip-hop, impact, Cultural Studies

## **INTRODUCTION: The Success of Childish Gambino and his Music Video “This Is America”**

Donald Glover (Edwards, California, 1983), known in the music industry by his professional name Childish Gambino, is a singer, rapper, actor, writer, director and comedian. His career as a writer began in 2006 with the screenwriting for the TV series *30 Rock*. Later on, he became an actor. He is the creator and main protagonist of the highly acclaimed series *Atlanta* (released in 2016), which focuses on the lives of African-American men trying to succeed in hip-hop, and has acted in well-known films like *The Martian* (2015), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018) or his self-produced short film *Guava Island* (2019). Additionally, in 2011, he became a famous rapper with the publication of his first album *Camp* (2011). As a result of his outstanding and multifaceted career trajectory, he was included in the list “The 100 Most Influential People” published by *Time 100* in 2017. However, his success will be even more consolidated one year later, when his chart-topping song “This Is America” (2018) was released.

“This Is America” is a song composed by Gambino, Jeffrey Lamar Williams and Ludwig Göransson<sup>1</sup> and produced by Göransson and Gambino. Although its main singer is Gambino, it also features vocals from other African-American rappers such as Quavo, Young Thug, 21 Savage, BlocBoy JB and Slim Jxmmi. The lyrics center on Black Americans by addressing issues such as gun violence, Police brutality, drug trafficking and consumption and the impact of capitalism on this community. All this is encompassed in an anti-racist rap song that also includes elements of Afrobeat, trap and gospel. The

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<sup>1</sup> On May 6, 2021, the rapper Emelike Nwosuocha formally accused Gambino of copying his song “Made in America” (2016). I take it for granted, however, that the song is Gambino’s original creation for the purposes of this dissertation.



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song soon became a hit, especially due to its music video. Both were highly successful in the Grammy Awards, earning awards in the following categories: Record of the Year, Best Rap/Sung Performance, Song of the Year and Best Music Video. They were also praised in magazines such as *Time* or *Rolling Stones*.

The music video, which surpassed twelve million views the day it was released, was directed by Hiro Murai, a prolific Japanese-American film and music video director that has collaborated with Gambino in other music videos and projects such as his film *Guava Island* and the series *Atlanta*. Additionally, it was choreographed by the Rwandan dancer, creative director, actress and activist Sherrie Silver. The video begins with Gambino turning his back on the audience. When the camera approaches him, Gambino turns around and dances to the rhythm of gospel music. His bare chest and his eccentric movements perplex the viewers. Then, Gambino takes a gun and shoots at a hooded Black man that had been playing the guitar. The shot causes a drastic change in music and the rap begins. The gun is delicately moved away by a young male dressed in a school uniform while the body is carelessly hauled. From this point onwards, Gambino, followed by a group of schoolchildren, dances through the different rooms of the warehouse where the video was filmed. While they dance, the background is full of chaos, robberies and chasings, constantly watched by the ever-present Police. The happy African melody returns until Gambino stops dancing and shoots at a gospel choir. Once again, the gun is carefully removed while the casualties are ignored. The contraposition of dancing in the foreground and violence and chaos in the background reappears. Later on, a seventeen-second moment of silence begins. Meanwhile, Gambino stays still as if he was holding a gun until he takes a cigarette and leaves the setting. He goes to the final room of the warehouse, which is full of abandoned cars. There, he dances once again, this time on the top of a car. However, during this time he is almost completely alone. Finally, the setting

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becomes so dark that only Gambino's face can be lightly discerned. The close-up shot centering on his face zooms out. Now, the audience can see that Gambino, who is frightened, is escaping from the warehouse, chased by a faceless mob.

Released during the controversial mandate of Donald Trump (2017-2021), "This Is America" perfectly fits in the resistance to American systematic racism sometimes offered by the genre it belongs to, hip-hop. Both the video and the song are very likely influenced by Trump's presidency and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, initiated in 2013 as a response to Police brutality against African-Americans. Therefore, "This Is America" addresses concerns of crucial relevance in the current times. This clear political involvement hidden in its frequent use of symbolism has made this video suitable for different kinds of analysis.

The video has been widely reproduced, parodied and interpreted by not only a great part of the American audience but also of the international viewership. This has resulted in a multitude of articles in different magazines and blogs, YouTube videos and comments on different platforms that propose different readings of "This Is America". The impact of the video has spread to such an extent that it has even been studied from an academic perspective. However, although this video and most of its covers portray their country from the point of view of a young man, none of these analyses have provided an exhaustive exploration of the videos' commentary on masculinity in specific as well as their subversive nature in anti-patriarchal terms.

Osman focuses on the video's satirical nature, except for its ending, and suggests that the satire of the video resides in the audience's discomfort resulting from seeing an African-American man killing and immediately after dancing unperturbed by his actions. While this analysis does not deal with masculinity in the video, LeMesurier pays more attention to its emphasis on the Black man. Nevertheless, this author does not analyze

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masculinity per se. Rather, LeMesurier centers on movement from the perspective of kinesiology, arguing that this music video, in which the only thing that Gambino can do apart from killing is dancing, "exemplifies how the rendering of Black embodiment as that which is perpetually in motion, even in supposedly positive representations, assumes an ontological separation that supports racist hierarchies" (141). Finally, Cohan's review of the video focuses explicitly on gender, but she concludes that "regardless of how beaten down and disenfranchised Glover depicts the Black man to be, the invisibility of Black women — both their vulnerability and their strength — remains glaring. There is something narcissistic about this, and his repeated, clichéd crotch grabbing further reinforces this hypermasculine stance" (108).

When it comes to the impact of the video, Margaretha and Panjaitan, who analyze the video through Multimodal Discourse Analysis, conclude that its "social distancing and lack of direct addressing are used as one of the main tools to divert the audience from the critique of Black discrimination and brutality beneath the song, which is planned to create a public forum to discuss the difficult subject" (203). However, the exploration of its actual impact is better addressed by Akingbe and Ayodele. These scholars compare Gambino's "This Is America" and Falz's "This Is Nigeria" by taking Musical Discourse Analysis as a basis and argue that both videos focus on the young—with no mentioning of their gender—as an ostracized group in their respective hostile countries. Akingbe and Ayodele also explore how hip-hop music videos end up contributing to the fixation of particular opinions.

This dissertation attempts to take the exploration of masculinity as its main focus and draw attention to the influence that the video has had in terms of how it has fostered a conversation about gender in other music videos. Firstly, I will examine how the stereotypes created by hegemonic white America about African-American men are

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rejected in Gambino's music video. Secondly, I will delve into what *America* means from the perspective of the video's protagonists, i.e. the African-American man. Finally, I will explore how it has boosted a reflection on masculinity in other American communities and in the international panorama. Consequently, I argue that Gambino in "This Is America" does not only challenge the subordination of African-American men by satirically attacking the representation made of them by the racist, patriarchal and capitalist USA and escaping from this context, but it has also initiated a conversation about what the USA and other countries mean to other men, fostering an anti-patriarchal challenge against dominant narratives.

Firstly, I claim that "This Is America", which is an example of popular culture, opposes the power of the white hegemonic USA and the representation it has constructed of the othered African-American man. Secondly, I deal with the impact of the video and assert that other rappers have engaged in a reflection on masculinity initiated by Gambino. In the second section, three different recreations of Gambino's music video—"This Is Asian American" (2018) by Jason Chu, "This Is Iraq" (2018) by I-NZ and "This Is Nigeria" (2018) by Falz—selected from the myriad of covers made after the video was released will be examined by focusing on their representation of the male gender. Finally, I conclude that "This Is America" is valuable because it has boosted a conversation about the production of masculinity depending on each context and about different types of subordination on an international level.

To accomplish the aforementioned goals, an exhaustive analysis of Gambino's music video based on Cultural Studies will be carried out. Firstly, since this dissertation centers on both race and gender, it is crucial to point out that, as Barker (2000) makes clear, neither race nor masculinity can be objectively, biologically and globally delimited; they are, instead, socially and culturally constructed. Secondly, it is also pivotal to broadly

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delimit the field of Cultural Studies. As Barker (2004) puts it, “cultural studies can be understood as an exploration of culture, as constituted by the meanings and representations generated by human signifying practices, and the context in which they occur, with a particular interest in the relations of power and the political consequences that are inherent in such cultural practices” (43). Most of the concepts mentioned by Barker (2004) are organized in the heuristic presented by Walton (2006). However, it is crucial to notice that, as Walton stresses, “separating the categories in this way is just a convenience and, in practice, they all interrelate” (Walton 261). Thus, this dissertation will take this heuristic as a basis for the analysis proposed, although the different sections it presents will be combined. Additionally, this dissertation will also draw attention to the consequences of the video by assessing its impact primarily through the analysis of the three selected covers of “This Is America”.

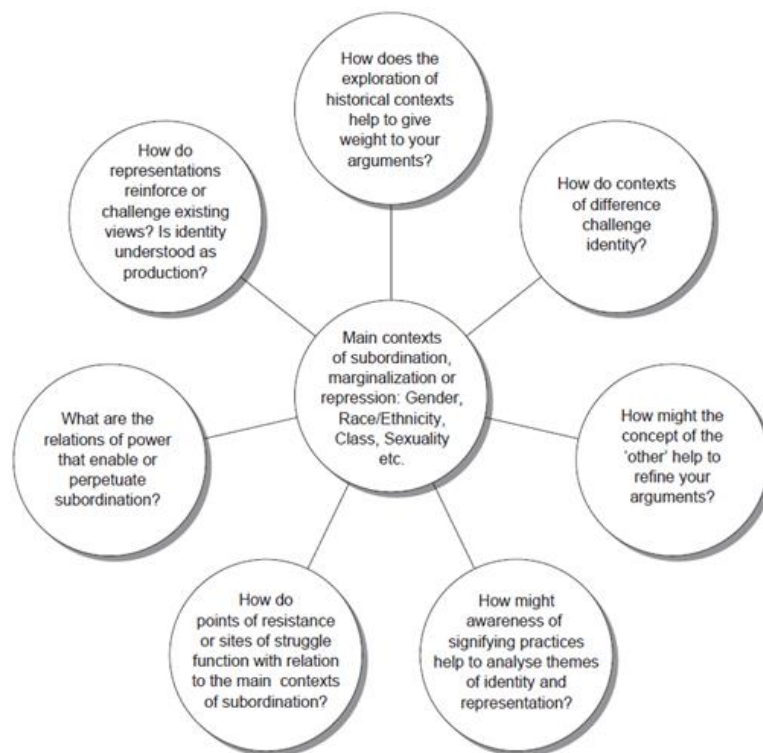


Figure 1. Heuristic taken from Walton (2006)

## **PART 1. Analysis of Childish Gambino's "This Is America": African-American Masculinity as a Context of Subordination**

### **1.1. Historical Context: How White Men have Acquired Power over the African-American Men**

In 1619, the first slaves of the thirteen colonies that would finally form the USA arrived in Virginia. As Barker (2004) stresses, slavery, along with the previous genocide of Native Americans, constituted the basis of the racialization of US history, resulting in the hegemony of the white race. Slavery was officially abolished when the Civil War (1861-1865) ended, more specifically, when the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment (1865) promoted by President Lincoln, which abolished slavery unless it was used for punishing criminals, was adopted. The 14<sup>th</sup> (1868)—on the full citizenship of people born in the USA—and the 15<sup>th</sup> (1870)—on suffrage for all races—Amendments also seemed to point towards Black freedom.

Nevertheless, the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) continued to be marked by discrimination against African-Americans. Black people in the south, where slavery had been crucial for economy, were still repressed due to the "black codes", which limited the new status of freed slaves. In addition, the Ku Klux Klan (founded in Tennessee in 1866), a white supremacist group, gained ground. Then, under the doctrine "separate but equal"—popularized after the Plessy v. Ferguson case (1896)—, the Jim Crow laws (1877-1964) were implemented. Named after a character of the minstrel show, which depicted a highly stereotyped and racist image of African-Americans, these laws ensured racial segregation and the consequent marginalization—including physical aggression—of Black people, especially in the south. As a result, the Civil Rights movement (1954-

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1965) gained momentum and crucial laws such as the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 against racial, religious, gender and other types of discrimination were passed.

Even so, discrimination did not end. The Black Power movement during the 60s and 70s and the Black Panthers—focused on combating Police brutality and eventually on Marxism—became especially relevant in African-American history. Nowadays, as Rickford argues, criminalization of Black Americans and mass incarceration, as Jim Crow Laws did, still ensure “the regulation of black bodies, the harnessing of black surplus labor in the name of corporate profit” (37). All this has been depicted in African-American culture and hip-hop, which arose as a “social commentary and a description of the challenges facing poor Black and Brown communities in the USA” (Deis 192), is no exception.

Gambino released “This Is America” in 2018, towards the end of a decade marked by two very different Presidents: Democrat Barack Obama (2009-2017) and Republican Donald Trump (2017-2021). As Rickford suggests, Obama’s mandate stood for the welcoming of a racially diverse nation by many US citizens. However, Trump’s victory in the 2016 presidential election showed that the USA was still a deeply racialized society. His defense of the building of a wall on the Mexico-United States border and of the 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment, which allows the use of guns, are two of the many aspects that boosted the controversy around his conservative stance. Regarding gun ownership, O’Brien et. al affirm that “US whites oppose strong gun reform more than all other racial groups, despite a much greater likelihood that whites will kill themselves with their guns (suicide), than be killed by someone else” (8). Additionally, Trump popularized the slogan “Make America Great Again”, which denotes nostalgia for the American racist past. According to Mukherjee, this sentiment is “born of America’s historical inability to (...) decouple the story of the Republic from the story of whiteness” (10).

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Nonetheless, institutional racism was also present during Obama's mandate. African-American deaths at the hands of the Police, principally the murder of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in 2014, in Ferguson (Missouri), revived the focus on Police brutality exerted on Black people, especially of the lower classes (Graff). Other tragedies such as the Charleston church massacre in 2015, when the white supremacist Dylann Roof shot at the parishioners of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church—part of the oldest African-American churches and seat of civil right activists' gatherings—, account for the racist USA even when Obama was president.

All these episodes led to the emergence of BLM. As Rickford notes, the name of this movement was created as a hashtag on Twitter by three women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. Although it began as a response to the exoneration of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator who shot dead seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin when he was visiting relatives, "the slogan's deeper significance as the rallying cry for an incipient movement crystallized in 2014 during the Ferguson, Missouri uprisings against police brutality" (Rickford 35). Nevertheless, it must be noted that, as Rickford points out, BLM is influenced by other pivotal movements of American history such as "the anti-lynching crusades of Ida B. Wells (...), the 1951 We Charge Genocide petition by the Civil Rights Congress, (...) or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) [after] the 1955 killing of Emmett Till by southern racists" (37), to name a few.

## **1.2. Representation, Identity and the "Other"**

In "This Is America", the main protagonist is an African-American man that constructs his own identity influenced by the reality enclosed in the warehouse. Since "identity is a process of *becoming* built from points of similarity and difference" (Barker, 2004: 94,



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original italics), the protagonist positions himself as similar to those who share their race and gender—among other labels—but different from other categories such as femininity and, especially in this video, their more powerful other: white American masculinity. However, being a white or a Black man is not “an essential state of being but rather is one that has to be represented and learned” (Barker, 2004: 177). This video offers different representations of African-American men but also “inquires into the power relations inherent in the representation of ‘blackness’ while simultaneously deconstructing the very terms of a black-white binary” (Barker, 2004: 177).

The video begins with an African-American man dancing and approaching a Black male guitarist. The singer's initial moves are eccentric, especially due to his facial expressions. Perhaps the most striking one is a wink, which has been related to the logo of Coon Chicken Inn, a restaurant chain popular in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that made their logo using a caricature of a Black male. All this is accompanied by joyous African music and Gambino singing “We just wanna party/ Party just for you/ We just want the money/ Money just for you”. However, according to Vernallis, music videos are characterized by, apart from the continuity of images, “moments that change or break the flow” (199-200). In 00:52, a drastic change in sound and imagery occurs: Gambino shoots dead the musician, who has suddenly appeared with his head covered and without his guitar. As many cultural critics have pointed out, the singer adopts the pose of Jim Crow just before shooting. Therefore, in the first scenes, the crucial aspects of the representation of African-American men as different from white men included in the video are presented: historical references to Black male subordination, the Black man dancing, the Black man killing and the importance of money for their manhood.

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Figure 2. Gambino winks



Figure 3. Logo of Coon-Chicken Inn



Figure 4. Gambino shoots at a Black man while adopting a pose usually related to Jim Crow



Figure 5. Jim Crow's posture

By including different historical references, Gambino stresses that his identity cannot be dissociated from American history. Along with the allusions to Jim Crow and Coon-Chicken Inn's logo, Gambino's own outfit also alludes to the African-American past, since, as Margaretha and Panjaitan argue, it is similar to the one worn by Black people in slave auctions. These references show how African-American men have historically been represented in various ways, in this case, as entertainers or as part of unfree labor, but always at the service of white people. By mixing the Jim Crow pose with the Black man killing, Gambino attracts attention to the link between his actions and the American racist past. In this scene of the video, the Black man kills, but in order to

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do so he adopts the pose of Jim Crow; in reality, a Black man may also kill and, consequently, be identified as a killer, but his deed, even if it is horrific and unjustifiable, is also connected to the racist environment in which he lives.

The dichotomy between Black and white people resulting from the power of the latter over the former persists in the current USA. As Campbell explains concerning what he denominates "myth of difference" (15), "people of color are routinely represented, in a number of ways, differently than white people (...) including "positive" stereotypes of successful African-American athletes and entertainers as well as the negative stereotypes of people of color (especially African-American and Hispanic men) as violent criminals" (15). As LeMesurier affirms, Gambino intertwines both representations in the video, which are "a white perspective on blackness" (147). It is precisely due to the mixing of the two representations of Black men, from killer to happy dancer in a matter of seconds, that this video has been classified as a satire by Osman and the audience in general.

Firstly, Gambino presents his identity through the representation of the Black man dancing, which occupies through almost the whole video the foreground of the image. A large part of the audience concluded that Gambino's and the schoolchildren's dance moves, always contrasted with images of violence, allude to how entertainment receives more attention than the violence exerted on Black people. Nevertheless, the relevance of dancing in this video may go further than that. Most of Gambino's and the schoolchildren's dance moves are either African-American or African, directing attention to their position as African-Americans in contrast with white Americans. However, as LeMesurier affirms, the dancing in the video also shows how "in order to be legible in the public sphere as a Black body, [Gambino] must dance" (148) thus succumbing to the racist conception of the "spectacularly" talented Black body" (Watts, 1997, quoted in LeMesurier 139). In addition, Gambino's dance moves also mix the opposite, perhaps

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even contradictory, allusions to Black men as threatening and Black men as vulnerable. From 1:04 to 1:08, Gambino acts as if he is about to faint, probably due to the exhaustion caused by living in a racist environment. Then, he immediately smiles and dances happily, succumbing to the image of the Black male as an entertainer. Nevertheless, when the line "I got the strap/ I gotta carry em" is heard in 1:22, Gambino acts as if he was fastening the strap of a gun. Thus, in less than twenty seconds, Gambino shows how his identity is "multiple, shifting and fragmented" (Barker, 2004: 94).



**Figure 6. Gambino acts as if he was fainting**



**Figure 7. Gambino, just after being about to faint, smiles and dances**

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**Figure 8. Gambino mimics the line “I got the strap”**

This is further stressed when Gambino stops dancing and kills other Black people. Gambino's shots mark the shift from the happy gospel music played by the guitarist or sung by the gospel choir to a discomforting rap characterized by its aggressive beat and the confusing background vocals of other rappers. He fires twice: when he shoots at the Black male musician (0:52) and when he shoots at the gospel choir (1:56), a scene usually related to the Charleston Church Massacre. It is especially remarkable that “the video begins by annihilating a root in black music” (Osman 41). This contributes to the denouncement of endemic violence towards African-Americans, be it exerted by racist Americans or even another Black person. Moreover, Gambino kills looking directly at the viewer after each shot and showing no empathy for his victims. This insensitivity, apart from disturbing the audience, contributes not only to the stereotypical image of the Black man as threatening but also to his hyper-masculinity. The lyrics also draw attention to his total lack of feelings—influenced by drug consumption, which emphasizes his condition as threatening—in lines such as “Yeah, yeah I'm so cold like, yeah/ I'm so dope like, yeah”.

Nevertheless, the representation of the Black male in this video is not restricted to dancing and murdering, it is also related to the implications that earning money has in a

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capitalist country such as the USA. Many critics have also related the recurrent references to money in the song as part of the critique to how "capitalist ideals (...) have ensured that the entertainment industry has been wielded as a tool to distract the population from more serious and pressing issues" (Akingbe and Ayodele 18). Although this is a possible interpretation, it ignores the link between economic power and Black masculinity. In the song, the grandmother's advice "Get your money, Black man" is especially stressed because of both the several times it is repeated and the force with which it is uttered. This pressure to have money—the line is a piece of advice in which the imperative mood, instead of other forms such as *should*, is used—is the reason why this man sees the world as chaotic. The havoc around Gambino and the dancers is caused by a multitude of people running disorderly, probably escaping. Although the exact cause of why they run seems unclear, the constant presence of cars with their doors open and people breaking them points at one cause: the stereotypical relation between Black males and robbery. In addition, the lyrics also contribute to the image of criminal Black men in lines such as "Yeah, yeah, I'ma go get the bag/ Yeah, yeah, or I'ma get the pad" alluding to armed robbery. This, contrasted with the most often happy choreography, suggests that no matter how much Gambino tries to succumb to the image of the dancer, the pressure on him to make money, perhaps by resorting to crime, will constantly influence his identity.

By intertwining money, crime and Black masculinity, this video draws attention to Black men entering the gangsta culture, which stands for the veneration of money, crime and female objectification usually present in hip hop. hooks argues that African-American male radicals of the 60s began to succumb to white patriarchal capitalist ideals about making as much money as possible. As hook suggests, when this is combined with "a culture that tells [Black men] that they can never really achieve enough money or power to set them free from racist white tyranny in the work world" (26) the gangsta

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culture, "the essence of patriarchal masculinity" (26), appears. In other words, "often black males choose crime to avoid the hierarchy in the workforce that places them on the bottom" (hooks 27). Gambino raps "I'm on Gucci" or "You just a black man in this word/ Drivin' expensive foreigners", this one related to expensive cars, alluding to lavishness. This points at the embracement of gangsta culture as well as the Black man's pressure to meet American patriarchal and capitalist expectations. However, his movements seem to be satirical while alluding to Gucci and the contrast between the allusion to luxurious cars and the lines "You just a big dawg, yeah/ I kenneled him in the backyard/ No, probably ain't life to a dog/ For a big dog" points at the ironic nature of this reference to money since for the Black male economic power does not mean having the power of white men. Thus, "This Is America" also criticizes capitalism, stressing how this economic system has ostracized African-American males.

Gambino seems to have constructed his identity as a play between different and even paradoxical representations of the Black male. These representations are, in fact, the result of patriarchal, capitalist and racist values imposed on him. As it has been previously noted, given the clash between these contradictory representations, the video has been widely considered a satirical rejection of all of them. However, as it will be argued later on, the rejection of these representations goes further than this, which will complicate Gambino's identity.

### **1.3. Signifying Practices**

Representation is deeply linked with signifying practices. According to Hall, "sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes (...) construct meaning and transmit it. They signify. (...) They are the vehicles or media which carry meaning because they operate as symbols, which stand for or represent (i.e. symbolize) the meanings we wish to

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communicate" (5). In this section, the analysis of how some relevant elements of the video "are made to mean" (Walton 268) will show that they have been employed by the hegemonic USA to perpetuate racist discrimination of African-American males.

White men are virtually absent in the video, but there is a clear symbol related to white America in it: the constant presence of the Police. As Margaretha and Panjaitan argue regarding the subjects in lines such as "We just wanna party" and "Police be trippin now", "the 'police' signifies a more robust power (...). The authority is negatively portrayed, and it creates a tension that puts 'we' in a state of fear" (194). The main protagonist of the video, the Black man, talks about his own people and shows affinity with other communities usually ostracized by white America such as Latino-Americans. Both African and Latino American men are linked with crime, money, drug dealing and, therefore, the image of the gangsta in lines like "Hunnid bands, hunnid bands, hunnid bands/ Contraband, contraband, contraband/ I got the plug in Oaxaca/ They gonna find you like 'blocka'". *Hunnid band* means ten thousand dollars and Oaxaca is a town from Mexico, a country usually related to drug smuggling. This is contrasted with the presence of the Police. Although the Police are mentioned in the lyrics, their presence is even more noticeable in the video since various Police cars appear in those scenes where violence is predominant. Although not all American Police officers are white, Police brutality against African-American people, especially against Black males, makes this institution inseparable from white hegemonic America exerting its power on African-Americans. Thus, the difference between the groups is clear: the Police stand for white hegemonic America, linking them with a position of responsibility and power but drug trafficking is linked with Black and Latino men, relegating them to the position of the dangerous other.



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**Figure 9. Childish Gambino and a group of Black students dance, ignoring the chaos and the Police behind them**

Also related to criminality, the video presents another crucial object for American history: the gun. If the killing of Black people was not gruesome enough, the scenes that include killings become even more grotesque when, after the two shots, Gambino gives his gun or rifle to a schoolboy that wraps them in a red cloth while the corpses are either hauled or ignored. On the one hand, both the video and the lyrics draw attention to guns by showing the Black male pulling the trigger. This is clearly appreciated in the aforementioned lines “Guns in my area/ I got the strap/ I gotta carry ‘em”. In “This Is America”, the gun is a symbol of the stereotypical view of Black American males as criminals and of the affirmation of their patriarchal masculinity, since they link them to the aforementioned gangsta culture. On the other hand, as it has been claimed by many cultural critics, guns in the video stand for the care that many Americans have for their guns, while they ignore the casualties left by gun violence. Thus, guns stand for the challenge against racist American values in two different ways: drawing attention to how they have contributed to gangsta culture and criticizing racist violence on Black people.

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**Figure 10. Gambino kills a gospel choir. His rifle is carefully taken away but the victims are ignored**

Another relevant scene in "This Is America" is the one accompanying the lines "This a celly/ That's a tool". In this scene, various schoolboys are filming all the chaos that is beneath the elevated platform where they are situated. The fact that they, as well as the dancers that follow Gambino, are dressed in a school uniform stands for the Black youth exposed to crime and the prejudicial image of Black people as criminals from a very young age. In the case of the students on the platform, it is especially curious that they cannot talk because they have their mouths covered but they can still film the turbulence with their cell phones. This can be related to BLM, since many Police aggressions have been denounced by this movement thanks to videos filmed with cell phones that have been spread through social media. Thus, although Black Americans have regularly been silenced by the mass media controlled by the hegemony and sometimes even disregarded by the justice system, they can now talk through social media. Finally, this scene and the lyrics that accompany it have also been related by cultural critics to another case of Police brutality, when Stephon Clark, a twenty-two-year-old man, was shot by the Police, who alleged that he had a gun (a tool in the lyrics), when he just had a cell phone.

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**Figure 11. Black students film all the chaos while their mouths are covered**

Finally, perhaps the most obvious sign to define Gambino as a Black male is his bare torso. Skin color, which has been basic for the process of racialization, perpetuates the dichotomy between Black and white people. Similarly, the body has also been crucial for the differentiation of male and female genders, although this is becoming blurred. Historically, Black and white as well as male and female bodies have been subject to different types of violence. For white America, Black skin has signified inferiority throughout all American history. This has been observed in different forms of oppression and violence during slavery, the segregation resulting from Jim Crow Laws and the different types of discrimination inherited from American history in the current times. In other words, the Black male body has also become a site of violence, where the racist beliefs of white supremacists have been projected by means of different violent acts (e.g. from lynching to Police brutality). Gambino's Black skin situates him in a position different from whites just as his afro hair does. Nonetheless, what is striking in Gambino's video is that he does not attract attention to his Black male body by oversexualizing it and presenting it as hyper-masculine, as it has been usually the case with Black male torsos. Instead, "the absence of tops shows vulnerability" (Margaretha and Panjaitan 199). More specifically, it shows the vulnerability that a Black man may suffer, as the video explores,

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as a subject of violence exerted by white hegemonic America and other Black Americans, who are also influenced by their experience as an ostracized community.



**Figure 12. Gambino's bare torso**

#### **1.4. Struggle and Resistance**

As hooks makes clear, hip-hop culture has usually “reflect[ed] the ruling values of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, albeit in black face” (142). However, it must be noted that the number of rap songs that distance themselves from this is constantly growing. Similarly, “This Is America” contradicts hooks’ definition of hip-hop and acts as an example of popular culture. As Walton explains, “Hall has a very particular way of defining popular culture as a site of struggle. What this implied was that popular cultural forms are of analytical interest only in so far as they are in tension with the dominant culture. This meant taking account of what belongs, at any given historical moment, to the periphery” (238). Thus, “This Is America” becomes part of popular culture because it resists American capitalist, racist and patriarchal representations of African-American men by not only satirizing them but also escaping from them.

As the title of the song suggests, the video attempts to show what America is from the point of view of a Black man. Curiously, the title is repeated at the beginning of the chorus, which appears twice, and, more importantly, it is always preceded by Gambino’s

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two shots and accompanied by the singer directly looking at the viewer with a neutral countenance. The confrontation between the mentioning of America and the video's cruel violence clearly shows that the USA is a hostile environment for Black people. Additionally, after claiming that this violence is America, Gambino repeatedly raps the line "Don't catch you slippin' up". This is probably a warning to other Black males like him. The American patriarchal, racist and capitalist society may sometimes drive them to crime, but they must not slip up and succumb to violence, because if white America finds out, their deeds will be transformed into stereotypical ideas of the whole community and their destiny will probably be getting trapped in the US system of mass incarceration.

However, in order to understand why America is hostile to Black men, the viewer has to consider the video as a whole. The representation that Gambino offers of the country is in line with Tucker's definition of "the United States as a prison writ large" (4): based on Foucault's "carceral networks", this means that the USA is an example of how prisons have been depicted as a necessary entity to ensure the control of the undisciplined, a group to which Black males, according to American racist beliefs, are instinctively attracted. As Tucker affirms, this has influenced the mass incarceration of Black males. In "This Is America", the warehouse where the video is filmed encapsulates this representation of the country. Gambino goes from one room to another, as if he was locked in the building. In other words, as if it was a prison. There, he can only be a killer, a dancer or a victim and he can only focus on gaining money, not necessarily—or sometimes even possibly—in a legal way. Therefore, his agency is limited due to his condition as an African-American male.

Nevertheless, when the last shot is heard—the "blocka" sung by Gambino in the line "They gonna find you like 'blocka'"—, there is a significant contrast. There have already been two shots after which Gambino has continued embodying the

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aforementioned representations of the Black male. Nonetheless, it is the final shot—or the onomatopoeia of the shot—that makes Gambino, who acts as if he was holding a gun, and the rap stop for a moment. The close-up shot directs the viewer's attention to his exhausted countenance until he drops his arms and takes a cigarette. In the next scene, the chaos of the previous images vanishes. Gambino is almost alone: he is only accompanied by the male guitarist of the beginning and a female character, who is the famous singer SZA. The presence of this woman may be related to the female objectification related to the criticized gangsta culture. In addition, various abandoned cars appear, keeping the allusion to robberies, and Gambino climbs one of them. At this point, Young Thug shouts "America, I just checked my following list, and/ You mothafuckas owe me". Since the sentence is incomplete, it is not explicitly said what the USA owes the Black man, but the lines are probably denouncing all the promises that white hegemonic America has made to improve African-Americans' lives, which have finally been unfulfilled. Then, Gambino shouts "Black man/ one, two, three — get down", which could be a Police officer's shout before subduing or even shooting at him. However, the zooming out shows Gambino, instead of getting down, throwing his cigarette and dancing again, but his movements differ from the ones in previous scenes.

Here, his moves could be "described as very energetic, lively, vigorous, unpredictable and raw" (Monteiro and Wall 248). This is in fact the description of Krumping, a widely known African-American dance style linked with hip-hop that could have influenced this scene. According to Monteiro and Wall, "the physical nature of the dance involves intense movements that are cathartic and provide the dancers with a means to release and express intense emotions such as anger, aggression and frustration positively, in a non-violent way" (248). From a white and racist perspective, Gambino

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dancing on the top of a car could signify his incivility, but for the Black man, these moves are a way to resist the subordination to which he has been relegated.



**Figure 13. Gambino dances on the top of a car**

More importantly, at the end of the video, Gambino runs away from the warehouse, i.e. from America. Gambino escapes horrified while he is chased by a faceless mob. Meanwhile, Young Thug sings “You just a black man in this world/ You just a barcode, ayy” or the final lines “No probably ain’t life to a dog/ For a big dog”. This final image and the lyrics that accompany it imply that Gambino finally opposes all the pressure that white America has exerted on him: he resists the racist powers that dominate the USA and the identity that this country has tried to impose on him. The video has an open ending since the viewers do not know whether Gambino will be caught or not. Thus, the audience can choose to be pessimistic or not about Gambino’s and by extension African-American men’s destiny.

Coming back to the concept of identity, one may question whether Gambino, who escapes from the small-scale representation of the USA offered in the video, wants to identify himself as an American. Viewers do not know where Gambino, as an African-American man, runs to. It can certainly be argued that Gambino’s run has no predetermined destination: he just escapes from the country he has depicted as oppressive. However, precisely due to the depiction of the USA that he presents, it can be claimed

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that Gambino aims to get to "new forms of belonging [that] need to emerge in response to the trauma of population displacement" (Gilroy, 2003, quoted in Chiorean 17).



**Figure 14. Gambino escapes from the warehouse while he is chased by an angry mob**



## **PART 2. The Impact of Gambino's "This Is America": An International Conversation about Masculinity**

### **2.1. Influence of "This Is America"**

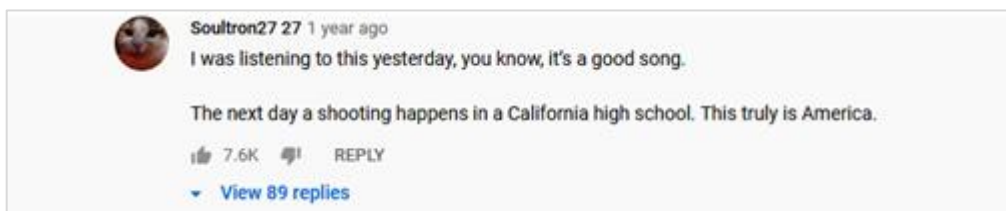
As Hall states, "above all, cultural meanings are not only 'in the head'. They organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects" (3). Just as, for example, "football matches with banners and slogans, with faces and bodies painted in certain colours or inscribed with certain symbols, can also be thought of as 'like a language'" (Hall 5) music videos as "a play between both the visual and musical codes" (Vernallis 199) can also be regarded as such. As Hall argues, languages represent ideas that need to go through a decoding process in which someone sends a message and another one receives it, although "the receiver of messages and meanings is not a passive screen on which the original meaning is accurately and transparently projected" (10). Thus, more than what "This Is America" says, it must be taken into account how this video has been read. The first part of this dissertation already presents a possible reading, but the second part will deal with how others have not only read it but also, and more importantly, responded to it thus engaging in a conversation, in specific, about masculinity.

Indeed, "This Is America" has left a mark on its audience. The music video soon became a trending topic on Twitter and dozens of YouTube users posted videos about their reactions to "This Is America" in the following weeks after its release. Although a considerable part of its audience did parodies and memes about it ignoring its reflection on African-Americans' complicated lives, a great number of its viewers tried to decode its symbolism. The vast majority of them ended up linking it with resistance to American racism. As a result, the song became a sort of anthem for BLM protesters and regained

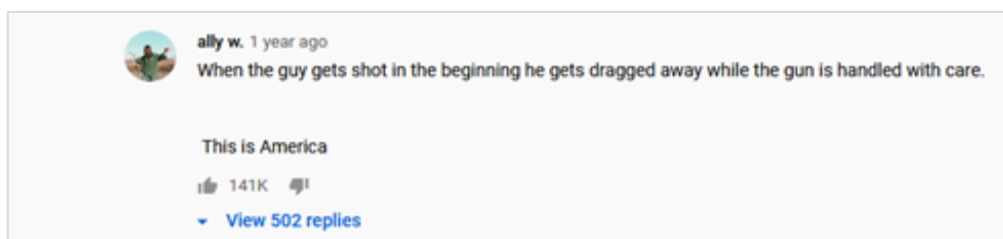
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momentum in 2020, when many users of the extremely popular social network TikTok used it as the soundtrack of their one-minute videos about the turmoil caused by George Floyd’s murder (May 25, 2020).

Moreover, the title of the music video has given many viewers food for thought, since a large part of the audience was engaged in a conversation about what America is, i.e. what *America* means. The following images are a few examples of viewers reflecting on this issue on both YouTube and Twitter. Figures 15 and 16 show how the audience related the song to the reality of the USA concerning gun violence. Figure 17 exemplifies how some viewers “realized that memeing [the video’s] most brutal moments proves the exact point Glover is trying to make” (Mufson, online), which has been said to be, as it was previously mentioned, that the USA is more focused on entertainment, in this case, on making memes of the video, than on acknowledging the crude reality depicted in it.



**Figure 15. YouTube comment relating the USA to gun violence**



**Figure 16. YouTube comment relating the USA to gun violence**

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**Figure 17. Tweets about how some US citizens focus on entertainment instead of oppression**

Therefore, “This Is America” goes in line with Wright and Sandlin’s definition of public pedagogy. According to Wright and Sandlin’s explanation of this term, “protest music texts become a ‘catalyst for’ critical and counter-hegemonic adult learning by opening up spaces in hegemonic neoliberal consumer culture, and potentially transforming mass consciousness” (2009, quoted in Haycock 438). While taking economic advantage of capitalism as a product that generates a great amount of income and contributes to the selling of other products released by the singer, “This Is America” criticizes the capitalist basis that jeopardizes most Black American lives and motivates its viewers to keep fighting capitalist values.

Nevertheless, the impact of this music video was not restricted to the African-American community. As Williams argues, “sampling and responses to existing songs are regular occurrences upon which the genre has built its reputation” (Williams, 2010, quoted in Akingbe and Ayodele 16). Thanks to the internet and globalization, Gambino’s video rapidly spread through the whole world, which resulted in many rappers of different countries using this video to give voice to their own views on oppression. The UK, Sierra Leone, Namibia, South Africa, Ghana, Barbados and the Dominican Republic are just a few examples of countries where rappers recreated the video soon after its release to denounce the injustices they suffer. The responses involved changes in lyrics and

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aesthetics but most of them share one main characteristic: they adopt Gambino’s satire by showing a male singer dancing despite the crude reality that the video presents.

Although protest rap songs are not uncommon, taking advantage of Gambino’s success has enabled many rappers to widen their audience. This is acknowledged, for example, in Chu’s music video “This Is Asian American”. As it can be observed in Figure 18, this video includes a message directed to Gambino thanking him for providing them with a channel to denounce repression seen from another perspective. Outside the USA, the Iraqi-New Zealander rapper I-NZ affirmed that “[“This Is America”] presented a great opportunity to use the platform to get a message across about Iraq, which otherwise would have never gained the kind of exposure it’s currently gaining” (quoted in *Arab News*: online). One of the most successful covers of Gambino’s song was Falz’s “This Is Nigeria”. As Falz claimed regarding his decision to recreate “This Is America”, “the primary motivation was to trigger an awakening among the Nigerian people about the numerous political and social ills that [they] constantly face as a country. And more importantly to spark a reaction in the positive direction” (Falz, quoted in Akan: online). Both I-NZ’s and Falz’s covers became highly popular in the USA and in other countries. Even so, or maybe precisely because of this, Falz’s “This Is Nigeria” was banned in Nigerian radio stations by the National Broadcasting Commission, which collaborates with the Nigerian government criticized in Falz’s cover.



**Figure 18. Acknowledgements in Chu’s “This Is Asian America”**

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Therefore, "This Is America" has also fostered a conversation about what the USA is from other male perspectives and even what other countries are when they are seen through its male citizens' eyes. In the three selected covers, the rappers' view of their country is also enclosed in a warehouse, which is also traversed by the singer. Furthermore, the three selected covers, as most of Gambino's covers do, reflect—even if they do so unconsciously—on different aspects that are deeply linked with masculinity and patriarchy. As a result, the three covers show that masculinity, which can embrace or reject patriarchal values, is a production deeply influenced by the context of each country and the hegemonic forces that rule them.

## **2.2. Analysis of Jason Chu's "This Is Asian American"**

Jason Chu's "This Is Asian American" is an example of how Gambino's music video has fostered a reflection on other types of racist marginalization inside the USA. In this music video, the rapper Chu collaborated with Tow-Arboleda Films, a film production company created by Michael Tow and Teja Arboleda that has won Telly and Emmy Awards. The three of them are Asian-Americans and base their work on combating the discrimination against this community. In this music video, they seem to center on the troubled status of the Asian-American population in general by drawing attention to poverty in the community or the low self-esteem that arises from conforming to western beauty standards, which, in the song, could be applied to both females and males. However, both the song and the video take the point of view of the Asian-American man: the singer, the main protagonist of the music video and the subject on which the lyrics are based are male. As Han claims, "Asian American men (...) have been negatively stereotyped as being effeminate, lacking the American ideals of manhood and sexually undesirable" (3). Therefore, this video makes relevant remarks about how Asian-American men have

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usually been considered non-masculine by racist white America while also addressing a critique towards patriarchal values.

Gender is explicitly mentioned in the lines "I don't belong in your area/ But you gon let my sister marry ya?" and "Girl I wanna settle/ Down", this one accompanied by a scene that features three interracial couples dancing. Although both examples allude to interracial marriage, the first one centers on an Asian-American woman—from the perspective of her brother—and the second one focuses on an Asian-American man. Regarding Asian-American women's role in interracial relationships, the aforementioned line may refer to how Asian-Americans are constantly discriminated against but, due to "the racialized images of 'Oriental' women, depicting Asian American women as exotically feminine, submissive, and domestic" (Han 3) they are still desired as wives according to patriarchal values. When the line about male involvement in this type of relationship is heard, Chu and other characters dance in pairs to a relaxing melody until the rap starts again and the three men shove their female partners. In this scene, Chu is paired with a white woman. Since this scene is related to a line that shows the man's urge to marry, it may be linked with Asian-American men's need to find a white wife "to climb up the racialized masculinity hierarchy in cross-racial competition" (Han 3). However, the reference to male violence exerted on females makes this scene inseparable from gender-based violence. It must be noted that, in spite of some scholars such as Hu concluding that East Asian men "embrace (...) domesticity and anti-sexist attitudes" (Hu, 2016, quoted in Han 3) in interracial marriage and of the emasculation of Asian-American men by western culture, Asian ideals for marriage, as Han mentions, are still based on patriarchy. The satirical nature of the video and its end show that it rejects this type of violence.

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**Figure 19. Three interracial couples dance**



**Figure 20. The male partners hit the women**

“This Is Asian American” focuses explicitly on masculinity in lines such as “I’m not a man/ or I’m a terrorist”. This is an ironic remark concerning how Asian-American men are considered either non-masculine or a menace to the country. According to Lu and Wong, “during economic hardship and times of threatened security, the term “perpetual foreigner” portrays Asian Americans, and immigrants specifically, as liars, traitors, and spies” (348). In the video, a man dragged by the Police emphasizes this issue. Additionally, other lines such as “I was born in your area/ I don’t belong in your area” or “Where are you really from?/ No, where are you really from?” allude to how Asian-Americans, in general, are never considered Americans despite being born in the USA.

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**Figure 21. An Asian-American man is dragged by the Police**

Another aspect of the song that can be related to masculinity is its emphasis on the fact that many Asian-Americans are in the USA just to work. The lines “We just here to build/ We don’t want no drama/ We just came to stack a mil/ Came to get the money/ Money set me free” illustrate this. According to Lu and Wong, Asian American men may suffer because their masculinity is deeply linked with both “expectations that men focus on career” (359-360) and their role as breadwinners. Additionally, Lu and Wong argue that Asian-American men give a crucial importance to their work lives to outweigh other situations in which they are not seen as masculine as the white male population.

Nonetheless, the pressure to have a successful career and its link with masculinity is stressed in the representation of the Asian-American man offered by the video’s main protagonist. As Lu and Wong argue, Asian-American men may be considered non-masculine due to “stereotypical attributes such as small, nerdy, passive, and unathletic” (357), which seem to be prejudices easily associated with the young male protagonist. His identity seems to be a constant struggle to meet the expectations imposed on him regarding academic success. This is suggested by his sad and overwhelmed facial expression when he plays the violin and when he takes an exam. This video adopts Gambino’s careful treatment of the gun while victims are ignored, but instead of a gun, the violin is used. It can be argued that the exam and especially the violin of the video stand for the social pressure fostered by the Asian values about perseverance and hard



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work. However, these values have also been transformed by white America into “one pervasive stereotype, the “model minority,” [that] mischaracterizes Asian Americans as intelligent, academically/professionally successful [and] hardworking” (Chou and Feagin, 2008; Lee, Wong, and Alvarez, 2009, quoted in Lu and Wong 347-348), which contributes to this pressure. Ironically, in the line “Student but never the principal” the song points out that even if Asian-Americans are usually considered bright students, they are not allowed to be leaders. According to Galinsky et al., Asian-American men tend to be discriminated against in positions of leadership related to masculine traits.



**Figure 22. The Asian-American young man plays the violin with a preoccupied facial expression**



**Figure 23. The Asian-American young man is left in shock while his violin is carefully taken away**

The most evident reflection on the emasculation of the protagonist is presented almost at the video’s end. In one of the final scenes, he is bullied by other young men who take his trousers away. Meanwhile, Chu and other girls laugh at him. This is, clearly,

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an allusion to emasculation. In addition, it must also be noted that some of the boys that bully the protagonist are Asian-American. This can be related to Lu and Wong's assertion that some Asian-American males try to be dominant or tough in order to conform to white masculinity values.



**Figure 24. The Asian-American young man is bullied**

The end of the video features the young male protagonist looking at an image of himself committing suicide as a result of enduring or observing all the situations that have been mentioned, but immediately after this scene, he rebels against all of them. According to Lu and Wong, "Asian American men's awareness of their inability to exude hegemonic masculinity can cause distress" (347). The video reflects this by presenting suicide as a possible way out considered by the protagonist. However, the video clearly advocates for another form of resistance to discrimination. The boy re-encounters once again the violin and destroys it. Immediately after, he screams, trying to liberate himself from all the pressure he has endured. Finally, the rest of the characters join him and scream with him directly at the camera, showing that they no longer accept the identity that patriarchal and hegemonic powers try to impose on them.



**Figure 25. The Asian-American young man sees an image of himself after committing suicide**



**Figure 26. The video’s characters scream at the camera**

### **2.3. Analysis of I-NZ’s “This Is Iraq”**

“This Is Iraq” is an instance of how the reflection on American hegemonic power influenced by “This Is America” was not restricted to the American borders. This music video is the version of Gambino’s song released by the Iraqi-New Zealander rapper I-NZ, stage name of Majid. Released on July 4, the video, directed by Pirlanta Toubba, took advantage of the significance of the date and, as it was previously noted, of the impact that Gambino’s video already had to criticize the USA’s role in Iraq since the American invasion of the country back in 2003. This conflict was declared by President George W. Bush (2001-2009) and was allegedly motivated by the 9/11 attacks, Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction that have not been found and Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship. Nevertheless, I-NZ’s message also focuses mainly on men and presents an

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anti-patriarchal stance by opposing the "reassertion of the masculinity of the nation" (Mann 156) defended by the USA in the Iraq War (2003-2011).

The American invasion of Iraq can be seen through the lens of gender and Said's orientalism, as Khalid proposes. According to Khalid, the USA othered Iraqi men by spreading "the dichotomy between the benevolent, civilised and moral masculinity of the West and the backward, barbaric, oppressive, deviant masculinity of the 'brown man'" (20). This video rejects this by humanizing Iraqis, especially Iraqi male citizens. The beginning of the song points out that Iraqi people just want to live in peace away from US influence even if they have to keep living with the imposed label "terror". This label, included in the term "War on Terror" coined by the American government, was used by the USA to claim that their enemies in the conflict were the terrorists. Additionally, since Iraqi women were mainly represented "as voiceless victims of a barbaric (male)" (Khalid 16), this label can easily be related to men. The video also humanizes Iraqis by ironically stressing how they were abused by the American army, which cries for its victim while killing civilians. American cruelty is especially emphasized in the very beginning of the video, which starts with the singer dressed in traditional Iraqi clothes approaching an old man playing the oud. Suddenly, two US soldiers appear and force the singer, now in the orange jumpsuit usually related to American prisoners, to shoot the old man. Thus, "This Is Iraq" inverts the aforementioned dichotomy, since it is the USA that appears as barbaric.

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**Figure 27. I-NZ is forced by the American army to shoot at another Iraqi man**



**Figure 28. I-NZ dances in front of Iraqi casualties**

Apart from rejecting the masculinity imposed on them by Americans, this video also opposes the masculinity that the USA spread of itself. Far from representing the USA as benevolent, I-NZ raps about the disaster caused by Americans during the conflict by emphasizing death, violence, corruption and terrorism. Thus, the song also criticizes the paternalistic motivations of pro-war Americans, who saw themselves as Iraqis' protectors—I-NZ ironically alludes to this in the line "Saying we gonna take care of you". Two clear examples of this criticism can be observed when the video emphasizes that the USA has collaborated with terrorist groups—US soldiers exchange weapons with terrorists in the video—and that the USA's main motivation was not Iraqi freedom but economic power, as can be seen in lines such as "cents for blood like yea" or "Barrels on

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barrels on barrels (barrels!)”—alluding to barrels of oil, which also appear in the video. Furthermore, Bush, the crucial figure in transmitting the masculinity of the nation as a whole during the conflict, is ridiculed in the video. A person wearing a mask of him, a clear caricature-like depiction of the President, is followed by soldiers holding a placard that reads “Mission Accomplished”. This message also appears in the line “delivered a mission accomplished”. The phrase was also read in a placard present in Bush’s infamous speech of May 2003 when he claimed, far earlier than the conflict ended, that the worst part of the war had been overcome.



**Figure 29. Allusions to terrorism and oil and the caricature of Bush**

However, the main rejection of the USA as benevolent comes with the allusion to the tortures in the prison Abu Ghraib, where Iraqi prisoners were sexually assaulted and physically tortured. This became known due to the leaked photos that the US soldiers took boasting about their horrendous deeds. The two lines “Take your clothes off (rape)/ Takin’ photos (ghraib)” accompanied by the image of a hooded Iraqi prisoner standing in a box with his arms in the form of a cross while a female soldier takes photos with him are clearly related to this horrific episode. Many men took part in the crime, but this video stresses the involvement of female soldiers such as Lyndie England or Sabrina Harman. As Khalid points out, popular opinion was more centered on how humiliated Iraqi men

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could feel by the tortures—especially by same-sex rape—than on the tortures themselves. Additionally, “images of US soldiers abusing Iraqi male prisoners feminise these prisoners and reinforce the superiority of US power (...). Images of a female US soldier achieves this more so (...) as it inverts what is perceived to be the ‘natural’ power relationship between men and women” (Khalid 27). Thus, the presence of this horrendous event in the video stresses that American masculinity was in fact patriarchal and cruel. Nonetheless, it also shows that gender continues to be a weapon in 21<sup>st</sup>-century wars: hegemonic America affirmed its patriarchal masculinity by attacking the masculinity of its enemies, sometimes by representing it as barbaric but, on other occasions, by assimilating it to its less powerful other, femininity.



**Figure 30. Allusion to Abu Ghraib tortures**

The old man from the beginning reappears at the end of the video, which attempts to encourage the Iraqi people to fight for their renewal. In this scene, the old man appears reciting the beginning of the poem “The River and Death” (1960) by the famous Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab. This poem focuses on an Iraqi city, Buwaib, immersed in blood and violence but, by drawing attention to nature, especially to a river, the poem becomes a revolutionary vindication of resurrection. The reading of the poem is accompanied by the image of another Iraqi man also in an orange jumpsuit cleaning the

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river of blood that resulted from the war. Therefore, the video opposes American military power while also attacking American power to represent Iraqis as a dangerous other by stressing the deep pain inflicted on them.



**Figure 31. I-NZ hears how the Iraqi old man recites a poem while another man cleans the blood on the floor**

#### **2.4. Analysis of Falz’s “This Is Nigeria”**

Finally, “This Is Nigeria”, released by the Nigerian rapper Falz—stage name of Folarin Falana (Lagos State, Nigeria, 1990)—and directed by Prodigeezy, shows that Gambino’s influence has not been limited to the criticism of the USA. Falz is also the son of the popular Nigerian lawyer and activist Fami Falana. In Gambino’s cover, Falz centers on political corruption, Police brutality, drug consumption, religious manipulation, neo-colonialism, poverty, crime and violence, including gender-based violence. However, the video mostly shows Nigerian men and the presence of most of its female characters is part of the critique towards patriarchal masculinity. Therefore, “This Is Nigeria” also draws attention to masculinity from an anti-patriarchal point of view.

This video repeatedly shows men as violent, a representative aspect of patriarchal masculinity. The video’s initial images immediately draw attention to Fulani herdsmen—also mentioned in the lines “Fulani Herdsmen still they slaughter/ Carry people they



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massacre”—, a nomadic community from the Sahel that is engaged in a long conflict with farmers, which has frequently ended in murder. In the video, a Fulani herdsman appears playing the ukulele until he stands up and kills another man with a machete. However, the video also addresses sexual violence exerted by men. Both the song and the video satirically allude to exorcism. Concerning this reference to religion, Adeshokan (online) claims that “Falz addresses stories of sexual assault by several pastors taking advantage of a desperate people”. Violence continues when the jihadist group Boko Haram appears in one scene. Throughout most of the video, Falz appears dancing with a group of girls wearing their hijabs. This has been considered by different cultural critics as a reference to the kidnapping of a group of Nigerian and Christian female students, known as Chibok schoolgirls, by this terrorist group. In the video, when the group appears, the girls escape horrified. As Maiangwa and Agbiboa note, this kidnapping is the group’s affirmation of “the oppression of women and their continued relegation to an inferior status vis-à-vis their male counterparts” (54). As happens with Gambino’s video, the juxtaposition between dance and violence shocks the viewers, who must face one of the countries’ crucial problems: in the case of this video, male chauvinism.



**Figure 32. Different violent scenes in which men—including the Fulani herdsman—are both the aggressors and the victims**

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**Figure 33. Allusion to religion**



**Figure 34. Allusion to Boko Haram**

However, “This Is Nigeria” depicts young men involved in crime and, at the same time, presents them as an ostracized group. The video shows young men fighting, robbing and taking drugs. The lyrics also mention fraud in the line “Yahoo Yahoo don tear everywhere now”, which alludes to yahoo boys, a term used to designate men that steal money on the internet. Nonetheless, Falz also raps “your people are still working multiple jobs, you talk say we lazy o”. According to Akingbe and Ayodele, here “Falz alludes to the Nigerian president’s caustic comment that Nigerian youths are lazy” (23). As Harris argues, the basis of Nigerian masculinity is the males’ condition as the main income earner in their home. According to Harris, since young men are not supposed to be at home but working, jobless young Nigerians, who find it difficult to get a job because of the precarious situation of the country, spend a great amount of time on the street, being easily drawn to violence. Thus, Falz, similarly to Gambino, sheds light on how

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masculinity, violence and money—the ultimate goal of employment—are linked. As it was previously mentioned, violence and money have also been the basis for mainstream hip-hop representation of men and gangsta culture, along with the objectification of women, which is also denounced in the video.



**Figure 35. Allusion to gangsta culture and the objectification of women**

This has led to the criminalization of young men while ignoring the basis of their conditions and, eventually, to Police brutality. This is addressed in the video by showing how the Police officers of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) hit a group of boys that were simply chatting and how they freed just one of them after the bribery of the young man’s rich father. While this scene is seen, the lyrics include Falz affirming that he is a student that has not done anything for which he should be punished. SARS is a Police unit created to combat robbery and kidnapping among other crimes, but it has been highly criticized due to its corruption and its disproportionate exertion of force on Nigerians. This has led to the movement #EndSARS, which became very popular thanks to social media, as happened with BLM. As it has been made public by Amnesty International (online), “the victims of the police unit (...) are predominantly male between the ages of 18 and 35, from low-income backgrounds and vulnerable groups”.

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**Figure 36. A group of young men is unjustly arrested by the Police**

Falz also identifies the main relations of power that foster these situations in, for example, the line: “We operate a predatory, neo-colonial capitalist system, which is founded on fraud and exploitation and therefore you are bound to have corruption”. In fact, this was pronounced by his father, which makes this resistance point even more relevant for common Nigerians. Finally, “the video ends with Falz raising his hands up in the defiant style of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the king of Afrobeat and a political activist” (Adeshokan: online). This, accompanied by the different characters of the video seriously staring at the viewer, reemphasizes the resistance towards the Nigeria depicted in the video.



**Figure 37. Falz raises his arm showing resistance**

## CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, I have suggested that music videos, in this case, rap music videos, can deal critically with the context in which they are embedded. In addition, I have also indicated the usefulness of Cultural Studies in the exploration of how subordination is resisted in what is known in the field as popular culture.

In the first part, I argued that Childish Gambino's "This Is America" challenges US racist discrimination against African-Americans by centering mainly on the repression of the Black man. I pointed out that Gambino's identity in his music video ends up being a malleable and sometimes even paradoxical construction deeply conditioned by the representations that white hegemonic America produces of the othered Black man. Consequently, I maintained that his identity as a Black man is the result of racist, patriarchal and capitalist pressures exerted on him. Then, the analysis of relevant signifying practices related to black masculinity contributed to asserting the video's main aim: dealing with Black masculinity subjected to white America. Finally, I focused on how the video opposes the stereotypical image of African-American men presented in it. This is certainly done by its satirical nature, as many critics have already pointed out, but it is also done by escaping from America, which is embedded in the warehouse—a sort of prison—where the video is filmed. At the end of the video, Gambino can no longer bear the pressure of racist, patriarchal and capitalist beliefs imposed on him as a Black man. As a result, he runs away from what *America* means for him. However, the video's open ending makes the viewers consider if Gambino can really escape from this context or not.

In the second part, I explored how the audience has engaged in a conversation with Gambino's video and defended that this engagement has contributed to an international rejection of different types of subordination. The three covers analyzed in

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this dissertation took advantage of Gambino's success and adapted the video to their own perspectives. Since they oppose relations of power linked, once again, with masculinity and patriarchy, their sampling of Gambino's "This Is America" has resulted in a reflection on how masculinity is a production, since its meaning varies depending on the context in which it is located. Chu's "This Is Asian America" shows that Asian men have been relegated to a non-masculine status in white patriarchal America. I-NZ's "This Is Iraq" rejects the USA's othering of Iraqi men as barbaric and attacks the paternalistic role that American hegemonic powers constructed for the USA. "This Is Nigeria" explicitly opposes violence and objectification of women by patriarchal men while also arguing that crime among young men is, in fact, influenced by corruption and neo-colonialism.

Consequently, it can be affirmed that popular culture can positively play a part in awakening the consciousness of the audience. The four hip-hop videos analyzed in this dissertation reject the patriarchal values usually present in the genre and show that men can also participate in the challenge of the system that has perpetuated the power of the male gender, but has also limited their identities. Thus, it cannot be denied that Gambino's music video has successfully boosted valuable lessons about subordination and masculinity in other countries and, especially, in America.

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Figure 3. <https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/the-story-of-the-coon-chicken-inn-226fe444089c> (Access date: 02 May 2021)

Figure 5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47125474> (Access date: 02 May 2021)

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