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Contemporary Cultural Analysis Assignment

This is America is a song by Childish Gambino, the stage name of actor and musician Donald Glover, released in May 2018. The song debuted alongside a provocative music video that quickly garnered attention for its stark commentary on gun violence, systemic racism, and the contradictions of American culture. Set in a seemingly carefree atmosphere, the video takes place in a large warehouse where Gambino dances and sings, only for sudden acts of violence interrupting the otherwise jubilant scenes. The song was released during a time of heightened conversation around police brutality, racial inequality, and mass shootings in the United States. Glover uses satire and disturbing imagery to expose the distractions and contradictions within American society, showing how entertainment often masks the harsh realities marginalized communities face. *This is America* employs a blend of visual and lyrical satire to expose the hypocrisy within American culture, particularly in its treatment of racial violence, with distracting entertainment and societal indifference. The stark contrasts between joyful music and violent imagery critique how popular culture masks and distracts from issues such as racism, poverty and gun violence. This paper will examine how This is America uses visual and lyrical contrasts to highlight American culture's hypocrisy. It will demonstrate how the upbeat tone clashes with violent imagery. It will also explore how Gambino's dancing represents society's tendency to ignore real struggles in favour of superficial distractions.

Ignorance is Innocence

This is America uses visual and lyrical contrasts to highlight the hypocrisies within American culture, mainly how entertainment serves as a distraction from systemic issues like racial violence. One clear example occurs early in the video, when Gambino, dancing with exaggerated, joyful movements, suddenly pulls out a gun and shoots a man wearing a hood who had been playing a guitar only moments ago (Glover 0:52). The cheerful tone of the music continues uninterrupted as if nothing significant has happened, while the camera pans away from the violence, focusing instead on Gambino's continued dancing. The dance moves he performs, many of them "Tik-Tok dances" – momentarily viral snippets of Internet culture, serve as a satirical commentary on how America prefers to focus on entertainment and superficial distractions rather than the grim reality of racial violence. This contrast exposes the hypocrisy of a society that consumes violence as entertainment but refuses to address the real issues behind it. Through this ironic lens, Gambino uses humour and satire to critique how deeply embedded this hypocrisy is, showing how easily society turns away from harsh truths in favour of joyous distractions.

Guns Over People

Another visual irony is how Gambino treats the guns with care and reverence, handing them off delicately, while the victim is left discarded without a second thought. After each act of violence, such as the moment Gambino shoots the choir (Glover 1:56), the guns are delicately handed off in red cloth, almost like sacred objects, while the victims' bodies are left ignored and strewn on the ground. Prioritizing the protection of these symbols over human life illustrates the nation's skewed moral compass. Gambino's juxtaposition of these elements is a sharp commentary on how America holds onto certain values, like gun rights while ignoring the

systemic violence that disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Through this powerful contrast, the song satirizes how these symbols are protected at the expense of human life and safety.

No Time to Analyse

In *This is America*, the drastic shifts in mood serve to satirize how American culture swiftly moves on from tragedy without meaningful contemplation, learning, and growth. For instance, after Gambino brutally shoots the gospel choir, a symbolic nod to the Charleston church shooting, there is no pause for grief or reflection. Instead, the video abruptly cuts back to joyful music and Gambino's dancing, as though the violence never occurred. This abrupt shift is a powerful critique of how mass violence, particularly against Black communities, is often met with a fleeting moment of attention before being forgotten. By forcing the viewer to experience rapid transitions between joy and violence, Gambino highlights the emotional disorientation often accompanying media portrayals of tragedy. Gambino's satirical approach points to the hypocrisy of a society that is quick to mourn publicly but equally quick to return to complacency without officially tackling the deep-seated issues and root causes. These mood shifts, then, reflect not only how society processes violence but also critique how the nation's short attention span prevents meaningful change from occurring.

Sing a Happy Song

The music in *This is America* is deceptively upbeat—light, jaunty, and celebratory, even amidst gunfire. The lyrics begin on an aspirational, positive note, mirroring quintessential American ideals of success and the pursuit of happiness. Lines like "We just want to party" (Glover 0:20), "We just want the money" (Glover 0:40), and "I'm so dope" (Glover 1:35) echo

the allure of the American Dream, presenting Black culture as vibrant and desirable. However, as the song unfolds, a darker reality emerges. The upbeat rhythm contrasts sharply with Gambino's lyrics as he shifts to themes of oppression and control. When he says, "You just a black man in this world, Drivin' expensive foreigns, You just a big dog, yeah, I kenneled him in the backyard" (Glover 3:45), Gambino exposes society's hypocrisy: while Black culture is celebrated and commercialized, Black individuals are marginalized, caged, and stripped of freedom. Through this duality, *This is America* critiques the American Dream, showing how it glamorizes specific images while masking systemic oppression. Gambino's song becomes a powerful commentary on the tension between America's glossy facade and the brutal realities faced by its marginalized communities.

This is America exposes the hypocrisy within American culture through its stark visual and lyrical contrasts, highlighting how entertainment and false patriotism are used to distract from systemic racism and violence. By juxtaposing joyful music with brutal imagery, treating guns with care while human lives are disregarded, and the fast-paced shifts in moods, Gambino shows how society is force-fed inconsequential content to numb critical thinking and subdue them. This ignorance perpetuates inequality. American citizens are kept distracted and manipulated into accepting lies about patriotism that keep us from questioning the systems that govern them. This ensures that those in power remain in control, keeping old, dangerous laws and making new ones that maintain historical injustices while violence and inequality continue unchecked for marginalized communities. The methods of oppression have shifted from physical control to mental manipulation. Rather than direct force, distractions and inconsequential content are now used to prevent critical engagement with the decisions being made. This form of oppression works by keeping minds preoccupied and disengaged, ensuring that the systems of

power remain unchallenged. This approach sustains inequality and injustice by steering attention away from meaningful issues, allowing those in control to maintain dominance without provoking resistance or scrutiny. Gambino's work is a call to recognize these distractions and challenge the forces perpetuating this oppression cycle.

Works Cited

Glover, Donald. "Childish Gambino – This Is America (Official Video)." *Youtube,* 5 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY.