

## THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

# Childish Gambino: This is America uses music and dance to expose society's dark underbelly

May 10, 2018 11.02am BST

This is America. Childish Gambino/YouTube

# Childish Gambino: This is America uses music and dance to expose society's dark underbelly

May 10, 2018 11.02am BST

Childish Gambino's new music video for his song *This is America* was viewed almost 50m times in five days. It is a remarkable artistic achievement given that it utilises finely-tuned choreography to satirise the role of the black man's supposedly "joyous" song and dance routine.

The release of the video was particularly timely. Encountering the Hiro Murai-directed promo brought some much-needed satisfaction – and sanity – to a week that had notably featured a Trump-endorsing Kanye West claiming slavery was "a choice".

After already amassing over 49m YouTube views, *This is America* has demonstrated the potential for an artist like Donald Glover – aka Childish Gambino – to use popular culture to critically address ongoing and deeply-ingrained issues surrounding race.

### Authors



#### Daniel Cookney

Lecturer in Graphic Design, University of Salford



#### Kirsty Fairclough

Associate Dean: Research and Innovation, University of Salford

### Childish Gambino - This Is America (Official Video)





## Not so 'happy' after all

It achieves this while simultaneously criticising popular culture for placating audiences. It can be seen as the antithesis of Pharrell Williams's *Happy* – a video that achieved its own constant rotation via more obvious feelgood escapism.

Glover's hard-hitting cynicism can be pitched against Williams' most buoyant song in a way that recounts Public Enemy's 1990 citing of Bobby McFerrin's similarly rose-tinted *Don't Worry Be Happy* as little more than a distraction within their own call-to-arms, *Fight the Power*.

Perhaps most controversial of all, *This is America* appears to openly question the entertainment industry's support for what amounts to a continuation of "minstrelsy" (the once highly popular 19th-century "blackface" tradition that relied on damaging racist stereotypes). This aspect was picked up by creator of the comedy *Dear White People*, Justin Simien, who observed how Glover even contorts his body into the caricatured figure of Jim Crow – a slave archetype who was a mainstay of such performances.



**Justin Simien** ✓  
@JSim07

Follow



That someone being, as the net has deduced, is Jim Crow, who Gambino embodies with a combination of popular dance memes sporadically interrupted with bug eyes. Jim Crow returns to Travon's father with a gun. Our father's guitar is gone. His head shrouded in white. Spoiler alert.



Justin Simien on Twitter. [Twitter](#)

Utilising sharp choreography as part of his own bewitching performance, he leaves no misunderstanding about where he locates either the origins or the current role of the black man's upbeat song and dance routine.

As a video, it immediately appears to have some kinship with Beyoncé's Grammy-nominated **Formation**. Both appear to pull us towards the motivation behind the **Black Lives Matter** campaign but, more than that, these are both examples of the music video as a politicised event. **Formation** is a fierce commentary on events from **Ferguson** to **Sandra Bland** to **Eric Garner** and **Freddie Gray**. The video marked Beyoncé's entrance into the political sphere while also ensuring that it is couched in mass appeal.

**Beyoncé - Formation**



As cultural theorist **Sunil Manghani identified**, these videos transcend the format of the music video itself, resulting in “a combined ‘object’ of music-video-news as it forms and reformulates through social media, news networks, and print journalism”.

Glover has now had a “moment” where he has dominated a cultural conversation by presenting work that is so fully formed in its complexity and accessibility.

### **A satirical dance**

What is so remarkable about the way in which Glover used the form of the music video as a politicised event is in the layered and nuanced content with a direct message. Peppered throughout the video are the traces of various dance styles, from viral video moves to **Blocboy JB’s shoot dance**, to the South African **Gwara Gwara**. Brought together, the differing origins form something that looks very American and which Glover appears to comment on directly.

Placing the choreography so front and centre seems to be saying that that mainstream culture is all America sees when they see the black community. The exaggerated facial expressions while dancing in the video, further pointing to the disparaging caricatures of the black man popularised in the Jim Crow era.

**Get Out Official Trailer 1 (2017) - Daniel Kaluuya Mo...**



## The Sunken Place

At the end of the video, Glover is seen running in semi darkness being chased by a group of what seem to be non-black people. Like many on Twitter have theorised, it is plausible to suggest that Glover is in fact running from the Sunken Place – a concept developed in Jordan Peele's film *Get Out*.

The Sunken Place represents a system that no matter how hard individuals and groups protest, it will silence them. As Peele explained:

You know when you're going to sleep and it feels like you're about to fall, so you wake up? What if you never woke up? Where would you fall? And that was kind of the most harrowing idea to me. And as I'm writing it becomes clear that the sunken place is this metaphor for the system that is suppressing the freedom of black people, of many outsiders, many minorities.

Glover in effect represents this concept through choreography and visual imagery in just four minutes and four seconds. Like Beyoncé, Glover has offered up a multi-layered political statement and one which the mainstream is now grappling with. If ever the music video had a moment, it is right now.

[Beyonce](#)[Kanye West](#)[Racial issues](#)[Music videos](#)[Black Lives Matter](#)[Jim Crow](#)[Donald Glover](#)

**Found this article useful? A gift of £20/month helps deliver knowledge-based, ethical journalism.**

[Make a donation](#)