

## Black America: Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Childish Gambino's *This Is America*

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### ABSTRACT

Upon the release of Childish Gambino's *This is America* (2018), the music video has been widely assumed to contain semiotic elements that criticize the injustice politics of race in America. To dig deeper into this assertion, we use Machin's Lyrics Analysis (2010) and Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar approach (2006) to analyze the illustrated semiotic elements. Both frameworks are two Multimodal Discourse Analysis approaches that explore interdisciplinary analysis in the discourse-oriented research. The verbal text is first analyzed using Machin's framework. After that, the visual elements are approached by Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. This article finds that Gambino does question the practice of black discrimination through gun and police violence in present America by utilizing distant words and excessive gestures in his visual communication as a diversion. They are purposefully placed to gain a profound observation from the audience and spark a conversation regarding the issue on a grander scale. Furthermore, it is found that *This is America* applies comical aspects in the visual elements as a layering device. Through humorous semiotic elements, Gambino is discovered to highlight black art commodification in his music video.

**Keywords:** multimodality, critical discourse analysis, carnivalesque, protest music

### ABSTRAK

*Setelah perilisan Childish Gambino's This is America (2018), video musik tersebut secara luas dianggap mengandung elemen semiotik yang mengkritik ketidakadilan politik ras di Amerika. Untuk menggali lebih dalam pernyataan ini, kami menggunakan analisis lirik Machin (2010) dan pendekatan tata bahasa visual Kress*

dan van Leeuwen (2006) untuk menganalisis elemen semiotik bergambar. Kedua kerangka tersebut merupakan dua pendekatan Multimodal Discourse Analysis yang merupakan analisis interdisipliner dalam penelitian yang berorientasi pada wacana. Teks berupa elemen linguistis pertama-tama dianalisis menggunakan kerangka berpikir dari Machin. Kemudian, elemen visual dianalisis dengan pendekatan tata Bahasa visual Kress dan van Leeuwen. Artikel ini menemukan bahwa Gambino memang mempertanyakan praktik diskriminasi kulit hitam melalui kekerasan senjata dan polisi di Amerika masa kini, dengan menggunakan kata-kata yang berjarak dan gerak tubuh yang berlebihan dalam komunikasi visualnya sebagai pengalih perhatian. Mereka sengaja ditempatkan untuk mendapatkan pengamatan yang mendalam dari penonton, dan dengan demikian dapat memicu percakapan mengenai masalah tersebut dalam skala yang lebih besar. Lebih lanjut ditemukan bahwa *This is America* menerapkan aspek comical pada elemen visual sebagai perangkat layering. Melalui elemen semiotik yang humoris, Gambino ditemukan menonjolkan komodifikasi seni kulit hitam dalam video musiknya.

**Kata kunci:** multimodalitas, analisis wacana kritis, carnivalesque, music sebagai protes

## INTRODUCTION

The marginalization of the African-American community in America is part of a long battle spanning for decades. Prominent black figures and activists across the country have been trying to raise people's awareness about the black community's present endeavor, which is majorly reflected through speech, in conversation, and by the agency of art. For the latter, music is one popular medium to convey such a message towards society. Many modern black musicians have publicly shown their support towards movements against discrimination through their artistic works (Yates, 2015). Donald Glover, also known as Childish Gambino, is a black musician who uses his music as a political tool is. One of his songs, *This is America*, topped the Billboard Hot 100 chart in less than two weeks after its release on May 5, 2018. The song was able to sweep a Grammy as the Song of the Year (Cirisano, 2019). It is a song that celebrates black culture performativity, which is a concept that acknowledges words as a shape of social action (*Performativity*, n.d.). *This Is America* has since been the town's talk throughout the year over its jarring visual and lyrical meaning, and it is believed to criticize racial injustice in the United States (Kornhaber, 2018).

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) has been widely used to analyze texts for their underlying meanings, hidden in the texts' verbal and nonverbal elements. By revealing the text's deeper meaning, we can also uncover the ideologies and power relations that the text is built upon. We believe that MDA can be used to unmask the power struggle of the Black community in America and its critic of how it has been poorly handled. As

a cultural product, black music is a manifestation of the African American struggles and lives in a form that only a few other arts can do (Rabaka, 2012). The construction of black identity is heavily influenced by rap music as it allows to represent their voice in the political atmosphere. Rose (1994) explained that “rap’s cultural politics lies in its lyrical expression, its articulation of communal knowledge, and in the context for its public reception” (p. 124). Also, rap plays an integral part in depicting the characters of black people and performers. Bonnette (2015) also argued that rap music serves as a tool for expressing the urban black’s political thought, a frequently marginalized community in American society. Overall, many studies agree that rap artists and music can highlight discrimination and brutality against black people.

There are various issues in black music distinguished by their complexity and ambiguity, one of which tackles commodification (Machin, 2010). Different kinds of African or black music have become a significant part of cultural commodification (Benjamin & Gilroy, 1994; Machin, 2010). The embodiment of black music in commodification creates a sense of confirmation and internalization to the black community's oneness, which therefore constructs a specific identity of their own.

In medieval Europe, Bakhtin (in Hamilton, 2015) notices carnival as a liberating ground for the public to present their subjective opinions and imaginations deprived of greater power oppressions. A carnival has become a space where classes and hierarchies are reversed, and legal order and rules are ignored. Bakhtin sees a tendency of this space creation in literary works after the Renaissance era, referred to as carnivalesque.

Based on Bakhtin’s idea of carnivalesque, Hamilton (2015) saw a gap in medieval carnivalesque, which cannot be applied to the present time. The literature and art evolution prompt this since the Renaissance era that transformed them into a more complex concept, particularly about the massive development of pop culture. Hamilton also found the idea to fail in accommodating the issue of modern racial disparity against black people. She believes that the art and aesthetic of recent black carnivalesque do not aim to demonstrate a movement, but rather as a strategy to raise awareness for the public. The intention of visualizing blackness using carnivalism is to question the history of black bodies commodification. Black carnivalesque enables us to comprehend black unconventional performativity through “laughter, parody, shock, and the grotesque” (Hamilton, 2015, p.236).

Since the 1990s, multimodal discourse analysis in linguistics has gained popularity in discourse studies for the search of text and visual meaning. Notable research that uses the multimodality approach has been consistently rotating around similar texts such as book covers (Li, Li, & Miao, 2018), advertisement (Hu & Luo, 2016; Olowu & Akinkurolere, 2015), and magazine (Behshad & Ghaniabadi, 2015). However, existing research seldom analyzes a song's combination of lyrics and visuals and how they complement each other. A multimodal analysis is also rarely found to

talk about racial issues. This paper aims to explore how Gambino's political critique is represented through the semiotic elements in the lyrics and music video of his song.

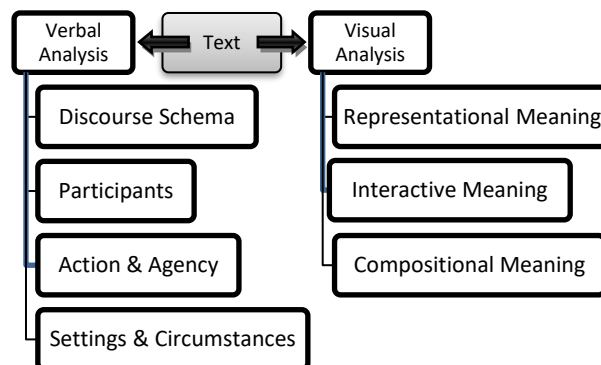
## METHOD

We apply a systematic analysis using multimodal discourse analysis that includes lyrics analysis by Machin (2010) and visual grammar analysis by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006). Furthermore, the semiotic analysis result is discussed from the perspective of Hamilton's (2015) to provide a more profound comprehension of the comical semiotic tools that Gambino uses in his music video.

Machin (2010) argued that semiotic choices in lyrics could understand the song's stories and comprehend the artist's identity, values, and action discourse. He divided the analysis into four study levels: the discourse schema, the participants, the action and agency, and the settings and circumstances.

Meanwhile, the Kress and van Leeuwen's theory on analyzing meaning on images is heavily based on the Halliday's social semiotic theory in 1978. Halliday (1978) offered three types of semiotic work or metafunctions. Those three metafunctions are ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Kress and van Leeuwen further adopted new terminology for the metafunctions based on their interpretations to make it more applicable for visual semiotic modes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). They are ideational/representational meaning, interpersonal/interactive meaning, and textual/compositional meaning.

Graphic 1:  
Theoretical Framework



## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Verbal Analysis

#### a. Discourse schema

Machin (2010) believes that every song contains underlying social values in their story. Every piece and action has a specific message about different values and identities that one particular culture embraces regarding its affairs. The following are the key lyrics that are deemed to represent the whole idea of the song:

*This is America → Guns in my areas → Police be trippin' now → You  
just a black man in this world*

By looking at the key lyrics above, the grand narrative of the song can therefore be established. *This is America* tells a story of a black man who comes across ingrained suffering of living in America that is caused by police brutality and gun. Along with the idea of not having a solution, Gambino sees this as a problem that will continue to be relevant.

#### b. Participants

It is essential to recognize the social actors and their attributes to make sense of the text's represented reality. *This is America* provides a variety of social actors which are:

*We, you, I, girl, America, police, grandma, somebody, black man, they,  
mothaf\*\*kas, big dang, him, big dog.*

The list shows impersonalized actors about whom no further explanations are given. Personal information, such as their names, is left unmentioned. By picturing the actors as an abstract presence, a social distance is deliberately set up between the participants and the audience. On the other hand, the actors are shown as collectivized participants: “we”, “you”, and “America”. It establishes a differentiation, which is an evident distinction of similar individuals or groups that constructs a clear difference between oneself and the other. The pronoun “we” emits a sense of power and unity of many. Conversely, “you” in the lyrics indicates a sense of alienation from the collective “we”. In this context, “you” might be directed towards the rest of America’s citizens apart from the black people.

The role of the participants is also noticeable in the text. The “police” signifies a more robust power that might go against the collectivity of “we”. The authority is negatively portrayed, and it creates a tension that puts “we” in a state of fear. On the contrary, “grandma” functions as a wiser existence and advisor for “we”. “Grandma” also serves to highlight the fact that racism has existed over generations.

The participants are also shown to be depicted through specific features that are categorized as objectivated participants. There are three objectified participants in the lyrics, which are “black man”, “mothaf\*\*kas”, and “big dawg”. These actors are categorized as such because they show those features: black, ill-behaved, and big.

Based on the song’s categorization, it is evident that there are many unspecified actors in the lyrics. It proves that Gambino uses social distance or unfamiliarity concepts to put off the audience from the real meaning of the song. It is presumably intended to poke discrimination against black people and create a debate within society as the problem is rarely brought into the spotlight and even disregarded. Although it is also possible that this might be just Gambino’s strategy to target a broader range of listeners. Overall, social distance is a strategy used in this song to strengthen the collectivity of the black in-groups, while showing that the issue has never been problematized in society.

### c. Action and agency

The action and agency analysis sees how actors are represented through their behavior. Conducted actions in the lyrics are necessary for the search of meaning-making. Below is an inventory to analyze the actions:

#### i. Material

Material investigates the doing process that is marked by a consequence or result. This process is specified by the active and passive participants in the text.

*Go away/ You go tell somebody/ You got me dancing/ Dance and shake the  
frame/ Don't catch you slippin' now/ police be trippin' now/ Look what i'm  
whippin'/ I got the strap/ I got the plug in Oaxaca/ They gonna find you  
like blocka/ I gotta carry 'em/ I' ma go into this/ I' ma go get the bag/ I'  
ma get the pad/ / I just checked my following list/ Drivin' expensive foreigners/  
I kenneled him in the backyard/ We gon' blow/ I'm geekin' out*

The actions above are concluded based on the active verb in the lyrics. Although this process looks for a result after a process (goal), there is no explicit goal given in the verses, suggesting an unclear purpose of the actor’s actions.

#### ii. Behavioral

Behavioral process examines psychological and physical behaviors, such as laugh, dream, sneeze, and breathe. This process is absent in the lyrics since not a single behavioral process can be found.

#### iii. Mental

Mental process analyzes any act of sensing. There are three kinds of mental processes: cognition (understanding, thinking, knowing), affection (fearing, liking), and perception (hearing, seeing, perceiving). The mental processes within the lyrics are:

*We just wanna party/ We just want the money/ I know you wanna party*

These processes are categorized into cognition class. This illustrates how the actor relies more on his logical ability rather than his feelings.

#### iv. Verbal

This process analyzes actions that are related to oral. There are two verbal processes found in the song, which are:

*You go tell somebody/ Grandma told me*

Both processes indicate a process that uses actions from the mouth, represented by the verb “tell” and “told”. The first example might allude to the narrator’s passivity regarding the act of telling, whereas the second suggests the active action of “grandma” who does direct saying.

#### v. Relational

This process analyzes a state of parallel existence between one being and another being. Relational processes in the lyrics are:

*I'm so cold like yeab/ I'm so dope like yeab/ I'm so fitted/ I'm on Gucci/ I'm  
so pretty/ You just a black man/ You just a barcode/ You just a big dawg*

The parallels of “cold”, “dope”, “fitted”, and “Gucci” might refer to wealth. However, they are followed by the word “just”, which seems to ridicule those qualities and re-labeled the narrator as a lowly being.

#### vi. Existential

This process describes the existence of something in the text. The existential process in the song is found in part:

*This is America*

The phenomenon is marked by the absence of action in the text. The idea of emphasizing the existence of a country means that there is a phenomenon that occurs within. The rest of the lyrics builds the details of what happens in America.

The analysis of action and agency shows a more significant material process compared to the other processes. The material process that shows represented explicit actions establishes a notion that black man acts as direct experiencers of the actions themselves, which means that this song can be seen as black people’s “testimony” of the present racial discrimination in America. It is vital to notice that material and behavioral processes outweigh the mental process,

which indicates that the actor is perceived as relatively active. These two ideas might infer the lack of human emotion and the formation of social distance.

#### d. Settings and Circumstances

The following are the denoted settings of *This is America's* lyrics and the implied circumstances:

Table 1:  
 Settings in *This is America*

Lyrics	Settings and circumstances
<i>This is America</i> <i>Don't catch you slippin' now</i> <i>Look how I'm livin' now</i> <i>Police be trippin' now</i>	America is deemed as a space that restricts black people's freedom through the presence of the police.
<i>This is America</i> <i>Guns in my area</i>	Gun ownership is common in America and is perceived as a double-edged tool for both offense and protection in places that. Looking at the context, "in my area" refers specifically to wherever places black people reside in America, or in other words, where there are black people, then that is where a gun can be found.
<i>I got the plug in Oaxaca</i>	Plug presumably refers to drug consumption that the narrator acquires in Oaxaca, a city in Mexico. Mexico is often prejudiced as the capital city of the drug trade.
<i>You just a black man in this world</i>	The reality of being black will continue to be relevant, no matter where it is.
<i>I kenneled him in the backyard</i>	Black people's living condition is comparable to a dog's pen.

America, the primary setting for this song and has been mentioned throughout. When the scene is combined with the social actors and their activities, it is clear that Gambino perceives America as a dangerous place for black people.

The time setting is also significant to observe as it allows the represented reality to unmask. There is a shift between the past and the present based on grammar. Singing in past tenses, Gambino made fun of the repeated generalization of black people's gun ownership and drug use decades ago. That notion builds a sense of warning and realization to the present. Meanwhile, in present tenses, he proposes that current America is unsafe and dangerous,



presumably due to its high shooting cases (Tate, Jenkins, & Rich, 2020). So far, the lyrical analysis has proven how Gambino perceives America as a place where black people are experiencing problems and hardships that are impossible to fix as the problems themselves have never been addressed and are ignored continuously.

## 2. Visual Analysis

### a. Representational Meaning

#### i. Narrative Processes

This process observes the vector that ties the participants (person, object, or place) within the image. The vector illustrates the relationship of “doing” or “happening” conducted by the participants. There are always participants that play out the vector, which is the “actor”. In the music video, Gambino presents himself as the salient actor. This is evident through his close positioning, clear focus, and clear contrast against the background. Through Gambino, *This is America* presents quite many actions from the beginning to the end, and often it shows structured transactional actions. In contrast, in another time, it shows a non-transactional structure. The difference between transactional and non-transactional structure lies in the presence of “goal”, which refers to present participants at the other end of the vector.

There are two prevalent transactional actions in the music video. The first one started from 00:49 to 00:53 where Gambino (actor) shoots the man with a guitar (goal), and from 01:48 to 01:57 in which Gambino (actor) shoots the choir (goal). Even so, the goals in the vector illustrate no sign of reaction as seen from their post-action eye gaze and expression. This passivity supposedly marks the goals as the “reacters”. As a result, the music video mostly shows non-transactional actions evident from the lack of goal. Therefore, the lack of goal and the absence of reaction in the music video suggest the dominant presence of non-transactional structure.

#### ii. Conceptual Processes

The lack of vector in *This is America* music video also suggests that it is conceptually structured. A conceptual process refers to people, things, and places that can be defined, classified, or analyzed visually in the images. This part of the processes focuses on the involved participants in the music video. Conceptual constitutes a classificational process, analytical process, and symbolic process.

The classificational process looks for the social hierarchy (the superordinates and the subordinates) structure between the image participants. There is a clear overtness visible via their positioning within the music video’s horizontal axis. Gambino and the school kids are positioned in the front, indicating their role as the superordinates. Meanwhile, located further behind in the same axis, a chaotic mass of

people proves their role as the subordinates. The positioning suggests a significance between the participants, in which the superordinates are more critical than the subordinates.

Meanwhile, the subordinates' distant positioning, action, and framing are purposely presented far and unfocused to make themselves go easily unnoticed by the audience and, at the same time, create a space for the principal participants to be in the center of attention. The covertness also confirms this classification in the music video, showing how the participants present themselves through movement. Both Gambino and the school kids are continuously dancing together while people at the back are collectively running and chasing one another.

The second process, which is the analytical process, looks for the participants (carrier) and their part-whole relationship. Gambino acts as the carrier in the music video with his clothes as the possessive qualities. He goes bare-chested with a gold chain necklace, greyish high buttoned trousers, and a pair of yellow loafers. The absence of tops shows vulnerability and realness in his black skin while at the same time emphasized his clothing attributes that refer to outfits worn by black people during slave auctions in the 1900s. When those attributes and the carrier are combined, this represents the African American under discrimination and oppression.

Meanwhile, the symbolic process delves into the carrier's meaning and identity through their symbolic attributes. A contrast to the possessive attributes, symbolic attributes are characterized if they are: obvious representation (color, size, position), pointed directly, appear odd in its surrounding, and linked with symbolic merits. Prominent attributes of the carrier (Gambino) can be found in the forms of a gun, a joint, and a lighter. The three items are dangerous and harmful. Nevertheless, looking at the context, neither of those attributes are considered illegal in America. However, there is ambivalence regarding this issue in the music video. Gun ownership is deemed legal in many American states, but using it for killing or murder is illegal. When Gambino uses the gun to kill the black man and the black choir at 00:52 and 01:56, everything seems fair and rightful. Also, at 03:16, as Gambino smokes the joint, he suddenly screams, "Get down!" and throw it away. These create the idea that conducting murder against black people is legal, whereas it is illegal for a black person to consume a recreational joint.

## **b. Interactive Meaning**

Visual communication constitutes two types of participants: the represented participants (places, people, and things represented in image) and the interactive participants (producers and audiences that communicate via image). This relationship between the participants can be analyzed based on three factors: contact, distance, and point of view.

### **i. Contact**

Contact is an established interaction between the participants in the image and the audience through their eye gaze. The music video exhibits direct eye contact with the audience and a gesture of his finger-pointing. The action of pointing and gazing right into the camera suggests a “demand” image, which tries to create a symbolical affinity from the producer to the audience. The gaze and gesture are further intensified by the lyric “you”. Accordingly, as the opposite of “we”, “you” might refer to people aside from black people. If every element is combined, it is evident that Gambino demands help and awareness from the audience regarding the problematic issues in the black community.

### **ii. Social Distance**

The distance that is given by the camera shot suggests the relationship between the represented participants and viewers. A medium close shot stops somewhere around the subject’s waist, whereas the medium shot stops at around the knees. A medium long shot shows the subject from head to toe. The long-shot also shows the whole figure, but the scenery dominates the area of the frame. As the framing continuously switches, the analysis focuses on the shots that last longer and more stand out than the rest.

Medium and long shots are used prominently in most of the music videos. Gambino’s purpose is to display his body movement (dancing and shooting) and his rapidly changing facial expressions. Another enticing example can be seen from 03:43 to the end. At first, the audience is served through a long shot frame that shows Gambino running from behind. Then the framing changes to a close-up shot, which features his terrified look, and as the camera gradually starts zooming out (long shot), the audience can see the premise of his action. Behind a terrified and running Gambino, a crowd of people can be seen further behind as if they were the chasers or as fellow runners. As the black community’s representation in the music video, Gambino tries to represent the idea of being black, chased, and terrified in America. This framing is also a visualization of the lyrics itself (“*you just a black man in this world*”). Black people cannot escape their reality of being discriminated against. Moreover, the lack of close shots proves a social distance relationship between Gambino and the audience.

### **iii. Attitude**

This part of the process investigates the connection between the participants and the audience from the video’s angle and point of view. It expresses the possibility of subjective attitude that is determined by the audience. There are two different types of angles: horizontal and vertical. A horizontally-angled image can have a frontal or an oblique perspective, whose difference lies in the detachment and involvement between the image producer and the represented participants. The frontal angle involves

both the producer and the participant as if they were expressed in the same space. Meanwhile, the oblique angle suggests otherwise. *This is America* thoroughly shows the frontal angle, where every element and participant is illustrated as equal. The producer aims to observe all participants in the music video through the camera lens and feel involved with it.

#### iv. Modality

Modality refers to the credibility of images to represent the world (“reality value”). Credibility is determined by color saturation, differentiation and modulation, contextualization, representation, depth, illumination, and brightness. The music video does not display a diverse range of color saturation in its images but is preferably predominantly tinted in mute color or “washed out” tone. This suggests Gambino’s intention to create conformity and subtlety of the whole elements within the music video.

### c. Compositional Meaning

It looks into the relationship between the representational and interactive elements to explain the text’s whole meaning. There are three resources for compositional meaning, which are information value, salience, and framing.

#### i. Information Value

Information value refers to the positioning of elements in the images. It analyzes how they provide information based on their zoning, whether placed on left or right, top or bottom, center, or margin. Elements presented on the left show “given” meaning, which refers to something that the viewer is already familiar with. In contrast, elements placed on the right shows something “new” to which the viewer has never been exposed. The features positioned on top of the image visualizes “the promise of the product.” That is, what the product offers to its users, or what is ideal. Lower elements illustrate the product itself, more of an informational appeal of the product, or referred to as the “real.” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.186)

Images that are provided in the music video illustrate neither left-right nor top-down relationship. Every element within the music video is presented in the center of the frame. This positioning means that everything is connected within a specific context. As previously analyzed, the participants (Gambino, school kids, and chaotic mass of people) have been classified based on their respective class as superordinate and subordinate. Although they may create a particular gap between each other, the information given based on their centrality within the same frame has proven otherwise. All the participants provide the same value in the context. The context in this sense refers to the setting for this song, which is America. It does not matter which of the participants are more salient or less important, as long as they appear the same and conform to the central positioning. It is safe to say that the centrality proves Gambino, school kids,

and the background mass as subservient to America's same context.

## ii. Salience

In compositional meaning, salience focuses on which elements within the image are worthy of more attention. An analysis should be done on the complex interaction of size, the sharpness of focus, tonal contrast, color contrasts, placement in the visual field, perspective, and also other cultural factors. The video shows the school kids and Gambino as the salient participants compared to the rest based on their size difference.

In terms of color, red is deemed as a very salient color. In the music video, there is an appearance of salient red fabric in 00:55 and 01:58. The fabric color appears very distinctive compared to the muted color scheme of the music video. Any objects attributed to red are oftentimes correlated with the idea of power, aggression, and danger. This fabric is particularly utilized as a bed for the gun that Gambino used to shoot people. This might suggest gun glorification in America.

## iii. Framing

The framing of images presents information through integration and separation of elements. Elements that appear within a frame can be inferred as a single unit of information. Any form of discontinuity can suggest visual framing. There is a thick disconnection that occurs at the end of the video. From 03:37 to 03:41, there is a long dark absence of images. The blank scene disconnects the images before and after. Before the frame cut, Gambino, as the salient actor, looks so engrossed in a joyous mood, whereas after the cut, Gambino appears to be more disturbed and scared. He ends the music video by visualizing that expression without any clear explanation or conclusion. This may allude to how discrimination and segregation in America have been ignored without any solution to end it.

From the analysis, it is clear how Gambino's political belief of race is layered beyond the text through his choices of verbal elements. Those elements, particularly in the music video, are doubled by the presence of humor. Gambino creates a parallel medium between the text and the carnival. This is intended to create a space outside the politics, while at the same time disposition politics as its primary concern. Also, carnivalesque (Hamilton, 2015) pays attention to the idea of making fun of the social hierarchy and politics between the "high" and "low." As previously mentioned, Gambino's perception of discrimination has positioned the black people in the "low" class while the other race as the "high." However, low black people's idea appears to be desirable in the music video through carnivalesque elements (words, gestures, costumes, and props) and exaggerated performance techniques. It highlights the dependency of both classes. The "high" exists because of the "low", and vice versa. This notion

also affirms the ambivalence of the cultural identity of black people. Through the music video, exaggerated movements and gestures are visualized to embody the “high” quality to conceal their “low” quality (chaotic chasing and killing). Gambino can be seen as deliberately “selling” his performativity as an aim to blur his representation of reality. This act of exaggeration, however, calls for another underrated problem for black people that is commodification. Commodification alludes to the idea that black performativity is often economically fetishized and commercialized by the general public, consequently eradicating the political and social messages within the art itself (Bonnette, 2015; Rabaka, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

This study shows the utilization of different social semiotic modes through the verbal and visual images of *This Is America* by Childish Gambino. They are deliberately structured to represent the concept of cultural ambivalence of black people in America. Verbally, they are described via the structure of the story, the participants, the actor and their agency, and the setting. Visually, the ambivalence is shown via the elements of representation, interaction, and composition. The analysis shows how clear 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. Additionally, although both modes of texts are complementary in representing the black socio-cultural context, it is evident how the music video proves to be more complicated from the double layering of its linguistic elements and its carnivalesque. This creates two different narratives that are open (lyrics) and layered (music video).

All in all, multimodal analysis proves to serve as a platform to analyze the combination of different modes (text, image, color, framing, etc) and present their meaning and critique on the socio-political inequality. This framework also allows for an undeterred bridging towards the meaning and contextual analysis of what discourse analysis offers. This research aims to make a positive contribution to the multimodal study and expand the knowledge regarding modern representation and meaning-making in the present and possible future. For future development, this research can be further explored within an anthropological framework to analyze the public response and opinions that can complement the fundamental investigation of the music video meaning.

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