I AM JUST A RAPPER: A LYRICAL AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF CHILDISH GAMBINO'S RISE FROM OUTCAST TO KING

by

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ABSTRACT

The Childish Gambino persona created by Donald Glover is a Romantic and Marxist hero stemming from Glover's experience as an African American within the cultural, socioeconomic, and artistic confines of the contemporary United States. At his conception, Childish Gambino was an outcast shunned by both mainstream and African American media outlets alike, but through lyrical and intellectual prognostication, the persona blazed a new trail into the fabric of American pop culture. Like other rappers, Glover's construction of such a complex figure is primarily rooted in the historical turmoil between enslaved Africans and the racist, hegemonic state that commodified them.

In this paper, I will argue that by fulfilling his lyrical prophecies, Childish Gambino becomes Plato's philosopher king: a leader proving his claim to the throne through his weaponization of intelligence, philosophy, and guardianship. I wish to show how Childish Gambino represents a symbol much larger than Glover's individual existence. This is an important distinction to note when examining both Glover and Childish Gambino, as the very small barrier separating poet from persona allows for analysis of each individual as their own entity and together as a sum of their parts. To conduct this analysis, I will first present a summary of the Black male rapper archetype to give the proper historical, critical, and cultural contexts in which Gambino's work can usefully be analyzed. Second, I am connecting my research to prior scholarship on African American studies, hauntology, Romanticism, Black Marxism, and trauma theory. The last piece of my methodology is to use Gambino's lyrics as

poetic support to illustrate how his ascension to philosopher king is a transcendent contemporary moment of resistance against the resurgence of white nationalism under the banner of Trumpism and a triumphant model of Black reclamation in the age of Black Lives Matter and police militarization. I believe this lyrical and cultural analysis will demonstrate the potential for rappers to spearhead intellectual movements and advance the literary archive.

Dedications

Firstly, I would like to thank Childish Gambino for making all of this possible. He not only gave me the confidence to pursue this project and my own artistic exploits, but he also gave me the confidence to be me when I needed it the most. Second, I would like to thank my mentor, the Tina Fey to my Donald Glover, Dr. Adam Bradley. I would also like to thank my brother for his unheralded support and faith in everything that I look to accomplish. I would also like to thank Dr. Paul Youngquist for his incredible patience with me and my drafts. Your personal attention on this project has made me a better scholar and I hope this project reflects your dedication. Lastly, I would like to thank my committee for their time and interest in my scholarship. I hope to make you all proud.

Acknowledgements

Author's Note:

There will be many cases in this text when I use Black, black, and blackness as specific terms. For the instances that I use the term "Black," I am trying to signify the histography of the Black individual in the United States, their origin in the wake of slavery, and the ethnic specificity that was stripped from them because of slavery. When I use the term "black," it is being quoted from an outside text and refers to the original author's use. In the instances I use the term "blackness," I am referring to the essence of a Black individual, the collective register of Black bodies, or a combination of the two.

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I. The Black Male Rapper Archetype

To accurately position Childish Gambino within his literary and cultural lineage, I will present a summary of the Black male rapper archetype to give the proper historical, critical, and cultural contexts in which Gambino's work can usefully be analyzed. When I refer to the Black male rapper archetype, I am using this definition: a contemporary Black male champion weaponizing the African oral tradition within hip-hop to combat the necropolitical wake of slavery. In this paper, I will argue the construct of the Black male rapper is rooted in the trauma of the African American experience within the United States, the racial hegemony resulting from the Atlantic slave trade, and African musical and oral traditions. When enslaved peoples from Central and West Africa were brought to the Americas, their former social and cultural functions were no longer applicable in the eyes of their oppressors; thus, their former roles had to adapt to survive under the institution of slavery. One of these roles, the griot, would eventually pave the way for the ethnomusicological construction of the rapper and provide a cultural link between American slaves and the African diaspora. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the Black male rapper archetype is rooted in the cultural and social functions of the griot through an explication of the griot's responsibilities and characteristics. It is my hope that connecting Black male rappers to a rich African history will legitimize the depth of Black culture and uncover the griot's ontological elements shared by its American counterpart.[1]

[1] In my explications I use the term 'ontological elements' to refer to the metaphysical or spiritual register of a griot's being: i.e. its magic, spirit, and spectrality.

The Griot

Griots, or African historian-poets, are crucial to the cultural and historical identities of their respective ethnic groups and are responsible for translating these identities across generations within the African diaspora. The word 'griot' is itself an umbrella term for its multiple ethnic iterations across Africa, including *jali* (Mandinka), *géwël* (Wolof), *jeseré* (Songhay), and very many others.[2] Written descriptions of griots have been found to date back to the fourteenth-century when the Berber traveler Ibn Battuta described his encounters with griots at the court of Mali.[3] Griots contributed to their societies as historians, genealogists, advisors, spokespersons, diplomats, interpreters, musicians, composers, poets, teachers, reporters, and masters of or contributors to a variety of cultural, social, and political ceremonies.[4] Griots fulfilling their function as a master of ceremonies provide a direct cultural link to the Black male rapper, who, as an emcee, performs a modern variation of this civic duty using the sacred bond between a man and his word. One does not need to look any further for an example of this cultural link in action then in the very infancy of hip-hop, where Coke La Rock would emcee for DJ Kool Herc during Herc's community parties. When the griot and Black male rapper perform as a master of ceremonies, they transform their words into a force uniting their listeners' spirits together. The individual energies of the crowd become connected by the value of and respect for the spoken word, for each individual body in the ceremony is responsible for its role as a community member and participant in the community's traditions. Another instance of this cultural link materialized is the art of emceeing itself: rooted in the same African oral tradition of

[2] See Thomas Hale, "From the Griot of Roots to the Roots of Griot: A New Look at the Origins of a Controversial African Term for Bard," *Oral Tradition* 12.2 (1997): 249-278, 251.
[3] Ibid., p. 250
[4] Ibid., p. 250-251

the griot, emceeing utilizes music and poetry to deliver sacred truths connected to the emcee's cultural and social philosophies.

Historically, griots were born into their position and could only marry other griots, thus ensuring a lineage of service and a potent transference of precious intergenerational knowledge.[5] Although some griots were seen as political and social leaders due to their close proximity to families of warrior-kings, their relationship to royalty was fundamentally based upon the service they provided. Despite the ambiguity surrounding their social position, griots used their oratorical abilities to serve as respected advisors to rulers, as tutors for princes, and as diplomats in delicate negotiations. Considering the different political specifics of their position and the variability of their place in a social power structure, griots were revered and feared for their weaponization of the spoken word. Because of the social power granted to the spoken word in African tradition, the griot could use their mastery of the oral tradition to improve or damage an individual's spirit. LeRoi Jones reminds us that "the spirit is always at the root in Black art,"[6] so members of the community knew to treat the griot's mastery with the proper respect it demands. To observe this phenomenon today, we can simply go outside and examine the interpersonal dynamics between a great freestyler and the cadre of folks that gather to hear them rap. Members of the community know not to test the best freestyler on the block, for the rapper can lift your spirits and community status by singing your praises or break you down through barbs and quips that resonate with the group long after the freestyle session is over. These small moments of cultural practice demonstrate the links tethering the constructions of the griot and the Black male

[5] Naturally, this would mean there are female griots that would lead to the construction of the Black female rapper archetype. Out of my own inability to fully detail the racial sexual violence towards Black women and construct a sound academic explication on the female griot's path to rap, I have specifically chosen to focus on the Black male rapper archetype.

[6] See LeRoi Jones, *Black Music,* Da Capo Press, 1967. p. 182

rapper together are founded upon their weaponization of the oral tradition and the oral tradition's role in each construction's ability to traverse political, social, cultural, and economic spheres.

If we are to consider what rappers can offer as citizens and community members, then we must understand the African oral tradition central to their critical and artistic pursuits. In African culture and tradition, the spoken word has a "fundamental moral value" and a "sacred character associated with its divine origin and with the occult forces deposited in it."[7] Those that master the oral tradition are seekers of knowledge, practitioners of the "great school of life, all aspects of which are covered and affected by it."[8] Being a practitioner of the oral tradition engages the totality of the orator's being and reveals the interconnectedness of things and community. The spoken word and its orator are inseparable, for the orator "*is* his word and his word bears witness to what he is."[9] In the case of the Black male rapper, whether it be Tupac Shakur, Nas, or Childish Gambino, removing the oral element from the construction is impossible−the title of rapper dictates its recipient have an active understanding and proficiency of the oral tradition to deliver material and magical truths unattainable otherwise. In this context, the word 'magic' refers to the "management of forces, a thing neutral in itself which may prove helpful or harmful according to the direction it is given."[10] When a rapper performs, they use their magic to manage the spiritual direction of their words, so if we think back to the freestyling example above, the rapper's magic can be helpful or harmful depending on the impact they wish to impart upon one's spirit. Thus, in the wielding of magic there is responsibility, a responsibility contextualized by the griot and Black male rapper's role in their community and the objectives they wish to

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[7] See A. Hampate Ba, "The Living Tradition," *General History of Africa I: Methodology and African Prehistory*, edited by J. Ki-Zerbo, UNESCO (1981): 166–205, 167.
[8] Ibid., p. 168
[9] Ibid., p. 168
[10] Ibid., p. 171

fulfill as a living embodiment of their word. In African tradition, speech, "deriving its creative and operative power from the sacred, is in direct relation with the maintenance or the rupture of harmony in man and the world about him."[11] Now we can take stock of the griot's material and metaphysical repertoire and how they utilize them; the griot's spirit empowers their speech, which then activates their magic, and imparts upon others a force aligning with a specific spiritual direction. The force the griot can conjure with the power of their speech and magic is why they must be responsible with how they fulfill their cultural and social obligations: with such power, the griot must exercise a high moral character to be true to the "great school of life"[12] and the interconnectedness of their function to the community.

The multiplicity of local political and cultural functions of the griot makes it impossible to cover all the individual manifestations of the archetype, but such an ontological diversity allowed the griot's 'magic' to survive slavery whilst names and personhood could not. Though the dehumanizing institution of slavery did not allow the griot's function in its native cultural structure to survive, practitioners of the African oral tradition evaded slavery's material constraints and persisted within enslaved African communities. In *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, Robert Farris Thompson makes particular note of the Kongo and Angola peoples' dedication to practice their culture and language despite slavery being a culturally disruptive force:

> When they met on the plantations and in the cities of the western hemisphere, they fostered their heritage. Kongo civilization and art were not obliterated in the New World: they resurfaced in the coming together, here and there, of numerous slaves from Kongo and Angola.[13]

[11] Ibid., p. 172
[12] Ibid., p. 167
[13] See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, Vintage Books, 1984. p. 104

As European slave trafficking grew in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the meaning of "Kongo" and "Angola" as ethnic signifiers were broadened to erase the individual ethnic identities of enslaved Africans from West Central Africa.[14] "Angola" in particular, became the name "of not only modern Angola but sometimes the whole west coast of Central Africa, from Cape Lopez in northwestern Gabon to Benguela on the coast of Angola proper."[15] Contrary to a prevalent view of African peoples in slavery as intrinsically alienated by their ethnic dialects and individual cultures, many Africans, including what European slave traffickers would label as 'Angolan' and 'Kongo,' shared fundamental beliefs and languages.[16] The practice and power of the oral tradition is but one of these shared fundamental beliefs used to foster cultural heritage and affirm a form of cultural autonomy within the wake of slavery.

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p. 103
[16] Ibid., p. 104

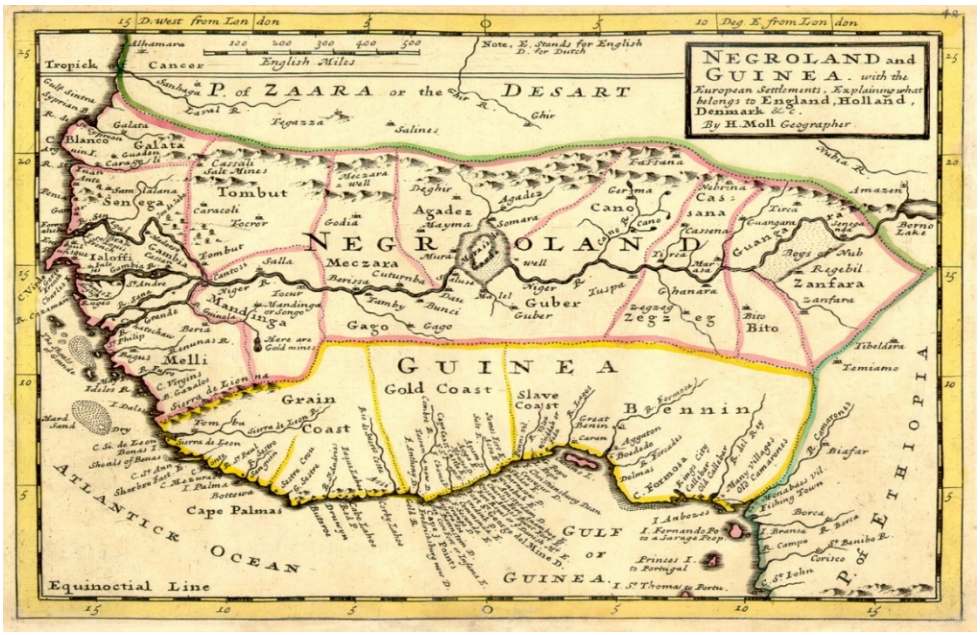
Map 1.1. African Ethnicities Prominent in North America and the Caribbean, 1500-1900[17]

The Wake of Slavery

Because griots can be found in so many different ethnic groups, their collective presence includes a vast geographic range in Africa, a range that directly overlaps with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In 1444, less than a hundred years after Ibn Battuta described his encounters with griots at the court of Mali, the first Portuguese ship collected slaves in Senegambia, home to the Wolof people.[18] As early as 1526, Affonso, king of Kongo and a close ally to the Portuguese, lamented the ruin the slave trade forced upon Africa and its people, describing an existence

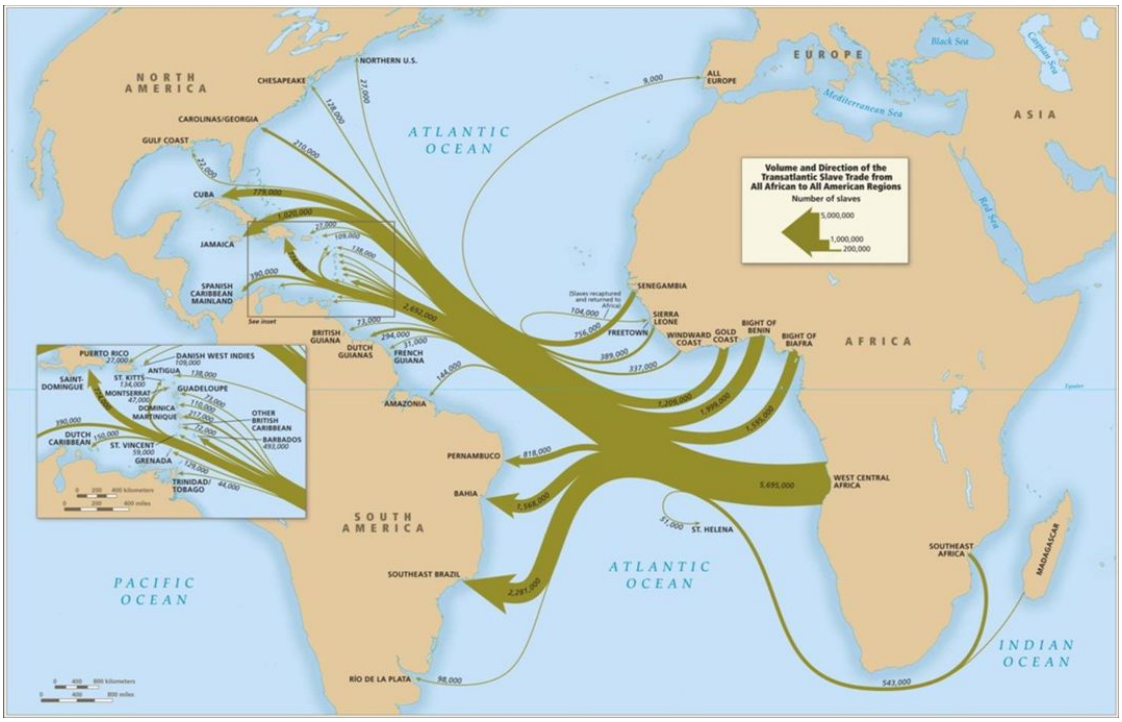
[17] See Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links*, University of North Carolina Press, 2007. p. 25
[18] Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas,* p. 16

where no one was safe from being sold; free Africans, nobles, and even the king's family members were enslaved and kidnapped.[19] By the 17th century, the Atlantic slave trade exercised a disruptive foothold in African social structure and political stability. Due to the increasing European demand for slaves in the Americas, the capture, kidnapping, and sale of Africans supplying the Atlantic trade expanded and moved inland.[20] By 1650, the Gold Coast became a major market for European guns and powder, and as a result, Lower Guinea housed a proliferating slave trade driven by large-scale, escalating purchases of European arms.[21] The Slave Coast, a swath of land stretching along the western coast of Africa, was a major source of Africans that were taken into slavery during the Atlantic slave trade from the early sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century. Ethnic groups living within the Slave Coast included the Wolof, Mandinka, Hausa, and many others who contained griots.



Map 1.2. Negroland and Guinea with the European Settlements, 1736[22]

[19] Ibid., p. 15
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Herman Moll, Negroland and Guinea with the European Settlements, Explaining what belongs to England, Holland, Denmark, etc., 1727, Electronic, 1200 × 894, *University of Florida*, George A. Smathers Libraries,



Map 1.3. Volume and direction of the transatlantic slave trade from all African to all American regions[23]

The institution of slavery is popularly thought of as a singular event, but as Christina Sharpe unpacks in her text *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, the rituals and acts of antiblackness embedded within slavery created such a violent environment the institution morphed into an all-encompassing climate. This devastating, pervasive environment produced what Sharpe calls a violent breathlessness intrinsically attached to the Black body's ontological experience. Racism, the engine of antiblackness that "cuts through all of our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake of its purposeful flow"[24] is a force authorizing both liberty and slavery and its status with state-sponsored personhood. To the African slaves aboard

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https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/82/Negroland_and_Guinea_with_the_European_Settlements%2C_1736.jpg/800px-Negroland_and_Guinea_with_the_European_Settlements%2C_1736.jpg

[23] David Eltis and David Richardson, Volume and direction of the transatlantic slave trade from all African to all American regions, 2010, Electronic, 1072 x 685, *Smithsonian Magazine,* https://thumbs-prod.si-cdn.com/QU2gfer7VcDXPAQXv8Lm1EHMBxI=/fit-in/1072x0/https://public-media.si-cdn.com/filer/39/1f/391f6e79-7c7f-45bd-8f11-395aa27a8b0c/file-20170420-21495-62z61a.jpg

[24] See Christina E. Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Duke University Press, 2016. p. 3

the Middle Passage, racism's purpose was economic and its wake physical, a "wake" Sharpe describes as "the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow."[25] As the European antiblack climate and its wake became more and more pervasive, the brutality of slavery became a singularity, from which the antiblack climate began to create weather patterns. Sharpe describes a "singularity" as a "weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances,"[26] meaning the antiblack singularity is a phenomenon occurring around the set of political, economic, and racial circumstances that dehumanized and violated African peoples. It is imperative to note how "weather" is being used in Sharpe's definition, as within her context, the weather is "antiblackness [that] is pervasive *as* climate."[27] When I think of climate, I tend to envision the patterns of meteorological behaviors the body is subject to and cannot control, so if we are to employ Sharpe in this rhetoric we can think about slavery as the environment the Black body cannot control, a pervasive force capable of extreme subjugation and destruction. Let us remind ourselves that climate and weather are not the same phenomenon. Weather includes short-term conditions of the atmosphere and climate a cumulation of weather within a period of time at a fixed geographic location. So, when Sharpe says the antiblack climate began to create weather patterns, she is moving from the macro to the microlevel. If the climate is antiblack in nature, so must be the weather, which she says, "necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies."[28] Every ritual and act of antiblackness that empowers the singularity and its self-generative properties leaves in its wake

[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

Black death and the "hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying."[29] For the griots enslaved and brought to America, their former socio-cultural function as historians, genealogists, and reporters tasked them (and other practitioners of the oral tradition) with becoming living archives of the Black death occurring around them.

The African political structures that supported the griot's intergenerational passing of knowledge were nonexistent in America, meaning the griot's knowledge had to be exchanged within the community to be remembered as cultural practice. Extreme acts of violence involving Black bodies, such as the *Zong* massacre or the Stono Rebellion, as we shall see, produced Black ghosts that griots (and other practitioners of the oral tradition) had to humanize from their spectral objecthood. Enslaved African bodies were recorded in ledgers and logs as *property* and, by dying as such, were left in the American archive as economic objects, thus producing a human ghost. As a reporter and historian, the griot had a responsibility to their community to record the Black ghost as a human with dreams, accomplishments, and dignity because, as Hale states, "singing praises is the most obvious and audible function they perform."[30] To recognize the spirit the Black body leaves behind in death, griots must tap into their magic and use their mastery of the oral tradition to reveal the humanity slavery seeks to destroy. Singing the praises of a body stripped of its humanity is an act of mourning, reclamation, and respect. By using the oral tradition, the griot combines the spiritual with the material to oppose the necropolitical and economic forces persistent in the antiblack weather and give hope the Black body's spirit will find peace. The importance of the body's spirit must be brought back to the forefront of this

[29] Ibid., p. 10
[30] Hale, "From the Griot of Roots to the Roots of Griot," p. 250

discussion because it is this spirit that gives strength to the griot's actions and the reparative impact it imparts upon their community. As Jones asserts, "the spirit is always at the root in Black art,"[31] so when we detail these African musical and cultural practices persisting through slavery, we must give heed to the Black spirit's power.[32]

The transmutation of the griot into the Black rapper can be charted through the evolution of African music in the United States, originating from Negro spirituals and culminating into hip-hop. In the American colonies, African slaves were forbidden from speaking their native languages, and as they were forced to convert to Christianity, they needed an avenue to express the music that had previously been so integral to their daily lives.[33] "The Biblical stories imposed upon slaves drew ontological parallels to their own lives," [34] and as more slaves were converted to Christianity, Negro spirituals served as the only acceptable musical avenue (not practiced in secret) to express communal faith, sorrows, and hopes. Despite the oppression leading to their creation, Negro spirituals, or as W.E.B. Du Bois characterizes them, 'Sorrow Songs,' utilized African rhythmic and sonic elements, allowing traces of Africa to survive slavery's antiblack singularity. One of these elements, the call and response, "never left us, as a mode of (musical) expression," Jones argues, having been passed down "both as vocal and instrumental form."[35] Therein lies the power of *tradition*, the intergenerational passing of knowledge essential to an individual's being and culture. Negro spirituals being sung by a collective of Black bodies is

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[31] Jones, *Black Music,* p. 182

[32] As I continue my critical inquires, I want to explicate on how I am using the phrase "the Black body" and its relation to its spirit: the Black body is the physical and material structure that houses a metaphysical spirit. The two components combined create the totality of a Black individual and its ontological experience. Given the comprehensive history of the American hegemony's necropolitics, "the Black body" cannot be separated from its historical subjugation, dehumanization, and marginalization.

[33] "African American Spirituals," Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495

[34] Ibid.

[35] Jones, *Black Music,* p. 181

reminiscent of Africa's "larger tribal singing units," the "large religious choirs (chorus) which were initially *dancers and singers*, of religious and/or ritual purpose."[36] The spirit may be a force powerful enough to survive slavery's antiblack climate, but it still needs the power of speech, for in "ritual songs and incantatory formulae…speech is the materialization of cadence."[37] When one's spirit empowers speech to materialize cadence, the harmony from this alignment of power "creates movements, movements which generate forces, those forces are then acting on spirits which themselves are powers for action."[38] From these spirituals evolved Gospel music and the blues, which I will spend a brief time discussing because the spirit of blues musicians is necessary to understanding the spirit of the rapper.

Blues music is characterized by a deep, palpable sadness from one's spirit; the sadness of this spirit is a force which generates speech and the specific cadence of the art form. In his text *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Amiri Baraka claims the blues "reminds middle-class Negroes of slavery," explicating further that "they could only think of slavery with the sense of shame their longing for acceptance constantly provided."[39] While I empathize with the shame these Black people feel in longing for acceptance, I would like to question Baraka's inclusion of class here. Attaching "middle-class"[40] to Negroes creates an unnecessary class divide that impedes the emotional urgency of the art form and its importance in the evolution of Black music. Baraka's framing of the Black middle class' interpretation of the blues is problematic because it suggests the Black middle-class' encounter with blues is predetermined based upon their economic station. This determinism impedes upon the unification of the Black

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ba, "The Living Tradition," p. 171-172
[38] Ibid., p. 172
[39] See Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Perennial, 2002. p. 176
[40] Ibid.

community and does little to suggest a difference between how the Black middle class and the Black proletariat encounter the blues. If the blues is integral to Black ontology, then class distinctions and differences should not stand in the way of how the Black community collectively arrives at the heuristic truth behind the artform. The sense of longing these Black people feel can be reflective of both the Black and human condition as well as a powerful thematic connector between the genre and rap. The popularization of blues and jazz signaled a turn towards what I call the 'modern Black body,' a term meant to signify the Black body's chronological shift towards our contemporary modality, and as one would expect, the "most contemporary expression of Afro-American musical tradition was an urban one."[41] The developing urban culture steadied the next evolution in Black music from blues and jazz to soul, funk, and rhythm & blues. Soul and funk bring us to that fateful party in the Bronx, when DJ Kool Herc spun James Brown to heal and to inspire a community stricken by intergenerational trauma (and make a few bucks so that he and his sister could buy some new school clothes).

The Black Body as a Ruin

If being traumatized is to "be possessed by an image or event"[42] as Cathy Caruth asserts, then the Black male rapper persona presents a critical engagement with trauma's ability to possess an individual and the intergenerational trauma passed down from slavery. The level to which a body experiences or witnesses trauma informs its vulnerability to possession: the greater the trauma, the greater the vulnerability. The severity of trauma also determines how it transfers onto someone else since trauma "affects not only those who are directly exposed to it, but also

[41] Ibid., p. 177
[42] See Cathy Caruth, editor, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. p. 4-5

those around them."[43] When a victim describes trauma to a witness or a witness directly observes a trauma parallax forms occur: the witness, as a secondary vessel of the original trauma, must access the site of fracture through the narrative of the victim. Since the witness must come into victim's fragmentation, the distance between the witness and the catalytical trauma is greater than the distance between the victim and the catalytical trauma. Survivors of trauma fear that they are "damaged to the core and beyond redemption,"[44] but for the Black body, this fear can become reality in a climate constantly pushing for Black death. Given the antiblack climate of slavery and its repeated violence against Black bodies, trauma was heavily embedded within the daily lives of African slaves and the generations of Black bodies that, as a result, became contagions of trauma.

[43] See Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Penguin Books, 2015. p. 1
[44] Ibid., p. 2

Figure 1.1. The lynching of George Meadows, 1889[45]

Traumas that become institutions, like slavery or lynching, create a breathless, cyclical pattern due to their profound potency and their unique ability to possess and repossess an individual and community. These cycles of traumatic affect can not only devastate the body of an individual, but also the familial generations the individual produces. Let us consider the trauma that comes from the whipping of slaves; such a trauma occurs within a social environment to incur a specific outcome whether that outcome be punishment, subordination, or some other horrific act of marginalization. The tearing of flesh from a whip is not just a physical sensation that leaves behind a material trace of the action, but a trauma that affects the "entire human organism−body, mind, and brain."[46] After being whipped, the slave's energy "now becomes

[45] Jamiles Lartey and Sam Morris. The lynching of George Meadows, 1889, Electronic, 1300 x 391, *The Guardian*, Library of Congress, accessed March 17, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/26/lynchings-memorial-us-south-montgomery-alabama

[46] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, p. 53

focused on suppressing inner chaos,"[47] as the pain of such a trauma is an overwhelming experience that is "split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own."[48] Following such a traumatic event is ontological terror: the slave must not only overcome the physical remnants of the whipping, but the palpable fear, hopelessness, and anger that lurks within their psyche. These considerations of whipping's traumatic effects are only addressing the individual at the microlevel without other bodies that could become witnesses or contagions of the whipped slave's trauma. The psychological and physiological consequences of trauma are even greater when applied to the macrolevel, such as a public execution of slaves with other slaves watching or a sale of slaves where a family unit is fractured and left dismantled.

Slavery forces the Black body to undergo a self-generative and intertwined process in slavery's drive toward death and trauma: an initial ontological fracture, such as being sold or whipped, producing a psychological fissure and a process of fragmentation following the break this fracture creates. These violent, self-generative processes form the base of the Black body's ruination from which the Black male rapper makes phenomenological observations. In its fractured and fragmented state, the Black body is vulnerable to haunting as it is psychologically constrained under malicious systems of exploitation. The fragmentation imposed upon a Black body from slavery, together with its antiblack climate, creates a subliminal existence where the Black body is never safe. To live the life of a slave is to live in a breathless and suffocating danger to the body and psyche. The lineage of American blackness is, in part, a lineage of trauma where the Black body inherits a cumulation of trauma from their ancestors and must reconcile

[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid., p. 66

the physiological effects of this trauma with ontological experience as an individual body. In this modality, the Black body becomes a material connector to community memory and geographic history while simultaneously being constrained by the present and the past: what I call 'physiological ruin.' The Black body exists as a physiological ruin because it cannot be separated from its necropolitical history; it is both a crumbling, shattered place from which to launch and land and a physical structure participating in an altered past, present, and future.

Charting the Black body as a physiological ruin means exploring how the concealment of Black subjectivity has pervaded the American moral economy and forces its "violent arithmetics of skin"[49] onto the descendants of African slaves. From current medical science we can now study a social environment's interaction with brain chemistry and this interaction's relationship with the unbearable physiological reactions that arise from trauma. The two social environments of the following figures demonstrate the chronology of blackness in the United States where Black bodies must physiologically carry with them a blackness that is "naturally malignant and therefore worthy of violation" because of the antiblack climate where "black is naturally violent and less-than-human."[50]

[49] See Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," *The Black Scholar*, 44. 2 (2014): 16-28, 23.
[50] Ibid., p. 17

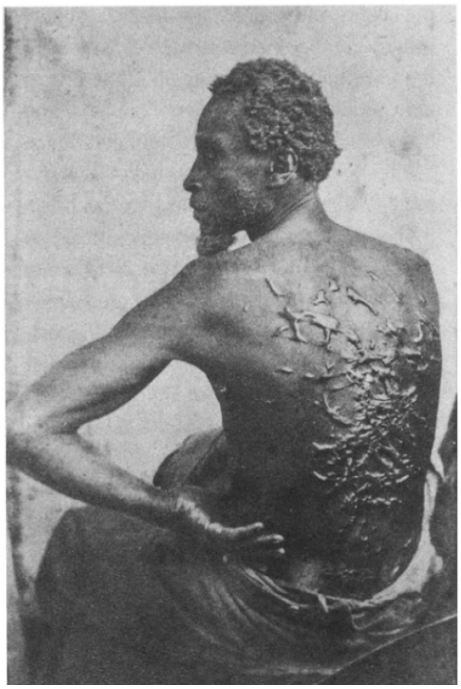

Figure 1.2: 'Rear view of former slave revealing scars on his back from savage whipping, in photo taken after he escaped to become a Union soldier during Civil War,' or 'Scourged Back, 1863' or 'Gordon' from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture."[52]

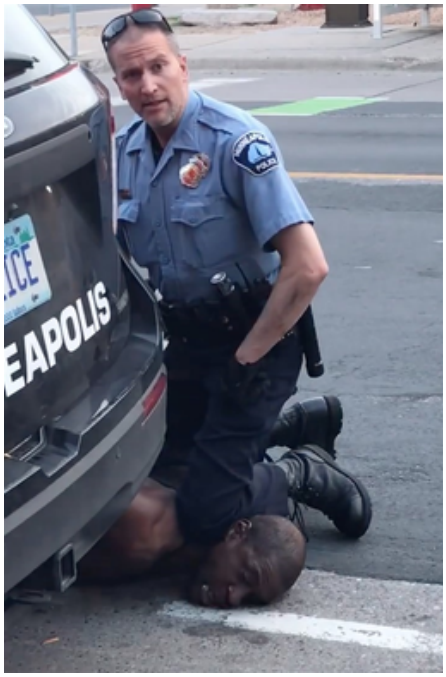

Figure 1.3: A screenshot of a video showing George Floyd's neck being kneeled on by Derek Chauvin.[51]

I hope by pairing these two figures side-by-side that their commonalities demonstrate how the Black body is a vestige to social violence spanning generations. Figure 1.1 shows the terror directed upon the Black body during legalized slavery; each of the scars disfiguring Gordon's back are physical remnants of trauma and the social environment in which these scars were produced. The fact that one of the names for this photo is "Scourged Back, 1863" is no coincidence: besides being a constant reminder of his life as property, Gordon's scars follow van der Kolk's medical findings and take a life of their own, telling the story of the Black body. During slavery, violence against Black bodies was a tool for subjugation and for keeping

[51] Darnella Frazier, George Floyd neck knelt on by police officer, 2020, Electronic, 256 × 390 pixels, *Wikipedia*, https://www.facebook.com/darnellareallprettymarie/videos/1425398217661280/

[52] McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," p. 21

enslaved Africans afraid of death but still alive since the value of the Black body was predicated upon the labor it produced. Figure 1.2 shows the terror directed at the Black body today where police violence is a potent tool for subjugation and reinforcing the American hegemony's push for Black death. The Black body today can be easily killed and made into an example because the hegemony is not interested in exploiting an individual Black body's labor, but rather the cultural and social products generated from a specific collective of Black bodies. To me, these two figures speak for themselves. Both men are physical tethers to Sharpe's antiblack climate and the rituals of antiblackness that enable these acts of violence to persist. To combat trauma, the brain seeks to build neural pathways strong enough to function while "carrying the memory of terror, and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability,"[53] but if trauma's constant repossession antagonizes slavery's ontological terror and further fragments the Black body, how can the brain begin to build such pathways?

For the Black male rapper, the answer to this question lies within the spirit of rap and the power of their speech to incite revolution. If slavery and its wake are the source of the Black sublime, then its Romantic counterpart, what I'll refer to as the 'Black beautiful,' is sourced out of the hope for a future where Black is perpetuated as equal to white and free from its economic objecthood. Achieving this Black beautiful requires active and strategic resistance to the terror instilled within the Black body from generations of "unpleasant emotions," "intense physical sensations," and "incomprehensible and overwhelming"[54] physiological reactions. Rap is how the Black body can find hope and consolation in the midst of disaster—wielding their magic, rappers can bring forth the Black revolution and humanize the unnamed ghosts that remain

[53] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, p. 2
[54] Ibid.

locked in the economic archive. For Black rappers, the ruin is a pedagogical performance demonstrating their sociopolitical criticism. Considering the intergenerational trauma imprinted on Black bodies throughout American history, the Black male rapper's heuristic responsibility is to seek the answer to Katherine McKittrick's question: "How then might we recast the arithmetics of skin, the truthful lies of the archive, and the making of black subjecthood that is always tethered to that status of nonperson?"[55] To seek this answer, the Black male rapper weaponizes the oral tradition's occult forces and calls upon the magic of the griots and rappers that came before him so that his word animates, sets into motion, and rouses the ghosts that pervade the Black archive.

Black Ghosts

Below the Sahara, African oral traditions function as a "grand vector of 'ethereal' forces,"[56] making the griot a conduit of the spectral and hauntological−through the griot's power both the word of those living and dead are exhumed into a canon outside of the griot and granted legitimacy. This transmission between spiritual and material is limited to the griot's command of memory and their individual proficiency as a living archive, constraints that also correspond to the Black male rapper. In her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon posits the ghost as a product of modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, repression, and their concrete impacts on the people most affected by them and on our shared conditions of living. This sociological focus is how Gordon frames her explications on haunting, but in this section, I will build upon her definition and discuss haunting as a critical practice

[55] McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," p. 23
[56] Ba, "The Living Tradition," p. 167

ingrained within the griot's oral tradition. By converging Gordon with the griot, I hope to demonstrate how haunting is imposed upon the Black body and the relationship between griots, the Black male rapper archetype, and the ghosts of the Black archive. Gordon tells us haunting is the "language and the experiential modality by which abusive systems of power make themselves" and "the incontrovertible facticity of racial capitalism known."[57] The oppressive nature of slavery is one of the examples Gordon mentions in her sociological search of unpacking the "something-to-be-done;"[58] which, in the case of the griot and Black male rapper, is the hauntological work of humanizing Black bodies and ghosts from the economic archive. This haunting of the economic archive is just one way in which the Black psychological experience of being in time is altered and "the way we separate the past, the present, and the future."[59] As a "grand vector of 'ethereal' forces,"[60] the griot and Black male rapper's experience in time is fundamentally altered because they are a living archive oscillating between the past, present, and future. The African oral tradition embedded within hip-hop, in its function as a micro-display of the Black archive, exposes intergenerational racial-sexual violence, revealing that what has "been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us."[61] Such "incomplete forms of containment"[62] are economic in nature for the Black body, as Katherine McKittrick explicates in her article "Mathematics Black Life," where she examines our current engagement with a Black archive that is bound by the violence of economics and its refusal of

[57] See Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008. p. xvi
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ba, "The Living Tradition," p. 167
[61] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. xvi
[62] Ibid.

Black subjectivity. Abusive and racialized systems of power like slavery, mar the Black body, leaving scars in their wake and echoes of haunting's spectral language. The scars that haunting leaves behind, like those on Gordon's back, are remnants of abusive systems of power like slavery and Jim Crow, exerting their will on the Black body, bringing chaos into its language with its repetition compulsion. Judith Butler's political and critical explications of mourning complicate the repetition compulsion of this resurfacing, arguing "a national melancholia, understood as a disavowed mourning, follows upon the erasure from public representations of the names, images, and narratives of those the US has killed."[63] When we apply Butler's explications to the Black archive, we see can see erasure in the ledgers and logs recording the Black body as a commodity. Black melancholia then, is a mourning of humanity, a mourning of freedom and agency.

From Black melancholia comes Sharpe's conceptualization of wake work: the haunting labor a living Black body undertakes to humanize Black ghosts from an economy of skin pushing for Black death. Conducting this haunting labor requires an intimate relationship with the spectral world, which is where the metaphysical qualities of the griot and Black male rapper become ever so important when we try to answer Sharpe's question, "In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death, how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death?"[64] Humanizing Black ghosts requires the same "hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work"[65] as tending to the needs of dying Black bodies, but even more so as those dismantling a violated Black archive, such as griots and rappers, must pull the Black ghost from objecthood,

[63] See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,* Verso, 2004. p. xiv
[64] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p. 17
[65] Ibid., p. 10

transmogrify the ghost into a subject, and finally, humanize it. For victims of mathematical and archival violence, we must know that this process to activate Black ghosts produces their personhood from the "afterlife of property."[66] Wake work re-temporalizes the laborer and their experience of a Black past, present, and future where haunting is the language of "working against meaning, working for meaning, [and] working in and out of meaning."[67] To decipher and activate 'spectral language,' the living Black body must be used as a vessel for the Black ghost to materialize its resistance against abusive systems of power. When griots and other practitioners of the oral tradition would sing praise of their fallen community members, they were conducting wake work: their spirit empowers their living bodies to retaliate against the spectral forces imprisoning the Black ghost and free it from the economic archive through the magic of their speech.

To further complicate our discussion of Sharpe's conceptualization of wake work, I would like to synthesize its spectral characteristics with that of McKittrick's "new world blackness,"[68] a blackness originating and emerging in violence, death, and the cumulative trauma produced by the antiblack singularity. New world blackness acts upon the modern Black body through the "proved and certified archives of ledgers, accounts, price tags, and descriptors of economic worth and financial probability"[69] of historic blackness, forcing the modern Black body to perform wake work if it seeks to humanize historic blackness from the economic archive. The Black ghost reminds us that the "slave is possession, proved to be property," so it would follow that Black freedom is "embedded within an economy of race and violence,"[70] with

[66] Ibid., p. 18
[67] See M. NourbeSe Philip and Setaey Adamu Boateng, *Zong!,* Wesleyan University Press, 2008. p. 204
[68] McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," p. 16
[69] Ibid., p. 17
[70] Ibid.

this economy of violence being housed within the economic archive. Those afflicted by new world blackness live as reconstructed manifestations of mathematical violence whilst being haunted by the Black ghosts produced by antiblack rituals and acts of Black resistance. Breathless numbers do not birth families, create art, or continue lineages, but in the antiblack wake, ghosts, in conjunction with those doing wake work, do. Bound by the historic designation of nonperson, the oral tradition is the fundamental weapon rappers equip to combat the economic forces of the archive and the singular entity in which Black life is rent and torn. Thus far, we have spent a considerable amount of time detailing the oral tradition that griots and the Black male rapper utilize and the necropolitical forces acting against the Black body, but now I will use Childish Gambino as a concrete example to ground these explications.

II. Childish Gambino: The Outcast

To understand the Childish Gambino persona as a cultural and literary force, we must first understand how it was created. Donald Glover's southern upbringing provides the necessary ontological context to explore Childish Gambino's origins since the two are inherently intertwined; as Glover's construction, Childish Gambino uses Glover's upbringing as his own before branching out into a path outside of Glover's own existence. Therefore, Glover's childhood provides the historical foundation from which Childish Gambino will be analyzed and examined as an external avatar. There will be times when I use Glover and Gambino interchangeably to refer to the same individual, but I will also make the distinction between Glover and his alter-ego when discussing Glover's ownership over Gambino as an identity or when Gambino is participating in a departure from Glover's material capabilities. Stone Mountain, Georgia, the setting to Glover's childhood, is the geographic site of the Ku Klux Klan's rebirth and an area rife with racial wounds still fresh from slavery. Located deep in the heart of the South, Stone Mountain's racial divides started when the Civil War ended, and the town was rebuilt from the aftermath of Union occupancy. While making up a significant part of the local quarry's labor force, African Americans were excluded from the housing areas of white families, leading to the creation of Shermantown, a shantytown. Ku Klux Klan rallies were held at the base of Stone Mountain from 1915, the year of the Klan's rebirth, to as recent as the 1980's.[71] From the racial divide that led to the creation of Shermantown to the threat of the Klan looming over its Black residents, Stone Mountain brandishes a palpable history and propensity

[71] Benjamin Powers, "In the Shadow of Stone Mountain," Smithsonian Magazine, May 4, 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/shadow-stone-mountain-180968956/?spMailingID=34221568&spUserID=NzQwNDUzNzY2MzMS1&spJobID=1281070717&spReportId=MTI4MTA3MDcxNwS2

for racial hatred. Tragically, what made Gambino a social outcast in his childhood and adolescence was his inability to be accepted by both his white and Black contemporaries, forcing him to occupy the fringe between Stone Mountain's racial communities.

The Superhero's Origin Story

Donald Glover was born on September 25, 1983 at Edwards Air Force Base, California to Beverly and Donald Glover Sr. As any DC or Marvel fan will tell you, the key to every superhero's origin story is to first look at their parents. Being named after his father imposes a responsibility Glover does not take lightly, as he points to in *Because the Internet's* "IV. Sweatpants" with the lyric "My father owned half the MoMA and did it with no diploma," (Glover, verse 2)[72] a clever way of stating Gambino has so many artistic accomplishments that he could fill the Museum of Modern Art and Donald Sr. would be apt in taking half the credit for it. Gambino's relationship with his father was so meaningful to him he even went so far as to re-record some of his lines in *The Lion King* after Donald Glover Sr. passed away in 2019. Glover explained he needed to re-record his lines because he understood the Simba character in such a "different" [73] way: a way that speaks to the core of a young prince who must assume the throne in the wake of the king's death. Donald Glover Sr. was Childish Gambino's Uncle Ben: the stable, wise father figure providing a positive, masculine role model for Gambino to follow. Gambino explicitly states as much in a 2011 interview with *q on cbc*, saying his "dad was a very

[72] Childish Gambino feat. Problem, "IV. Sweatpants," Track 8 on Because the Internet, Glassnote Records, 2013, CD.

[73] See Andrea Mandell, "Donald Glover: From redoing Simba after losing his father to his funny Blue Ivy encounter," USA TODAY, Published July 16, 2019; last updated July 19, 2019, https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/movies/2019/07/16/lion-king-donald-glover-redid-simba-lines-after-losing-dad/1728489001/

good role model and very supportive."[74] Their strong relationship is brought up in several Gambino songs, including *Culdesac's* "I'm Alright" with Gambino declaring, "This is exactly what I wanted/All my fans love me, dad is proud of me," (Glover, verse 1)[75] or *Camp's* "Hold You Down" when Gambino recounts his blackness being questioned, "He said I wasn't really black because I had a dad." (Glover, verse 1)[76] Part of the social alienation Gambino experienced as a child was due to the strong relationship he had with his father: many of Gambino's Black peers told him he was not Black because his father was such an integral part of his life. Gambino's lyrical prognostication does not always benefit him, as is the case in *EP's* "Be Alone" where he reveals the complicated effects of alienation and foretells an impending future without his father: "I am feeling more alone than I ever have felt before/ I wanna pick up the phone, ask my dad how to handle it/ But what will happen when my dad's not there to answer it?" (Glover, verse 1)[77] If Donald Glover Sr. is Gambino's Mufasa, it is vitally important to discuss Beverly, the Sarabi of the Glover household, and the maternal responsibility she bears for Gambino and his troubled childhood.

During Donald's childhood, the Glover household was full of struggle: while Donald Sr. and Beverly were fighting to ensure their children would never have to experience the trauma they experienced during their own upbringing (which we'll cover later in the chapter) Gambino was preoccupied with navigating the alienation and racism from his social experiences. Such isolation proved to Gambino that a key part of race is performance and optics, as he alludes to in *Culdesac's* "The Last:"

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[74] q on cbc, "Comedic Triple-Threat Donald Glover in Studio Q," YouTube Video, 19:20, October 19, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cj7V9K3bzRc&t=1035s
[75] Childish Gambino, "I'm Alright," Track 9 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[76] Childish Gambino, "Hold You Down," Track 9 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.
[77] Childish Gambino, "Be Alone," Track 1 on EP, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.

I was a good kid, backpack on my shoulder
98 test score in my *ThunderCat* folder
My cousin was older, my mama used to wake up
Drive me to his school 'cause his school was much safer
But I slipped up and accidentally told a teacher
Now I'm going to a school where I get beat up
Because I ain't get down with them other kids
Probably 'cause I talk too white and I got a dad who's there
Mama couldn't take it, sold the place and got us out of there
Guest room, now the six of us splitting one with a restroom
Now I'm going to this school called Rockbridge
School of the neighborhood we tryna buy a house in
There's not a lot of black kids
So I stick out like a sore thumb with some bad acne (Glover, verse 1)[78]

Gambino's experience at the unnamed elementary school and Rockbridge Elementary led him to observe how race can be performative as exercised by an individual, but that there also exists a performance of race that happens externally, a performance conducted by the perception of society and those inhabiting or controlling spaces of that individual. Akin to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Gambino came to be invisible because he was refused to be seen for who he is instead of the perception that was created of him due to his peers' own social and cultural conditioning. Inside, Gambino thought of himself as bright, curious, and Black, but outside, he was "too white" and had "a dad who's there,"[79] which meant there was not any room for his particular brand of blackness. When a Black body's performance of race does not match with societal perception, the body's internal expression clashes with the external, thus creating a subterranean space within the psyche where the internal self is separated from the self being perceived by others. This subterranean psychological space, what I will refer to as an

[78] Childish Gambino, "The Last," Track 15 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[79] Ibid.

'ontological undercommons,' is the site of a splintered blackness where the Black body is chained to the designation of nonperson despite their individual characteristics proving that Black is human. The social consequences from Gambino's external expression of his new world blackness raise powerful concerns about blackness as a performative spectrum: does having *ThunderCats* on your folder make you any less Black? Does having a father in your life that loves and supports you make you an outlier in the Black community? To Gambino's peers, the answer to both questions is a resounding "Yes." Donald Sr. and Beverly raised Gambino and his siblings as Jehovah's witnesses, a possible connection to the "I was a good kid" (Glover, verse 1)[80] lyric, but being a good kid did nothing to protect him from the racial strife surrounding Stone Mountain. The bullying Gambino received from his peers was so severe it prompted his mother to uproot the family and relocate to a guest room for the family to share. The guest room could have been uncomfortable for Gambino and his family because of the lack of pride his parents may have felt maintaining a steady household in such a cramped space or perhaps because Gambino's social alienation creeped its way into the domestic and made Gambino even more uncomfortable. For a moment, let us consider the totality of this event: the violence Beverly witnessed on the account of her son was so traumatic she saw no other option than removing their family from the entire community and severing their social ties to the area. She would rather have her family struggle with such extreme hardship than to continue to see her son be beaten again and again. Beverly's deep, palpable love for her son is a trope that is repeated throughout Gambino's discography: from *Culdesac* to *Because the Internet,* it is explicitly demonstrated Beverly became a contagion of Gambino's racial and social trauma after

[80] Ibid.

witnessing the adverse effects of his alienation and the racism embedded within the Stone Mountain area.

In *Camp,* Gambino further reveals how the racism embedded within the Georgian social landscape converged with the economic disenfranchisement of Black bodies during his childhood. On its opening track, "Outside," he raps:

> Yeah, Dad lost his job, mama worked at Mrs. Winner's
> Gun pulled in her face, she still made dinner
> 'Donald watch the meter so they don't turn the lights off'
> Workin' two jobs so I can get into that white school
> And I hate it there
> They all make fun of my clothes and wanna touch my hair (Glover, verse 2)[81]

Continuing in the same vein as *Culdesac's* "The Last," "Outside" further demonstrates the emotional seismography of Glover's childhood is marred by the trauma of everyday life for the Black body: not only is he suffering from alienation and racial discrimination by his peers, but his parents are afflicted by economic and violent forces. Let's carefully unpack this moment for a second. In a geographic area known for its racial violence and terror, Beverly had a gun "pulled in her face,"[82] came back to her family to fulfill her obligations, and still had the economic awareness to tell Gambino to "watch the meter so they don't turn the lights off."[83] It's these moments that give credence to Beverly being the Sarabi of the Glover household—how she can suppress the inner chaos from staring down the barrel of a gun and make sure her children are fed and taken care of to the best of her ability. From Gambino's descriptions, it appears the Glover household is strong and communicative about the turmoil happening in their individual

[81] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

lives because they recognize the bond from being a contagion of each other's trauma. By becoming a witness to his mother's trauma, Gambino validates her pain and can feel her sorrow as she feels for him when he comes home and tells her another story of him being beaten and ridiculed. Based upon the descriptions "that white school" and "They all make fun of my clothes and wanna touch my hair"[84] the school in question could be Rockbridge, in which case the dire straits of Glover's domestic security become even more present. Beverly and Gambino's relationship runs just as deep as Gambino and his father's, but perhaps even more so because Beverly consistently takes it upon herself to shoulder Gambino's emotional load. She can recognize how the attacks on his blackness affects her son and the psychological impact each traumatic event imparts upon him because of her own traumatic experiences. Gambino hints at the tethering of trauma that connects him with his parents in "Outside's" first verse, revealing his parents "left the Bronx so [he] wouldn't be that/ All their friends in NY deal crack." (Glover, verse 1)[85]

Regardless of the space Glover found himself in, there existed a pervasive conflict damaging his emotional repertoire. These tragic circumstances pushed Glover deeper into a racial-social periphery, where he continuously experiences what Fanon calls "the desperate struggles of a Negro who is driven to discover the meaning of black identity."[86] Gambino's peers beating him because of his new world blackness, making fun of his clothes, and fetishizing his Black physical characteristics are all examples of how white America forced "an existential deviation"[87] upon him. The children berating and dehumanizing Glover are emboldened and

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, 1986. p. 6
[87] Ibid.

enabled to do so because of the white hegemony reinforcing the push towards Black death and marginalization. I believe these instances of violence and their consequences on the Glover household were the genesis for Glover's desire to become beloved cultural paragons of the mainstream American consciousness as an act to subvert hatred of Black bodies. The racial divide of the Stone Mountain region comes up again in a later *Camp* track entitled "That Power" when Gambino reflects on the exteriority of the Black body and its social effects:

> Lovin' white dudes who call me white and then try to hate
> When I wasn't white enough to use your pool when I was eight
> Stone Mountain, you raised me well
> I'm stared at by Confederates, but hard as hell (Glover, verse 1)[88]

Much like "Outside" and "The Last," "That Power" negotiates between the external and internal performances of the Black body and presses against Black subjectivity as an exterior effect instead of an interior effect with an outward orientation. This negotiation is how Gambino demonstrates the plight of what I'll refer to as the "split Black man:" the male expression of a splintered blackness rooted in the disconnect between exteriority and interiority. On one side of the ontological undercommons is the interior, where the self, identity, and body converge, and the other, the exterior, the external perception of the interior created from social and cultural conditioning. The "white dudes"[89] Gambino refers to are malicious representations of an American hegemony willing and able to weaponize a Black body's blackness against itself. Calling Gambino white because of his personal demonstration of new world blackness while simultaneously discriminating against him because of this same blackness is another example of

[88] Childish Gambino, "That Power," Track 13 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.
[89] Ibid.

Fanon's "existential deviation:"[90] the attack uses the designation of white to subvert Gambino's identity as a Black man while also reinforcing Black is "worthy of violation" and "less-than-human."[91] Despite the repeated attacks on his racial identity and social mobility, Gambino is thankful for the heuristic lessons he gleaned from these experiences and their ability to expose the stark reality for Black individuals in Stone Mountain. Gambino rapping he is being "stared at by Confederates"[92] displays an awareness of the historical geopolitics of Stone Mountain, such as it being the site of the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, and describes members of the area's white community. These violent and discriminatory actions are not isolated incidents unique to Glover but instead are social manifestations of the antiblack singularity that has survived slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow.

While having some similarities to his alienation from Stone Mountain's white community, Gambino's ostracization from his Black peers raises essential questions about internal racism, toxic masculinity, and blackness existing as a spectrum that the Black community needs to discuss. In *Camp's* "Outside," Gambino recalls a time in his childhood when he embodied multiple aspects of being an outcast:

> They called me 'fat nose,' my mom say, 'You handsome to me'
> 'Mrs. Glover ma'am, your son is so advanced
> But he's acting up in class and keeps peeing in his pants'
> And I just wanna fit in, but nobody was helping me out
> They talking hood shit and I ain't know what that was about
> Cause hood shit and black shit is super different (Glover, verse 1)[93]

[90] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 6
[91] McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," p. 17
[92] Childish Gambino, "That Power," Track 13 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.
[93] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.

Whereas his previous white peers would fetishize his hair, these particular students bullied and discriminated against Gambino for his fat nose, a physical trait commonly attributed to the Black body. The multiple incidents of racial violence and social alienation Gambino received at school made him turn to Beverly for solace, thus deepening her role as a contagion with each new trauma Gambino exposed her to. From the "98 test score in my *ThunderCat* folder" (Glover, verse 1)[94] to his teacher's intimate admission to Beverly above, Gambino's intelligence was well recognized by his teachers, validating his worth as an intellectual and academic but with this same intelligence came an advanced emotional capacity. Gambino's intelligence deepened the range of emotions he could feel and analyze, but his psychological repertoire was not developed enough to reconcile his trauma with his budding phenomenological observations. Gambino "acting up in class" and "peeing in his pants"[95] was a behavioral response to his continued alienation and inability to understand why he was being mistreated. The "existential deviation"[96] forced onto him by the white students in his classes was replicated by his Black peers because they spoke "hood shit"[97] Gambino could not understand. The song's title is also an indication of Gambino's social status, as his alienation from his white and Black peers puts him on the 'outside' of society and the communities he sought to be a part of. Gambino's inability to reconcile his social standing between Stone Mountain's racial communities is an expression of his double consciousness, "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world."[98] To the white kids, he was too Black, had a fat nose, hair apparently primed for the touch, and other qualities that branded Gambino as

[94] Childish Gambino, "The Last," Track 15 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[95] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.
[96] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 6
[97] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.
[98] See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, University of Virginia Library, 1903. p. 4

the *other*. For the Black kids, he talked too white, had a father present in his life, and exhibited an intelligence that threatened their own securities, forcing him to the outside of accepted blackness as the *other*. As an outcast, Gambino was always looking at himself through the eyes of others and measured his soul by the blackness he knew to be and the whiteness forced upon him: therein his psyche was a distinct "twoness…two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[99] This twoness forced Gambino into the periphery, the metaphysical fringe of society where the *others* exist in social purgatory, unable to be accepted into one social group or any other.

Inhabiting the Periphery

As an inhabitant of the periphery, Childish Gambino has the unique position to critically analyze the American social, cultural, and literary climate whilst still possessing innate traits, such as his new world blackness, intelligence, and affinity for 'white culture,' that allow him to traverse through the margins of different in-groups. From his childhood we can see how Gambino existed in a social space between Black and white and the psychological implications of his alienation, but as he became more talented and emboldened to be himself, his relationship with the periphery changed. Where being called 'different' before was used to marginalize and other him, he now wears it like a badge. It is imperative to understand Gambino's relationship with the periphery if we are to extrapolate the heuristic lessons of his alienation and understand the social and racial critiques embedded within his lyrics.

[99] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 4

Culdesac's opening track "Difference" is Gambino's reclamation of being called 'different' and chronicles the evolution of his relationship with the periphery. The song's architecture is fundamentally built around the word and how it has affected Gambino: the hook, verses, and outro all feature "different" as the prevailing theme and spirit. Throughout the song, Gambino's narration oscillates between the past and the present to portray the exchange between interiority and exteriority. The song's somber piano intro pulls the listener into an introspective atmosphere before Gambino begins the first verse with the lyrics, "Niggas wanna have some, all I want's to have it all/ They wanted something different, nigga, problem solved." (Glover, verse 1)[100] When he was a kid, Gambino just wanted to fit in and be accepted, but as an adult he cherishes the differences between him and society because that's what makes him Childish Gambino. Toward the middle of the same verse Gambino again uses this oscillation between past and present to detail the acceptance he now receives despite still being as different as he was before:

> Always do me like I love self portraits
> Now these fake niggas say 'Hey' like horse shit
> People treat me different but I'm still the same person
> I don't know what it means, I just know that it's worth it
> I know I'm not perfect, but I am original (Glover, verse 1)[101]

Where before he would find sorrow in the stark differences that kept him from being accepted by his peers and society, he now finds strength and belonging. The periphery has no judgment for Black bodies like Gambino that defy preconceived notions of blackness. Instead, it allows him the freedom to explore his identity and accept the integral parts of himself his peers would

[100] Childish Gambino, "Difference," Track 1 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[101] Ibid.

question and belittle. The reversal of favor Gambino references in the couplet "Now these fake niggas say 'Hey' like horse shit/ People treat me different but I'm still the same person"[102] raises profound concerns about the value society assigns to an individual and how success can validate the personal characteristics excluding an individual from social spaces. Gambino saying he doesn't know what this newfound recognition means shows he thinks about these concerns, but that he will not allow his differences to be used against him. Therein lies a lesson we can take from Gambino's journey: having the confidence to be who you are even when people refuse to see you is power. Being different was haunting for Gambino as a child, but he can now his use his voice and the power within his speech to right the wrongs that have been done to him. Gambino's complex relationship with being different, and even the word itself, should be at the forefront of our analysis when we think about the ontological division that has characterized his relationship with society. After years of being too Black for the white kids and too white for the Black kids, Gambino is comfortable with his place in the fringe, as he even stated in a 2014 interview with the Breakfast Club, "I'm out of place everywhere. I don't think there's a place where I really fit in."[103] The lack of a place for Gambino has paradoxically created a place for him, a 'no-place' if you will, in which Gambino found a home. The song's outro reflects the resolution Gambino arrived to after questioning if he was going to allow his identity and blackness to be determined by society or himself:

> I am just different
> I am just different

[102] Ibid.
[103] Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, "Breakfast Club Classic: Childish Gambino A.K.A. Donald Glover On White Privilege & Twitter Activism," YouTube Video, 33:00, May 10, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28sTZge1Lyo&t=1441s

I've always been different
I am just different (Glover, outro)[104]

By accepting his place in the periphery, Gambino found healing and the truth that was denied to him for so long. Despite the internal peace Gambino has cultivated as an inhabitant of the periphery, he now faces new challenges and criticisms from the society that cannot box him into any set definition. As a concrete example of a Black body that has transcended the brutalities of othering conducted by both white and Black bodies, Gambino now strives to empower those that defy stereotypical classification. He has become a champion of the periphery, and as such, must defend his ontological position from those that seek to dismantle the periphery's safety. How Gambino exudes his blackness and his intelligence allows him to oscillate between in-groups that dictate an individual must have a certain trait to be allowed entry.

The next track on *Culdesac*, "Hero," details Gambino's acceptance of his position as the periphery's champion and acts as a treatise on how Gambino fulfills his obligations to his constituents. Gambino's faith in his purpose and abilities empowered his psychological repertoire to fight back against his oppressors as seen in the song's first verse, "Ain't it funny? In a year, I went from different to special/ Yeah I got it together, yeah, I took those chances." (Glover, verse 1)[105] Gambino's traumatic childhood and social alienation left him fragmented and alone, but once he "got it together,"[106] his modality shifted. In his childhood, he spent so much time putting the pieces together to try to assimilate and create a self-image that would be integrated into the social spheres he inhabited, but through a rearrangement of these same puzzle

[104] Childish Gambino, "Difference," Track 1 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[105] Childish Gambino, "Hero," Track 2 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[106] Ibid.

pieces, the right image revealed itself to him. Gambino's faith in himself is also at the crux of the song's chorus:

> Yeah, yes, I'm on top
> I'm going this hard, and no I won't stop
> Yeah, yes, I'm on top
> I'm going this hard, and no I won't stop (Glover, chorus)[107]

Gambino's rearrangement of the pieces to his identity show how he wields his magic as a Black male rapper. In his childhood he did not have a way of managing the racial forces attacking his blackness and identity, but in adulthood, he found rap as the avenue to dispel the haunting and trauma that entrenched themselves into his psyche. Despite the internal focus this psychological process precipitates, Gambino still maintains the collective register at the forefront of his mission, saying, "Guess who's in the house and representing like a congressman." (Glover, verse 3)[108] The word "representing"[109] in the lyric is imperative to note because it connects Glover's individual journey to those in the periphery. From Gambino's intimate relationship with Spider-Man, he knows with great power comes great responsibility, and the responsibility that has been assigned to him as a practitioner of the oral tradition is not one he takes lightly. He knows as a champion of the periphery he must fight for those without a voice and those who do not know the power of their speech or the magic that lay dormant in their spirit. I think what makes the Black community's treatment of Gambino so tragic is the fact that the Black body has always been in the periphery of the American hegemony, and yet, Gambino's peers sought to subjugate and belittle one of their own just so they can have someone underneath them.

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

The Writer Behind the Mask

Before we continue exploring Gambino as a literary construct, I will discuss how Glover arrived at the name of his alter-ego and how it informs his social and racial commentary. Donald Glover's literary background and heritage, omnipresent in all his artistic pursuits, equipped him with the necessary critical repertoire to advance the rap genre. In a 2011 Fuse interview, Glover recalls typing his name into a Wu-Tang Clan name generator and being given the name "Childish Gambino:"

> Well, I talked to RZA and RZA, I mean like it was his generator, I guess so, but he, he said, and I think this is encapsulates exactly what it is, he's like, 'Yo, it's like that computer had a brain, like you're childish, but you can also murder someone.' Okay, I don't think I can murder anyone, but it's definitely was just like, I feel like very, for me, it's kind of just like silliness and kind of seriousness.[110]

Gambino being the name of a notorious Italian mob family aligns perfectly with RZA's observation on Gambino being a stone-cold killer, a trope that spans Gambino's entire discography. The Gambino crime family is one of the 'Five Families' that run organized crime primarily in New York City, but they also have a geographic network that includes California and even Atlanta. Named after Carlo Gambino, the crime family rose in prominence and wealth from the 1950's to the 1970's but started to fall apart after multiple assassination plots and in-house betrayals. RZA's computer observation becomes even more interesting when we compare Carlo Gambino to Glover: Carl Sifakis, writer of *The Mafia Encyclopedia*, describes Carlo as a

[110] Fuse, "Where Did Childish Gambino Come From?" YouTube Video, 4:48, November 9, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBV2bSwuNGo

"study in contrasts" and a "man who preferred being misunderstood."[111] As previously discussed, Glover is a man of social contrasts who had to understand the power of being misunderstood so that he can use it to his advantage. It is also quite interesting that Carlo was the head of such a successful mafia family and Glover the head of an artistic crew named 'Royalty,' which includes his brother and other members Glover seems to treat as his family. Much like Carlo, the unassuming image Glover cultivates is a mirage. The "silliness"[112] Gambino exudes is a reflection of the 'childish' in "Childish Gambino," but I would argue the significance of the word and his portrayal of its meaning goes even deeper. Because of the trauma that surrounded his childhood, I would argue Gambino wears the 'childish' portion of his name to tap back into his childhood or reintroduce himself back to the childhood he lost as a Black outcast in Stone Mountain. Physically, Gambino even demonstrates some child-like characteristics such as his round face, boyish looks, and warm eyes to match an accessible and approachable personality. In the same 2014 interview with the Breakfast Club, Gambino speaks about how his disarming appearance empowers many people to test him, "People test me, and they'll be like, 'You soft.' I grew up in Stone Mountain, that's where the KKK came out again. I had to be this my entire life. I don't like it when people test me."[113] To understand the space that separates Donald Glover from Childish Gambino, we should explore how Glover constructed Gambino as a persona and the ontological differences between the two.

As an external avatar, Gambino is Glover's vessel to store the valences, prospects, forces, and opportunities he experiences traversing through racially and economically antagonistic

[111] See Carl Sifakis, *The Mafia Encyclopedia*, Infobase Publishing, 2006. p. 180
[112] Fuse, "Where Did Childish Gambino Come From?"
[113] Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, "Breakfast Club Classic: Childish Gambino A.K.A. Donald Glover On White Privilege & Twitter Activism."

spaces. I believe Glover recognized early in his childhood he would need a version of himself that evaded his flaws and insecurities, but I think once Gambino provided that for Glover, Glover started becoming more and more like Gambino. At first, Gambino was a rapper/producer utilizing rap's literary and oral elements to repair Glover's trauma and hold space for the man Glover *wanted* to be. However, as Glover's personal success and status rose, Gambino had to set the ontological threshold even higher: the next step was to achieve loftier goals like intergenerational wealth and a permanent residence in American mythology. Thus, Glover and Gambino set out to become beloved American cultural paragons such as Simba, Spider-Man, and Lando Calrissian. As the two men checked off paragon after paragon, a newer height had to be reached: cementing Childish Gambino as a cultural paragon himself. Despite Glover's personal need for Gambino, Gambino was created to advance Glover's community-oriented scholarship as a literary construct. This ethnomusicological type of scholarship is represented in two ways: first, Gambino's scholarship where he uses rap as a vehicle for philosophy and education and second, Glover's own scholarly creativity to use an alter-ego as an exercise in literary theory and activism. I believe Glover created Gambino to be a persona that resists reduction into Black stereotypes, thus keeping an archetypal fluidity. This fluidity allows the listener to choose how they want to encounter Gambino, whether that be through the lens of Romanticism, Marxism, or existentialism. In the next chapter, we will explore Gambino as a Black Romantic figure and the Romantic conceptualizations and heritage within his work.

III. Childish Gambino: The Romantic

In my earlier discussion of the Black male rapper archetype, I explicated on the connection between Romanticism and the Black body, but what does this connection look like when it is materialized into rap? Childish Gambino, as a Black Romantic, seeks to unpack this question through his critical explorations of ruin and his beginnings as a Byronic Hero. For Gambino, the ruin is intimate, pervading, and suffocating. His Black body performing the heuristic knowledge of a ruin mirrors his commentary on the idea of love itself being a ruin, and not just interpersonal love, but abstract love such as a love for work or a love for freedom. These ideas are in critical conversation with Lord Byron's Romantic probing on love as a metaphysical site of ruin and the paradoxical tethering that can arise from the loss of love. At the beginning of his career, Glover constructed Gambino as a Byronic Hero to understand the ontological site of fracture and its manifestations on the Black condition. In this chapter, I will argue Byron's importance as a mediating figure between Gambino and Romanticism and show how certain Romantic qualities help us understand Gambino as a Byronic Hero. To understand Gambino's Romantic trajectory, we must first explore his beginnings as a Byronic Hero before we consider his philosophical maturation into the philosopher-king he currently projects.

The Black Byronic Hero

The Byronic Hero, named after Lord Byron, is a variant of the Romantic Hero whose features and characteristics are defined by those of Byron's characters and the writer himself. Byron's personal life and poetry inform the defining characteristics of the Byronic Hero archetype, so before we can use Byron as a mediating figure between Romanticism and Childish

Gambino, we must spend some time discussing these defining characteristics and their applicability to Gambino's poetry. In his text *Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, Peter L. Thorslev Jr. describes the Byronic Hero as a lover of "music or poetry" and "courteous toward women" with a "strong sense of honor, and carries about with him like the brand of Cain a deep sense of guilt."[114] Gambino's status as a rapper fulfills his love of both music and poetry, and I would argue, given its prevalence in his music and philosophy, his sense of duty and obligation to his family and the Black community reflects a Byronic sense of honor. The guilt that Thorslev Jr. assigns to the Byronic Hero is interesting to think about because there is a moment in *Because the Internet's* "V. 3005" that displays Gambino's deep guilt and his thoughtful approach towards women:

> Assassins are stabbed in the back of my cabin
> Labrador yapping, I'm glad that it happened, I mean it
> Between us, I think there's something special, and if I lose my mental
> Just hold my hand, even if you don't understand, hold up (Glover, verse 2)[115]

One key piece of knowledge to bring in here when we analyze the above passage is to know that Childish Gambino is part of the "assassins"[116] being referenced here, as the word is reflecting Gambino's self-description in *Sick Boi's* "Assassins," when he raps, "Ah, ah, you can call me assassin." (Glover, verse 3)[117] In this passage, we can see Gambino is glad his killers stabbed him in the back of his cabin, but why? If he has such a special person in his life, why be at peace with losing that and being killed in such a treacherous manner? I suspect the answer is the guilt embedded within Gambino that he needs to release. The source of such guilt could be Gambino's

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[114] See Peter L. Thorslev Jr., *Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, University of Minnesota Press, 1962. p. 8
[115] Childish Gambino, "V. 3005," Track 9 on Because the Internet, Glassnote Records, 2013, CD.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Childish Gambino feat. DC Pierson and Nick Packard, "Assassins," Track 11 on Sick Boi, Glassnote Records, 2008, CD.

inability to reconcile relationships with family members (which I'll discuss in a later chapter) or the fleeting nature of his time here on Earth, a detail he makes multiple references to such as in *Culdesac's* "The Last," when he laments, "I'm here for a good, not a long, time" (Glover, verse 1)[118] and "Fuck it All," "Bright lights, they tend to burn out fast/ So I shine bright, but I'm scared that it won't last." (Glover, verse 1)[119] This guilt runs deep in Gambino, and while he may not explicitly state its origins, it does manifest itself in Gambino being a "fatal lover,"[120] another Byronic Hero characteristic Thorslev Jr. discusses in his text. Synthesizing the Byronic Hero's qualities reveals its embodiment of division: the Byronic Hero is divided from himself and society, preferring to be a traveler, by choice or necessity, outside of his own culture and community. Therein lies a palpable connection between the Byronic Hero and the American Negro, to invoke Du Bois: their "twoness."[121] The Byronic Hero divided from himself and society mirrors the "two warring ideals" and "two unreconciled strivings"[122] of the American Negro. Thus, the American Negro and Byronic Hero's body can be a conjunction of social and psychological division, behaving as animated vessels containing internally opposing forces. Connecting the Byronic Hero to the American Negro is how we arrive at Childish Gambino and his Romantic explorations into his Black body as a ruin.

As a literary scholar, Gambino does not project Romanticism into rap, he projects rap into Romanticism. By positioning Gambino in his early years as a Byronic Hero, Glover seeks to probe the archetype as the result of a historical lineage and an ontological form that characters and people fall into. If Gambino's probing is true, then we must ask ourselves if the Byronic

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[118] Childish Gambino, "The Last," Track 15 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[119] Childish Gambino, "Fuck it All," Track 11 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[120] Thorslev Jr., *Byronic Hero*, p. 8
[121] Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, p. 4
[122] Ibid.

Hero is a psychological or historical problem: Gambino argues it is both. The song "Fuck it All" details this argument in length: the song's hook is his thesis that summarizes his Byronic qualities before he explicates his argument with his verses. The hook's repetition of the same four lines:

> I ain't gonna be around forever, so fuck it all
> Seeing all this pussy, I'mma fuck it all
> Fly around the world, eating good, drinking alcohol
> You ain't nothing like me, nigga, not at all
> I ain't gonna be around forever, so fuck it all
> Seeing all this pussy, I'mma fuck it all
> Fly around the world, eating good, drinking alcohol
> You ain't nothing like me, nigga, not at all (Glover, hook)[123]

These lines demonstrate Gambino's repetition compulsion and his psychological instability. He knows his time on this Earth is limited, but instead of wallowing in his misery, he directs this existential energy into his ambition to achieve what he can while he can. The repetition of the hook's quatrain reflects Gambino in a state of existential acknowledgement, mourning that his Black body is a ruin and his personal experiences only exasperate his ruination. "Fly[ing] around the world, eating good, drinking alcohol"[124] seems to be a rejection of his vulnerability. Rather than participating in actions that could potentially subside his ruination, he decides to bathe in the splendor and comfort of earthly desires. The song's first verse chronicles the story of Gambino's ruination and the possible origins of his deep-seated guilt:

> Ex-girlfriend on my mind, she really fucked me up
> Doing shots of whiskey 'til my friends are saying, 'That's enough.'
> I really really miss her, sometimes I wanna fuck it all
> Mix some warm Guinness with 20 tablets of Tylenol

[123] Childish Gambino, "Fuck it All," Track 11 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[124] Ibid.

> Call 'em while I'm drifting off, tell her that I love her so
> Parents crying harder cause I didn't even leave a note
> Saying that I'm selfish and I'm sorry that I left
> But it hurts so much to wake up and I left you guys a check
> Cause I ain't fucking happy, you don't know shit about me
> I think it started when she said she happier without me
> I really can't blame her cause I'm happier without me
> I don't see what girls are seeing when they say they're all about me
> I'm scared they wanna trap me, these hoes are all liars
> I double bag my shit and never cum while I'm inside her
> I used to be a sweet dude, now I'm so angry
> Look at what these girls and these fake niggas made me
> Cry when I'm writing, I don't really know why
> I think its cause I can't really see myself an old guy
> And that scares me, I wanna be around a while
> But I feel my purpose goes beyond having raised a child
> Bright lights, they tend to burn out fast
> So I shine bright, but I'm scared that it won't last (Glover, verse 1)[125]

Gambino's construction reveals a fractured relationship between his exteriority and interiority much like how Byron's exterior projects an image of vitality and power despite his internal and physiological ruination. In *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, the Modalities of Fragmentation*, Thomas McFarland contends, "incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin— the diasparactive triad— are at the very center of life" and that a "phenomenological analysis of existence reveals this with special clarity."[126] Such a triad constitutes forces that empower each other due to their destructive nature: McFarland's term "diasparaction," meaning "to rend in pieces," is a suffocating violence leaving ruin in its wake and fragmenting the complete "once-was" into an incomplete subject. From its devastating effects on his psyche, we can see Gambino's introspection on his past relationships with women as a ruinating force

[125] Ibid.
[126] See Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, the Modalities of Fragmentation*, Princeton University Press, 1981. p. 5

empowering his fragmentation and feelings of incompleteness: the ex-girlfriend and other female figures on his mind enable his sorrow, suicidal tendencies, and longing to reassemble the fragments of their shattered relationships. In addition to displaying the division embedded within the Byronic Hero, Gambino also taps into the Byronic precedent of love being an ontological site of ruin. Seeing as the verse is written as a possible future that Gambino has yet to actualize, perhaps the palpability of his guilt stems from his desire to commit suicide without so much as leaving a note for his parents and his anger towards them for not understanding the totality of his psychological instability. Another contributor could be Gambino's selfishness that he exudes through this hypothetical suicidal act and his pursuit of earthly desires to remedy his pain. The lyric "I really can't blame her cause I'm happier without me"[127] continues to illustrate Gambino's suffering but also reveals a possible disconnect between Gambino and Glover: if Gambino is the metaphysical vessel to store Glover's valences, trauma, and haunting, then perhaps being too close to these forces had become too much for Glover to handle. It seems to me that McFarland's model applies not only to an individual's psychological fitness, but also to the unconscious connection between poet and persona. Gambino's lyrics are a testament to the diasparactive triad being a weapon strong enough to alter both body and mind and the unconscious connection tethering poet and persona together. Whereas the song's hook is a rejection of vulnerability, the song's first verse is a detailed explication, a narrative contrast speaking to the depth of Gambino's psychological instability. By exemplifying the Byronic Hero in our contemporary moment, Gambino compels the Black male rapper into the Romantic archive, thus advancing the Romantic Hero tradition and its connection to the Black body. The Byronic precedent of conceptualizing love as a ruin, another Romantic conceptualization

[127] Childish Gambino, "Fuck it All," Track 11 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.

connecting Gambino to Byron, must be discussed if we are to understand how Gambino views love and lyrically positions it as a ruin.

Love as a Ruin

In songs such as "I'm Alright" and "These Girls," Gambino frames love as a painful and haunting endeavor that is destined to end in ruin. Ironically, it is this same ruin that provides a grounding Gambino uses to launch and land as he explores the interpersonal tethering created by the loss of love. To Byron, love "shows all changes—Hate, Ambition, Guile," that "betray no further than the bitter smile." (Byron, canto I, lines 231-232)[128] In this instance, love is a performative ruin that uses memory to connect the past and present. For Gambino and Byron, love exists as external and internal ruined entity with enough agency to reveal its multiple layers by itself. In his experience as a Black male rapper, Gambino complicates Byron's explications by conjoining love with haunting, mourning, and new world blackness.

Because of its extreme relevance to Gambino's intellectual engagement with Byron, we will take a deep dive into *Culdesac's* "These Girls" to determine how Gambino constructs love as a ruin and its ability to affect his psychological landscape. Sonically, "These Girls" explores subfragmentation and haunting through the tonality of its female singers, who represent a ghostly collective of Gambino's failed romantic relationships. The song's narrative paints a forlorn and introspective story oscillating between the material and spectral: Gambino uses physical locations like a party, apartment, and bed to ground listeners in accessible, familiar spaces before taking them into the spectral world. When Gambino sings, "These girls are on my mind"

[128] See Lord Byron, *The Corsair,* Whitefriars, 1814. canto I, lines 231-232

(Glover, verse 1)[129] in the first verse he is foreshadowing the subfragmentation process the observer will learn of in the chorus. The song's spectrality is strongest in its chorus, demonstrating an oscillation between the metaphysical and the psychological:

> These girls have all the best of me
> I bet that I will lose it all
> These girls have all the best of me
> I bet that I will lose it all
> I know this thing will never last
> I need to tear it all apart
> These girls have all the best of me
> I bet that I can lose it all (Garfunkel & Oates, chorus)[130]

To me, the collection of intimate relationships Gambino has accrued form a conceptual graveyard where crumbling tombstones mark the sites of loss and lack, and the ghosts of his lovers lurk in mournful perpetuity. The addition of more tombstones and ghosts within this metaphysical graveyard is a testament to Gambino's repetition compulsion and how he chooses to confront loss and decay. Garfunkel & Oates' high-pitched singing is a sonic indicator that a haunting is taking place, revealing the "Hate, Ambition, [and] Guile"[131] cumulated throughout Gambino's relationships with these women. In this way, Garfunkel & Oates become Sirens, luring Gambino in with their song before they flood his psyche with a maelstrom of trauma, memories, and visions of ruin. I believe this is a perfect moment to employ Gordon's social explications of a ghost as "not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure,"[132] in Gambino's case, a figure representing his estranged love interests and their social positionality.

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[129] Childish Gambino feat. Garfunkel & Oates, "These Girls," Track 14 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Lord Byron, *The Corsair,* canto I, lines 231-232
[132] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. 6

The social implications of Gambino's haunting are detailed in the song's second verse, in which Gambino's self-awareness reveals his acceptance of his ruination:

> I wanna be alone, I wanna be alone
> This fame and fortune shit shows me things I wasn't knowin'
> You're my biggest fan, I promise to be there
> I wanna be that guy, but I don't think I can
> I'm losing everything, I wanna let it go
> I wanna take it right and slow because (Glover, verse 2)[133]

The confluence of Gambino's social and romantic strife leads the listener to that "dense site where history and subjectivity make social life:"[134] a place where the spectral and material collide. As a living archive and as a Black body, Gambino's relationship with haunting and ghosts is already intimate and pervasive, but when they are conjoined with love's ruinating power, they become their own overwhelming microclimate. Now it is not just the material and spectral danger imposed upon the Black body he must navigate, but also love's diasparactive forces capable of leaving their own disastrous imprints upon his being. The ghosts of Gambino's failed relationships are just "one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there" makes itself "known or apparent to us, in its own way."[135] "I'm losing everything, I wanna let it go"[136] is a direct referent to an ontological "once-was," a previous psychological and temporal past Gambino is losing access to, and the "now-is," the temporal present where subliminal and diasparactive forces are imbuing Gambino's ghosts with power. For Gambino, love is a catalyst to diasparaction, so he can only overcome its ruination and ghostly enforcers by accepting loss as an entry point into a relationship. Paradoxically, the lack of a relationship becomes Gambino's connection to the relationship, producing a spectral bridge barely visible

[133] Childish Gambino feat. Garfunkel & Oates, "These Girls," Track 14 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[134] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. 6
[135] Ibid.
[136] Childish Gambino feat. Garfunkel & Oates, "These Girls," Track 14 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.

between Gambino and his ghosts. His poetic display of Black lineage, a lineage of ruin, is a display of what Saidiya Hartman asserts is a "violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise...an asterisk in the grand narrative of history."[137] Like Hartman, Gambino recognizes how the Black body is a "violated body"[138] suffering from inherited traumas and diasparaction, but the reparative function of Gambino's suffering comes from his insistence on hope for the Black beautiful. By rebelling against the ruination he inherits from his lineage and the subliminal forces embedded within his new world blackness, Gambino reformulates history to imagine a better Black future. Armed with an extensive literary repertoire, Glover is rap's prime vehicle to legitimize its Romantic characteristics: using Gambino as a case study materializes the Byronic Hero into a concrete body and illuminates its humanity. Like Byron, Glover blurs the line between human and literary construct: he is the one rapper whose "hero was his poetry, or whose poetry existed for his hero."[139] Politically and economically motivated by revolution, Glover's philosophical departure from his Byronic Hero explorations signaled a rebirth of his Childish Gambino persona. While Gambino's embodiment of the Byronic Hero archetype set an ontological course towards ruin and disaster, his maturation into a philosopher-king redirected this course towards greatness within the American cultural pantheon.

[137] McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," p. 16
[138] Ibid.
[139] Thorslev Jr., *Byronic Hero*, p. 4

IV. Childish Gambino: The Marxist

The critical undercurrent embedded within Donald Glover's proletarian background has its roots in Black Marxism and surrealism, two schools I have observed him frequently employ in his discography and his television show *Atlanta*. Born into the Black proletariat, Childish Gambino was subjugated to the class struggles resulting from the economic and necropolitical constraints following the wake of slavery. Glover's southern upbringing reveal crucial conflicts that arise at the intersection of race and class: after centuries of disenfranchisement and dehumanization, modern Black bodies are haunted by spectral objecthood and the antiblack singularity that persists in American economic spheres. In describing his proletarian past, Childish Gambino paints the picture of a Black man wielding the power of his labor to overcome the economic and political barriers reinforced by the marginalization of Black bodies. As a direct descendant of slaves lacking a personhood recognized by the hegemony and its moral economy, Childish Gambino weaponizes the freedom a successful Black male rapper can achieve into an economic blueprint for the Black community to follow. To combat the rampant commodification and objectification of Black bodies throughout American history, and particularly within the American music industry, Childish Gambino seeks to empower the Black community to reclaim the power of their labor and take a collective turn towards economic mobility.

The Proletariat's Champion

Charting Gambino's economic ascension reveals Glover's acute awareness of the freedom rap can provide but also reinforces the stark reality that rappers can only uplift their communities if they have the economic capital to do so. Throughout his discography, Glover

establishes his proletariat origins as the basis of his economic argument that for Black bodies to achieve economic mobility, they must know that "black freedom is embedded within an economy of race and violence."[140] In *Royalty's* "We Ain't Them," Gambino details how his great grandfather achieved the highest level of freedom a Black body can obtain within the economic constraints of slavery ("My great granddad bought his own freedom/ Walk barefoot to Virginia to start his own peanut farm" Glover, Verse 1)[141] to reference the mathematical violence present in Sharpe and McKittrick's work. Amidst the antiblack singularity and ontological terror of slavery, Gambino's great grandfather was able to ascend from the economic positionality of "product" into the fluid social positionality of "human." From members of his family, Gambino heard firsthand of his great grandfather's subliminal existence as a slave and his transition from the designation of nonperson and property into a Black body with limited human and economic rights. Buying his freedom only meant Gambino's great grandfather was safe from being enslaved by his previous master, so as he journeyed to Virginia, he did so knowing the ever-present danger that he could have been trapped, relocated, and sold into slavery in another location. This commonplace practice was a phenomenon known as the Reverse Underground Railroad, empowered by the Fugitive Slave Acts passed by Congress. Active in the decades between the American Revolution and the Civil War, the Reverse Underground Railroad was a microeconomy built on kidnapping runaway slaves and free Black people, transporting them to slave states, and selling them as slaves or occasionally getting a reward for the return of a runaway slave.[142] The antiblack singularity pervading American institutions meant the Black body was never safe and never fully human, which makes Gambino's great grandfather's story

[140] McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," p. 17
[141] Childish Gambino, "We Ain't Them," Track 2 on Royalty, Glassnote Records, 2012, CD.
[142] See Carol Wilson, *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865*, University Press of Kentucky, 1994. p. 1

that much more impressive and inspirational. As impressive as his great grandfather's experience is, Gambino knows the contemporary Black body is still constrained by economic inequality and the exploitation of the products and labor it produces. Economic freedom, as Gambino argues, must be forcefully taken from America's white supremacist institutions and the predominant culture that reinforces these institutions' economic power.

The idea and materialization of freedom is a recurring theme in Gambino's music and critical explications because he recognizes the Black proletariat cannot gain true economic freedom without its legal and material freedom being established regardless of the prevailing hegemony. His ecopolitical position is founded upon his negotiation with economic and necropolitical forces, where he advocates the Black community taking the status of subject versus waiting for the status of subject to be granted to them. In the same 2014 interview with the Breakfast Club, Gambino is asked by Charlamagne the God about the meaning of freedom and its relation to whiteness:

> *Charlamagne the God*: "On Twitter, you said, 'I want to be a white rapper.' You said, 'I want to be so white I'm the biggest rapper of all time…What if this works for everyone and everyone can experience this whiteness and this bigness.' What did it mean?"
>
> *Childish Gambino*: "It was a poem about freedom…art is supposed to be a conversation. When was the last time somebody was mad about a poem? I did that. That poem is about freedom…We always want to be human because we are, but the truth is we aren't because they won't let us. We have 400 years of data saying they're not gonna let us. I know my purpose…I'm fighting for real and I'm fighting to quantify our worth. Like when they shoot us in the streets basically they're saying like you're not worth anything and we have 400 years of data we see what happens every time. So I'm here just being like, "Yeah, I'm gonna wear this, I'm gonna do exactly what I want to do. I'm gonna say this on Twitter, Black Twitter can get mad, white people can get mad, I don't care. I gotta be me because I got to quantify my worth."[143]

[143] Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, "Breakfast Club Classic: Childish Gambino A.K.A. Donald Glover On White Privilege & Twitter Activism."

Note the emphasis here on the collective pronoun *"we."* The "400 years of data"[144] Gambino refers to is the history of the Black body in America; the short phrase is a quick summary of the extreme acts of racial violence, the malicious antiblack methodology pervading American institutions, the responsibility for living Black bodies to perform wake-work, and other ontological elements that encapsulate the Black experience in the United States. When Gambino's great grandfather bought his own freedom, he did so to be recognized as human and leave a legacy that would be granted some form of social and economic legitimacy. When enslaved Black bodies are branded as property, occupying space in logs and ledgers as a commodity, they function as living economic products. Their value in economic spheres of exchange and technologies is their blackness and the generations of labor they can provide as biological entities. As a slave, Gambino's great grandfather's economic worth was fundamentally founded upon his blackness and exploited labor, so as a free Black man he had to establish a new avenue to prove his economic value within America's racialized capitalism. As he walked "barefoot to Virginia to start his own peanut farm,"[145] Gambino's great grandfather still carried with him an inescapable legacy of economic objecthood because the legacy of Black in America is a legacy of the object. Within this legacy is a well of economic and material violence that persisted through the wake of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, leading to the economic inequality Black bodies like Gambino and his family must navigate to survive. This intergenerational exploitation and marginalization of the Black body are the "400 years of data"[146] Gambino uses to make his sociopolitical and phenomenological observations. "I know

[144] Ibid.
[145] Childish Gambino, "We Ain't Them," Track 2 on Royalty, Glassnote Records, 2012, CD.
[146] Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, "Breakfast Club Classic: Childish Gambino A.K.A. Donald Glover On White Privilege & Twitter Activism."

my purpose…I'm fighting for real and I'm fighting to quantify our worth"[147] is the thesis of Gambino's economic stance: from his traumatic childhood and experience as a Black man, he recognizes the rampant commodification and objectification of Black bodies throughout American history and knows rappers must spearhead the movement to empower the Black community.

As discussed in a previous chapter, Gambino's childhood was stricken by economic instability, an instability symptomatic of American capitalism methodically seeking to disenfranchise Black bodies. In *Camp's* opening track "Outside," Gambino depicts his family's struggles to establish the lack of economic opportunity in the Stone Mountain area afforded to Black bodies: in the first verse he recounts his father's economic hardship, "My dad works nights, putting on a stone face/ He's saving up so we can get our own place/ In the projects, man that sounds fancy to me" (Glover, verse 1)[148] and in the second verse, his mother's, "Yeah, Dad lost his job, mama worked at Mrs. Winner's/ Gun pulled in her face, she still made dinner/ "Donald watch the meter so they don't turn the lights off." (Glover, verse 2)[149] From Gambino's description, clearly Donald Sr.'s career as a postal worker bothers him to an observable degree, whether that be because of difficulty, stress, or some other aspect that complicates his relationship to his work. "Putting on a stone face"[150] elicits a poignant and powerful image of Donald Sr. performing alienated labor, which is concurrent with Marx's explications that all labor under capitalism is alienating. A worker with a "stone face"[151] is hardly a happy worker or one that reaps somewhat moderate rewards from their labor, and yet Donald Sr. presses on

[147] Ibid.
[148] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.

because of his responsibility to his wife and children. Night after night he works, saving up so his family can get their own place, which could be a possible thematic connector to *Culdesac's* "The Last" when Gambino raps, "Mama couldn't take it, sold the place and got us out of there/ Guest room, now the six of us splitting one with a restroom." (Glover, verse 1)[152] Even with two incomes, Beverly and Donald Sr. can only hope to afford a place in the projects. The "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mantra is a white fantasy unavailable and unattainable to the Black nuclear family. Sadly, Donald Sr. was just another cog waiting to be cut, as Gambino depicts in his second verse when Donald Sr. loses his job. In three lines, Gambino weaves together a powerful microcosm of the Black experience in the United States and further cements Beverly's incredible strength as a Black woman and mother. With Stone Mountain being the site of the Ku Klux Klan's rebirth, and Atlanta one of the most segregated cities in America, the opportunity and infrastructure to support families like Gambino's is laughable and virtually non-existent.[153] The Black proletariat knows the lack of resources and support is by design because, as Gambino says, we "have 400 years of data"[154] to support what the Black collective already knows. When Black families like Gambino only have enough energy and resources to survive, loftier goals such as obtaining political power or social mobility become almost unattainable. Even someone like Gambino didn't just "pull himself up from his bootstraps." He had to weaponize his intellectual capacity and ambition to take advantage of economic and academic opportunities unavailable to his parents. In the previously mentioned 2014 Breakfast Club interview, he was adamant in promoting what "Black people need more than anything is a

[152] Childish Gambino, "The Last," Track 15 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[153] See Nate Silver, "The Most Diverse Cities Are Often The Most Segregated," *FiveThirtyEight*, May 1, 2015, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-most-diverse-cities-are-often-the-most-segregated/
[154] Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, "Breakfast Club Classic: Childish Gambino A.K.A. Donald Glover On White Privilege & Twitter Activism."

chance to fail."[155] He cites the reason why he's been able to succeed the way that he has is because he's "never had a chance to fail."[156] Despite the road to new economic heights now being brighter for Gambino than ever before, his economic status did not just immediately change because he moved out of Stone Mountain. While in New York, Gambino faced an even greater pressure to succeed and demonstrate his worth as a Black body easily commodified and exploited in the music industry.

Upon his arrival in New York, Gambino developed the confidence to wield the power of his labor and actualize his ascension towards becoming the Black proletariat's champion. Despite the new level of freedom he was unable to find in the South, Gambino's economic struggles continued past Stone Mountain and into his new life in New York. While attending NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, Gambino worked as a Resident Assistant to mitigate the financial support he would need from his parents: RAs are granted housing and meal plans as payment for their services, leaving federal student aid or loans to pay for tuition and other school-related expenses. In *Culdesac's* "I'm On It," Gambino describes how even despite the economic mobility college may promise a Black individual, the reality is far from what it seems:

> Yeah, I used to be broke, no cash
> And them niggas played games, Road Rash
> Walking 'round NYU, looking for a dollar
> Too proud to ask my friends or my struggling father
> So I skate around the city for a couple hours (Glover, verse 2)[157]

As a Black college student trying to honor the sacrifice of his parents, Gambino would rather financially suffer in silence than look to cause more economic problems for his family or his friends. Here he was at NYU, trying to move past his trauma from Stone Mountain and achieve

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[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Childish Gambino, "I'm On It," Track 12 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.

his dreams, and yet, he is still broke, still stuck in the same economic sphere he was when he was a kid. Despite his academic and social upward trajectory, he is still alone, an economic outcast in a school where the net price of attendance is $40,336 and he is doing everything he can to keep the economic assistance he needs from his parents as low as possible.[158] Knowing his relationship to his parents and his awareness of their struggles, I would be willing to bet that skate session around the city was one centered on reflection and deep-seated pain. His sacrifice is a powerful rhetorical exercise in Black Marxism: Gambino consciously put himself in an economic disadvantage for the collective good, combining statesmanship, familial responsibility, and the awareness of the class positionality of those around him. The image of Gambino "Walking 'round NYU, looking for a dollar/ Too proud to ask my friends or my struggling father"[159] evokes the constant negotiation with economic forces that plague the Black rapper. Despite Gambino attributing this choice of not seeking help to pride, the harsh reality is that he had no choice. He knows the incredible economic instability his parents are embroiled in back home and his peers may be just as economically disadvantaged as he is, and yet, he feels the need to attribute this moment to pride. In *Camp's* second track "Fire Fly," he recounts another experience of financial hardship reflective of his class positionality:

> Skateboardin' down at Washington Square
> Lookin' for quarters
> Maybe afford a falafel for dinner, uh
> I'm so broke man, scholarship apologin' (Glover, verse 1)[160]

[158] "New York University," Forbes, accessed March 21, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/colleges/new-york-university/?sh=2f173c4e5de6
[159] Childish Gambino, "I'm On It," Track 12 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[160] Childish Gambino, "Fire Fly," Track 2 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.

There are several distinct commonalities between the moment in "Fire Fly" and the moment in "I'm On It" that reveal a larger truth of the Black body's quest to achieve economic agency, but what is imperative to note is that separating these commonalities from the Black body's history in America as an object is impossible. As a Black body living in the wake of slavery and a descendant of an enslaved African, Gambino sought to use college (an incredibly prestigious one at that) as a launching point to combat the Black body's lineage in what Cedric J. Robinson describes as "chattel in their economic image, as slaves in their political and social image, as brutish and therefore inaccessible to further development, and finally as Negro, that is without history."[161] Robinson's use of the word "history"[162] is not conventionally Marxist; instead, he reminds us that Black bodies have been erased from it. Robinson's use of the word is a pointed marker to the erasure of historical legitimacy granted to the Black body in America and this erasure's effect on the power the Black body can exert to overcome its ontological station. Again, we are brought to the "400 years of data"[163] Gambino uses as evidence for his economic criticism and observations, a criticism that is centered on the collective economic uplifting of the Black community.

A Road to Freedom

As a construct, Childish Gambino embodies Black economic mobility. Despite growing up poor and suffering from many dire economic situations, he was able to use rap as a vehicle to

[161] See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, University of North Carolina Press, 1983. p. 187
[162] Ibid.
[163] Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, "Breakfast Club Classic: Childish Gambino A.K.A. Donald Glover On White Privilege & Twitter Activism."

ascend into the Black bourgeoise and build intergenerational wealth. Charting Gambino's economic ascension reveals Glover's acute awareness of the freedom that rap provides but reinforces the stark reality that rappers can only uplift their communities if they have the economic capital to do so. Such is the Black Marxist dilemma: how does a Black body ascend American economic and social ladders while evading the bourgeoise's intoxicating and encapsulating grasp? The character of Gambino's activism answers this question in the form of a collective register: in the same 2014 interview with the Breakfast Club, he proclaims the "job as young Blacks in this country is to show our worth" and that the Black community has to "take ownership of what we do, which is build culture."[164] Having a background in dramatic writing, Glover shares with Marxism a keen attention to class and collective agency that is never centered around the individual, but instead around the collective strength of a community. As a Black leader, Gambino exhibits his active understanding of class relations in his proclamation that his "job right now is to make sure that other kids feel like they can do whatever they want."[165] From his privileged position as a member of the Black bourgeoise, Gambino recognizes his communal responsibility and the power he can exert over his listeners to achieve positive change.

In the 2014 Breakfast Club interview and on his mixtape *Royalty,* Gambino stresses the need for the Black proletariat to become aware of how their labor and culture is commodified and exploited within America's racial capitalism. He argues that the Black proletariat, at the intersection of class and race, must collectively look to change the prevailing social structure to acquire agency and economic opportunities. In the *Royalty* track "Black Faces," Gambino raps:

> People wrestle over petty cash
> When we should be really cryin' over that one percent

[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.

> Like we tipped a milk glass
> Fuck y'all, I'ma let my grandkids ball (Glover, verse 2)[166]

With this quatrain, Gambino orients the class conversation toward the collective register. According to him, even in the midst of American capitalism running rampant, a community-centered rhetoric must be at the forefront of Black revolution. Therein lies the "danger" of the Black male rapper construct: with such a focus on individual success, how can rappers as a collective empower their communities within a society still pushing towards Black disenfranchisement and commodification? Gambino's answer is predicated upon fundamentally changing the Black community's economic mindset: instead of fighting over "petty cash" the Black community needs to challenge and dismantle the "one percent"[167] that predominantly controls American wealth. In *Camp's* "Outside," Gambino again pleads to his listeners to understand the importance of community, saying, "The truth is we still struggle on a different plane/ 7 dollars an hour, WIC vouchers, it's all the same." (Glover, verse 1)[168] Gambino knows to achieve a collective economic identity there must be an active individual awareness of the systemic and meticulous disenfranchisement of Black bodies. Once an active awareness is perpetuated within the Black collective's economic pedagogy, then we can move forward to fulfilling our social and civic responsibilities to each other as a community.

[166] Childish Gambino feat. Nipsey Hussle, "Black Faces," Track 2 on Royalty, Glassnote Records, 2012, CD.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.

V. Childish Gambino: The Philosopher King

By fulfilling his lyrical prophecies and transcending the brutalities embedded within his craft, Childish Gambino becomes Plato's philosopher-king: a leader proving his claim to the throne through his weaponization of intelligence, philosophy, and guardianship. At the top of the Platonic political and social structure stands the philosopher-king who is selected to rule because of his high qualifications and godlike characteristics. In this chapter, I will argue Childish Gambino's accomplishments, artistry, and flaws perform the same function as these godlike characteristics because he grounds the position of a philosopher-king in an accessible and recognizable form. Detailing how Childish Gambino exudes a Black philosopher-king is vitally important to legitimizing the literary history of the Black male rapper archetype and Gambino's heuristic purpose: to provide an intellectual construct that empowers Black bodies to achieve economic mobility, social acceptance, and philosophical enlightenment. To the Black community, Childish Gambino's ascension to philosopher-king is a transcendent contemporary moment of resistance against the resurgence of white nationalism/ethno-nationalism under the banner of Trumpism and a triumphant model of Black reclamation in the age of Black Lives Matter and police militarization. To accurately position Childish Gambino as a philosopher-king, we should first explore how America's ghettos function as a modern manifestation of Plato's allegorical 'cave' and the re-education needed within the Black community to lead others out of its psychological grasp.

The Ghetto as Plato's 'Cave'

Before he conceptualizes the "cave" in *The Republic*, Plato orients the reader to understand the importance of education and the "nature"[169] of the people dwelling in the cave. In the preface of his translation, Allan Bloom emphasizes the significance of Plato's use of the term "nature," writing "*nature* is *the* standard for Plato," which should come as no surprise given Plato's philosophical probing of how human "nature"[170] accounts for the cave dwellers' existential dread of what lies outside. To transpose Plato's term onto the Black body's ontological and psychological constraints in American ghettos we must recognize the difference of a nature assigned to a body versus the nature a body exudes from its essence. Throughout American history, the Black body has been designated as "*naturally* violent and less-than-human,"[171] but this is not the nature the Black body exudes from its inherent blackness. Instead, this is an assigned nature embedded within the prevailing antiblack culture to associate the Black body with being criminal and "worthy of violation."[172] When we consider the Black body's experience in the Platonic cave, we must keep in our minds that the ghetto is not only a physical space, a la the Comptons, the Decaturs, and the Bronxs of the world, but also a mindset, a system of beliefs in oneself and the world that needs reorientation for the collective and individual good. We must keep this consideration of the Black body's nature in the forefront of our rhetorical encounter with Plato's description:

> 'Next, then,' I said, 'make an image of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind. See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in

[169] See Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, BasicBooks, 1968. p. xix
[170] Ibid.
[171] McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," p. 17
[172] Ibid.

> bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets.'[173]

Since the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Black bodies have had their "legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around."[174] On the slave ships, these bonds were made of chains and iron—in the ghetto, these bonds are psychological and socioeconomic, having mutated and grown in complexity to criminalize those in the ghetto and keep them imprisoned within their minds. This is precisely where Childish Gambino comes in as a force of education, using Plato's focus on re-education as the rhetorical mindset in which to engage with the 'cave' and its heuristic purpose.

If one of the primary goals of Black studies is to answer Sharpe's question, "What must we know in order to move through these environments in which the push is always toward Black death?"[175] then as Childish Gambino says, we must "go outside,"[176] beyond the geopolitical and socioeconomic confines of the ghetto to achieve the freedom we deserve by resisting the psychology of the ghetto. In an interview with *q on cbc*, Childish Gambino specifically references the Platonic cave, telling the interviewer that he is "on the outside, like the allegory of the cave."[177] Sharpe describes the push toward Black death as an all-encompassing climate, but Gambino reminds us we can go outside the ghetto as a psychology. Therein lies the ontological conflict of those, like Childish Gambino, that leave the cave:

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[173] Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, p. 193
[174] Ibid., p. 193
[175] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p. 106
[176] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.
[177] q on cbc, "Childish Gambino brings 'Because the Internet' to Studio Q," YouTube Video, 27:44, April 8, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhBntF0q6jY

> It's weird, you think that they'd be proud of 'em
> But when you leave the hood
> They think that you look down on 'em
> The truth is we still struggle on a different plane
> 7 dollars an hour, WIC vouchers, it's all the same (Glover, verse 1)[178]

If hostility and resistance is to be expected for the cave-dweller that leaves the ghetto, then the re-education of those remaining in the cave must be executed through a language they will accept and hear, the "hood shit"[179] Gambino previously knew nothing about until he mastered the language. This is the reason why Gambino's explications are rapped, for rap is the language of the hood in which to critically encounter its stark reality and re-educate the cave's occupants to venture into the world outside. For Black bodies, the light "burning far above and behind them"[180] is the Black beautiful, the hope for a future where Black is perpetuated as equal and free from its spectral objecthood. However, this hope can only be actualized from the road above the cave, and those determined to travel on it are startled by the increasing pressure of their fellow travelers' demands to forget about those still in bondage. The disconnect Gambino describes in the couplet, "The truth is we still struggle on a different plane/ 7 dollars an hour, WIC vouchers, it's all the same,"[181] between those like him who left the cave and those still in it is based upon the economic opportunities afforded to those that leave the cave for the outside world and the perceived social hierarchy associated with these economic opportunities. The emotional conflict between those outside and inside the cave is a consequence of the perceived social hierarchy accompanying the economic opportunities outside the cave, a phenomenon Gambino references with the lines "It's weird, you think that they'd be proud of 'em/ But when you leave the hood/

[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, p. 193
[181] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.

They think that you look down on 'em." (Glover, verse 1)[182] The multiple levels of miscommunication that exists between these two ontological parties again brings us to the importance of re-education and the dismantling of the narrative that those that occupy the ghetto are all criminals and lowlifes that deserve to be exiled within it. The hook of *Camp's* "Outside" explains Gambino's methodology in steering the Black bodies still imprisoned in the ghetto to understand the need for re-education:

> There's a world we can visit if we go outside
> Outside, outside—we can follow the road
> There's a world we can visit if we go outside
> Outside, outside—no one knows (Glover, hook)[183]

The "road"[184] Gambino references is his manifestation of the road outside Plato's cave, a road within the spirit of the individual that connects them to their larger community. By grounding his re-education in the collective register, Gambino seeks to empower the Black community rather than participating in an individualistic pedagogy that would only benefit the few. Gambino's use of 'we' assumes a responsibility for the Black bodies that wish to follow in his footsteps, but Gambino knows before the Black community can visit the world outside of the ghetto, they must change their mindset and believe the road above will guide them. If an individual never believes that they can escape, then they can never materialize their escape into reality. Having experienced the freedom and enlightenment that comes with leaving the cave, Gambino urges members of the Black community, like his cousin, to fight against the ghetto's colonizing narrative:

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[182] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.

> Street took you over, I want my cousin back
> The world sayin' what you are because you're young and black,
> Don't believe 'em,
> you're still that kid who kept the older boys from teasin', for some reason (Glover, verse 2)[185]

Because the ghetto exists as both a physical space and a mindset, what Gambino refers to as the "street,"[186] it can infect the Black body's ontological undercommons when the nature of their blackness is designated as criminal and "*naturally* violent and less-than-human"[187] by the prevailing hegemony. Gambino knows the exterior forces acting upon the Black body seek to trap it within the ghetto so that "they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around,"[188] which is why he pleads with his cousin to turn away from the lifestyle and image the antiblack singularity wants to imprison him into. Upon his return visits to the cave, Gambino has seen how his cousin has changed and the violence that has entrenched itself into his heart. My previous analysis and detail on Glover's personal life has illustrated his belief in the power of family, so it should not be hard to see why Gambino values the relationship that is at stake between him and his cousin. The love between Gambino and his cousin has been malformed by trauma, but it can be saved if his cousin follows the road outside of his psychological prison. The ghetto lifestyle is the "lifestyle" Beverly references when she tells Gambino:

> She don't want me in a lifestyle like my cousin
> And he mad cause his father ain't around
> He lookin' at me now, like
> 'Why you so fuckin lucky? I had a father too
> But he ain't around so I'ma take it out on you'

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[185] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.
[186] Ibid.
[187] McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," p. 17
[188] Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, p. 193

> We used to say 'I love you,' now we only think that shit
> It feels weird that you're the person I took sink baths with (Glover, verse 2)[189]

When the default state of the Black body is ruin, it is vulnerable to haunting. The cave exists to exasperate haunting and further ruin the Black body, subjecting it to a subliminal existence where survival and individualism become the norm. Therein lies the importance of Gambino's magic: he seeks to use his unique management of forces to enlighten and heal his community against the necropolitical institutions that continue to marginalize and exploit the Black body. As a literary scholar, Gambino knows the Black revolution can only be realized by a proactive re-education that exposes the hidden systems of power haunting the Black body. Gambino's cousin cannot see the road ahead of his father's abandonment, and because of this he cannot materialize the emotional capacity to heal. If Gambino's cousin went outside of his loss, he could draw strength from his relationship with Gambino and realize he is still an integral part to a community that needs and values him.

Leaving the ghetto isn't necessary to actualize acts of Black revolution, for there will be Black bodies that refuse to leave the cave as an exercise of solidarity. However, those remaining must still maintain a proactive pedagogy. Rap's democratic nature and history as a Black creation make it the perfect vehicle to maintain this pedagogy and instill hope toward a future where Black is truly equal to white. If rap is the vehicle propelling us toward this future, then the spirit is the driver, the palpable force willing us forward when we seek to undo the antiblack singularity left in the wake of slavery. With "Outside's" outro, Gambino seeks to engage the spirit of those he hopes to re-educate and heal them:

> Can you hear me now?
> Can you hear me now?

[189] Childish Gambino, "Outside," Track 1 on Camp, Glassnote Records, 2011, CD.

Oh, help us Lord
Oh, I'm screamin' baby, baby, baby (Glover, outro)[190]

The background vocalists singing with Gambino move his spiritual engagement toward the collective register, where it can be heard by those willing to listen and seek enlightenment, the spiritual awakening one undergoes when they complete their re-education. Gambino knows before a collective enlightenment can be fostered and maintained within a community, individual enlightenment must be obtained and practiced as a conscious act. Gambino knows every Black body's road to enlightenment will be different, but re-education must be its Platonic "*nature*."[191] The teachings from his Jehovah Witness parents and his faith in himself empowers Gambino's educational nature and his conscious practice of enlightenment. It is in Gambino's nature to re-educate the Black bodies imprisoned in the cave because those that follow him out remind him that with enough re-education and faith, he will one day get his cousin back from the street.

The Philosopher-King

From my synthesis of Childish Gambino's childhood and literary heritage, I hoped to illustrate the accessibility embedded within his persona and its ability to promote community in multiple social and cultural spheres. Given the globalization of pop culture and the technological advancements that allow the wide distribution of information, I believe accessibility and relatability are imperative qualities a modern philosopher-king must have. In this section, we will conduct a careful explication of Glover and Gambino, as a single entity, converging the Platonic philosopher-king with the Black male rapper archetype within an American cultural context.

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[190] Ibid.
[191] Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, p. xix

Therefore, I look to enter the American power hierarchy through American pop culture and synthesize its relevancy with Gambino's cultural capital.

Given the ethnopolitical history of the United States and its complex systems of power, the Platonic power structure needs to be restructured if we are to be able to place a Black man like Childish Gambino as philosopher-king. According to Bloom, the Platonic power hierarchy is comprised of people "guarded by warriors who are obedient to guardians who are ultimately obedient to philosophers or who are philosophers themselves,"[192] meaning there are three levels to the Platonic hierarchy: the constituents at the bottom, above them the warriors that guard these constituents, and above the warriors the philosopher guardians. The philosopher guardian is the highest political order as there are "no guardians above the guardians; the only guardian of the guardians is a proper education."[193] If a "proper education"[194] is the only thing keeping the philosopher guardian in check, then we can analyze the veracity of a philosopher-king's regime by their pedagogy. This is precisely why I have spent so much time in this paper discussing Gambino's focus on re-education in all of its forms: if we synthesize his economic, social, racial, Romantic, and philosophical commentary and critiques, we will find his pedagogy is as comprehensive as it conscious and calculated. It would follow then, that such a comprehensive pedagogy reflects the "proper education"[195] a philosopher guardian must employ in their regime, but what makes Glover such a unique philosopher king is his use of rap as a pedagogical methodology. In this musical form, his philosophies are easily consumable and can be seamlessly distributed between his constituents. With such a smooth channel of communication,

[192] Ibid., p. 431-432
[193] Ibid., xvii
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.

his philosophies can be widely available without the need for institutions that could complicate or defile his message.

From the entry point of American pop culture, I can levy Gambino and Glover's accomplishments and philosophies to fit the characteristics of the philosopher-king and its qualities as a guardian. One of these characteristics, a "disposition at the same time gentle and great-spirited" is required, for "if a man lacks either of them, he can't become a good guardian."[196] This characteristic brings us back full circle to the importance of Childish Gambino's namesake: Gambino's childish and silly qualities could be described as "gentle" while his commanding management of his spirit would definitely qualify him as "great-spirited."[197] Another example of Gambino's great spirit is his rehabilitation of the "Gambino" name: while historically tied to the Gambino crime family, Glover's use of the name brings a new dimension and image to its legacy to provide a positive alternative to its negative perpetuity.

In discussing philosopher-king regimes, Socrates argues "regimes depend on men's virtues, not on institutions,"[198] which rings true if we think about the philosopher-king being an accessible monarch, a true man of his people. Such a man would allow his virtues to lead his monarchy, a set of virtues not every man could embody, but still strives to do so as a part of their civic duty. A philosophical moment in *Culdesac's* "Fuck it All" presents a potent correlation to Socrates' point:

> Not only have I changed, I'm becoming something better
> And revenge is for the weak, so I have settled my vendettas
> With all of the kids who made my early life a living hell

[196] Ibid., p. 52
[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid., p. xvii

And I hope you're doing well and feeling better 'bout yourself (Glover, verse 2)[199]

Despite all of the trauma that Gambino's childhood enemies put him through, he still wishes the best for them and makes a concerted effort to declare that he has no plans to seek revenge. For all of the violence Gambino suffered in Stone Mountain, it takes the grace of a king to turn the other cheek and be the example you expect your citizens to follow. Gambino knows that part of his claim to the throne depends upon his virtues and how he can embody them as a philosophical blueprint for his subjects. Glover voicing Simba in the remake of *The Lion King* should supplement his claim as a philosopher-king since Simba's political journey in the movie is predicated upon him rematerializing his father's ideal philosophies, philosophies that made him such a respected and just king. The connection between Glover and Simba should not be easily dismissed when we think about Glover's right to claim his kingdom, since there is the very real possibility Glover consciously chose to play Simba as a way to make his own philosophies receptive to a wider audience and to create a lasting association with a beloved monarch.

Glover's association with Simba offers an interesting and fun opportunity to examine the relationship between their virtues and how Simba supplements Glover's cultural significance. Glover's embodiment of Simba is an important cultural moment to unpack as it not only fulfills the lyrical prognostication found in Glover's songs "Difference," ("Chick on my left arm, she could write *The King and I*" Glover, verse 1)[200] and "Got This Money," (New fresh prince, you can chill in my castle" Glover, verse 2)[201] but it also completes his mission of becoming an American cultural paragon as a way to subvert hatred of Black bodies. When we consider *The*

[199] Childish Gambino, "Fuck it All," Track 11 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[200] Childish Gambino, "Difference," Track 1 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.
[201] Childish Gambino, "Got This Money," Track 4 on Culdesac, Glassnote Records, 2010, CD.

Lion King's philosophical implications it is easy to see Mufasa and Simba's virtues are, essentially, the *de facto* moral economy of the Pride Lands. One of Mufasa's emblematic quotes, "I'm only brave when I have to be,"[202] shows the careful consideration he gives before acting upon his virtues and ties in quite nicely to Gambino's lyric in *Royalty's* "We Ain't Them," when he asks, "And what's a leader if he isn't reluctant?" (Glover, verse 1)[203] The ability for a king to philosophize is, perhaps, the most defining characteristic of a philosopher king, as seen in Socrates' demand for "philosophers [to] rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize."[204] The first half of *The Lion King* is spent detailing Mufasa's philosophies and how Simba, as a king, must implement them within his regime for the good of his subjects. Given the Pride Land's power hierarchy, it is a political environment where "political power and philosophy coincide in the same place,"[205] meaning Simba is as much as a guardian as he is a philosopher.

While it could be debated if Glover has any substantial political power, he does indeed carry cultural and social power, which can still influence an individual's reception to philosophy. This cultural entry point is where Glover looks to enter the American power hierarchy and insert his philosophies; as shown by his economic critiques, his critical methodology is centered around seizing control of culture. By 'seizing control' of Simba, Glover establishes a relationship with a well-known example of a philosopher king and siphons some of Simba's cultural importance unto himself. The social clout that comes with his siphoning should then, in theory, allow for an exchange between Glover and Simba as connected entities. Therefore, if we continue this line of

[202] *The Lion King,* directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (1994; Walt Disney Pictures), DVD.
[203] Childish Gambino, "We Ain't Them," Track 2 on Royalty, Glassnote Records, 2012, CD.
[204] Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, p. 390
[205] Ibid.

reasoning, there should be an opportunity for Glover to insert some semblance of blackness into Simba and his cultural significance, thus providing an opportunity for Simba to legitimize blackness in the mainstream American consciousness. Glover accomplishes this legitimization by providing the voice of Simba, thus invoking the African oral tradition's power of speech. Considering Glover's philosophical objectives, I believe him inserting blackness into Simba is an attempt to dismantle the antiblack narratives perpetuated within American culture through a cultural icon that is already accepted and revered. In this way, Glover fulfills another characteristic of a clever guardian by being a clever thief, showing how a Black body can weaponize its intelligence to transcend the antiblack climate. Let's remind ourselves that the spoken word and its orator are inseparable, for the orator "*is* his word and his word bears witness to what he is."[206] Glover's active understanding and proficiency of the oral tradition enables him to direct his magic into Simba, an accessible and popular American icon imbued with a blackness Glover gave him. Because of Glover's magic, Simba can also be seen as a revolutionary Black figure forever embedded within the American mythos.

Claiming Lost Kingdoms (Conclusion)

From my research linking the Black male rapper archetype to the griot, I hope the public will be encouraged to appreciate rappers in a different light, perhaps one that heralds their intelligence or dedication to a rich culture that tried its best to survive one of the most depraved institutions we have seen in human history. As academics, we still have more work to do to bring rap into academic spaces and recognize rappers as important figures of the literary form. It was

[206] Ibid., p. 168

also my intent in this thesis to contribute to the current wave of pop culture scholarship and the advancement of hip-hop studies. By connecting rap with Romanticism (which seems to occupy such an exalted space in academia) hopefully this thesis illuminates the rich literary history of rap and different ways readers/listeners can encounter the material. In tying Gambino to the Byronic Hero archetype, I wanted to build off previous scholarship that explore the ability of human beings to become literary archetypes themselves and ground abstract and historical poetics into accessible examples.

Throughout this thesis we have explored the history of the Black male rapper archetype, Gambino's purpose as a literary construct, and Glover's ascension to Black philosopher-king, but the question remains: Where do we go from here? Synthesizing Gambino's accomplishments with his cultural relevancy should illustrate the literary legitimacy of the rap genre, but what does it actually *mean*? What does it concretely accomplish in our day-to-day lives? For many, like me, it gives Black bodies hope and strength to carry on despite overwhelming knowledge we could be the next Elijah McClain, Sandra Bland, or Willie McCoy. After all, the murders of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, and countless unnamed others forgotten in history are still ever-present necropolitical and racist acts of violence designed to keep the Black body in bondage. In case anyone forgot, Trump just left office three months ago. In the wake of the 2020 summer police shootings and prevalence of white supremacist rhetoric, I hope that my explications shed some light on the subliminal and traumatic experiences Black bodies go through. Being haunted and unable to reconcile your personal history as the descendants of objects and violated bodies is painful and something the Black community must wrestle with every day. Perhaps reading about the Black male rapper archetype's deep historical routes has empowered those who feel like they are missing a part of themselves because they do not have

access to their culture or family history. With that being said, it's vital that we remind ourselves that marginalized communities can still try to marginalize others themselves. As Gambino's experience growing up in Stone Mountain proves, there can always be interpersonal power struggles or conflicts that cause real damage to people, regardless of whether they're the same race or not. The more things change, the more they stay the same, but they don't have to.

I would also like to showcase the communal good of Black Marxism and echo a lot of Gambino's sentiments about the Black community recognizing how much power they have and their influence on world culture. Saying we build culture is not egotistical or an exaggeration; the Black man is the most copied man on the planet, bar none. Everybody wanna be a nigga, but nobody wanna be a nigga. Like Childish Gambino, I want Black kids to know their worth. I want them to know they matter. Whether they want to be a fireman, teacher, or massage therapist, they should have pride in trying to be the best version of themselves and support others in their attempts to do so. People can say slavery was over 150 years ago or the Civil Rights Movement was 60 years ago, but they don't understand that history is not just about what happened in the past, it's about right now. It's about ten years from now. We live in history, we *make* history.

What makes Gambino such a unique literary hero is his diverse fusion of cultural elements into a single commanding figure, a figure he actively empowers other Black bodies to become in their own way. Personally, Childish Gambino gave me the confidence to persevere when I had nothing left, when the weight of my own alienation and trauma became as suffocating as a noose. Before Childish Gambino, I thought I was the only one without a home, without a community, and all the things that connect us as humans. Figures like Gambino prove that the "freaks and geeks" of society deserve dignity and respect; that Black lives matter in an age where white mobs can still storm the streets and have a mass of sympathizers. This thesis

was written to add insight about the type of history Gambino has made and where else he can go from here. I believe when it's all said and done, between Glover's rap career, *Atlanta*, and his comedy, Donald Glover will go down as one of the most talented entertainers of any generation. If there is nothing else the reader takes from this thesis, I hope they know that Glover could only get here when started to believe in himself. Childish Gambino was always Donald Glover's destiny, and now it's up to us to fulfill ours.

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