IS THIS AMERICA?: HOW RHETORICAL VELOCITY AND RECOMPOSITION TURN MOVEMENTS INTO MEMES

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Recomposition has been widely discussed as complex and rhetorically sophisticated—but is it just? This essay examines three recompositions of a music video, Childish Gambino's "This Is America," to understand how justice and injustice are carried out through changes to form and content. Save a few cases, such recompositions appropriated the original for personal gain, in effect undermining Gambino's work to champion for marginalized communities. Ultimately, my analysis shows it is imperative that content creators learn what makes just and unjust recomposition. Rather than misappropriate important messages from marginalized groups, users should call out unjust recompositions when they see them.

On May 5, 2018, Childish Gambino published "This Is America" on social media platforms, and like a defibrillator, his video shocked many in the nation back into reality.[1] In the video, we witness Gambino, topless but donning a gray Confederate uniform bottom, in the role of a Sambo.[2] A violent streak is displayed in explicit, bloody scenes—some reminiscent of the police killings[3] and racially-motivated mass shootings[4] of the recent past. When Gambino's character is not causing destruction, he is frantically dancing about, sometimes with an entourage of schoolchildren, distracting the viewer from the chaos happening in the parking lot behind him. Through this act, Gambino reflects upon many themes, such as police brutality, gun violence, desensitization, and hyper-materialism. In the end sequence, Gambino runs away from the camera, trying to escape from media distraction and from desensitization to American violence. As viewers, we can infer that Gambino encourages us to run, too—towards active engagement in socio-political discourse both on and off the internet.

This ongoing conversation about the social and political treatment of media and race-based violence is the primary focus of this essay—in particular, how thousands of recompositions of "This Is America" joined the conversation, too. According to Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss, *recomposition* is a process of remixing and transforming one work into a work with different messages. Some recompositions upheld the messages behind "This Is America," while many others undermined the intent of the original. This undermining is a grave dilemma, particularly as it concerns social justice and antiracist discourse.[5] I argue that the

unjust recomposition of such an intricate, sociopolitical statement as "This Is America" has led to its influence being utilized by creators for personal gain. Moreover, I argue that these recompositions undermine the very message of racial justice that Gambino champions. I evaluate three such instances of recomposition, looking to determine whether they are just or unjust. While this paper examines justice in recomposition through Gambino's work, it ultimately aims to uplift the many Black content creators with much less influence than Gambino. Gambino had enough popularity and power for "This Is America" to reclaim and solidify its original intent as a sociopolitical statement at the 2019 Grammy Awards, but this power is not guaranteed to new and upcoming Black content creators on social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and of course, YouTube. Thus, this essay concludes that rhetors—from the most influential content creators to semi-popular meme creators to regular social media users—ought to learn what makes just and unjust recomposition so that they do not mar or misappropriate important messages from marginalized groups and, instead, call out these unjust recompositions (whether intentional or not) when they see them.

THIS IS AMERICA, THIS IS RECOMPOSITION, THIS IS INJUSTICE IN RECOMPOSITION

Ridolfo and DeVoss describe *rhetorical velocity* as a "conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time," which uses those factors to create a work that can be "appropriated by third parties." In this particular context, *appropriation* is the inevitable process of borrowing and transforming. As Ridolfo and DeVoss state, "more elements and others' elements become much more readily available to mix, mash, and merge" in a process known as recomposition. Examining rhetorical velocity enlightens us on the spread of compound rhetorical situations—what scholar Keith Grant-Davie describes as "discussions of a single subject by multiple rhetors and audiences" (265). Rhetorical velocity reveals to us how quickly situations and even facts change when they are recomposed, particularly in today's digital age. Ridolfo and DeVoss mention YouTube as one of the major platforms in which recomposition is allowed and cherished. The platform is also where "This Is America" gained immense traction and was recomposed by the thousands.

According to Ridolfo and DeVoss, transformation occurs when the rhetor "delivers a text into a new context; collects the text with others to make a new compilation; adds additional materials to the text; and more." We can infer that "This Is America" had a specific agenda of transforming the "text" of white supremacy, vulgar materialism, and police brutality into a four-minute hip-hop music video. Gambino and his rhetorical team, most notably video director Hiro Murai, created their video in a way to be a statement and, more so, a movement. With intentions of furthering their movement on a massive scale across America, their video's recomposition was inevitable, and videos from an assortment of rhetors surged onto YouTube. While some held true to the original's themes to create unique and insightful recompositions, many other parodies transformed "This Is America" from a video containing sociopolitical messages into a song creators altered for a wide array of messages. The song was parodied so often and so quickly that "This Is

America" concreted itself as a formidable antiracist work. Thanks further to Gambino's performance at the 2019 Grammy Awards, the video became well-known in households and memes across the nation.

Some viewers might consider the transformation of Gambino's video to a parody on YouTube as too minute and insignificant to affect social justice. However, Natasha N. Jones and Stephanie K. Wheeler invalidate this assumption by demonstrating that the framework and design of documents, which most believe as a small matter, can actually disempower and marginalize groups of people (669). If the framework of documents and websites can lead to the marginalization of social classes if handled improperly, the recomposition of YouTube videos can do the same. Though we do not have a universal standard of parody design to help us examine the quality of certain videos, we can examine videos by comparing an individual example to its original, particularly in terms of *form* and *content* (Jones and Wheeler 664). According to Jones and Wheeler, *content* refers to the information and message being communicated to an audience (657). For music videos, content is primarily delivered through lyrics. On the other hand, *form* refers to how the information and messages are being communicated to an audience (Jones and Wheeler 657). Form, in the case of videos such as "This Is America" and its progeny, can include anything in the videos that is visual, like set design, stage direction, performers, and their actions; it can also refer to audio, which includes the music, the way lyrics are said, and the inflections of those lyrics. Content plus form intertwine to create a recomposed work. However, the justness of a work turns sour if either the content or form is inappropriate and disempowers the messages of the original, or worse, marginalized groups of people.

For this essay, it is important to note the difference between *pastiche* and *parody*, which are literary genres, and how they fit within the conversation of recomposition. Generally, *pastiche* and *parody* are both considered types of attitudes towards original works; thus, they are useful in exploring just and unjust motivations for recomposition. *Pastiche* celebrates and respects what it imitates, whereas *parody* mocks (usually through satire) what it imitates, usually as a form of critique or social commentary. Depending on the composition, parody may be appropriate in countering injustice from original sources. However, in the case of just recomposition, "This Is America," which can be interpreted as a parody of American violence, is best recomposed as a pastiche. If a parody mocks what is essentially a parody of modern-day America, it risks mocking the social critique of the original parody, especially if the imitating rhetor is not as skilled or comedic as its original.

For the remainder of this essay, I will analyze three recompositions of Gambino's work. The first is Nicole Arbour's "This Is America: Women's Edit," which, overall, lacks tact in both content and form despite an intriguing premise. "This is Malaysia," a parody created by rhetors Jin Lim, Reuben Kang, and Alan Lok, inverts the content of the original to be a praise of a nation rather than a critique of it (a message to which criticism could certainly be had, even within the form of its own video). Thirdly, and the only just recomposition include in this essay, is Nigerian rhetor Folarinde 'Falz' Falana's "This Is Nigeria," whose pastiche builds and recrafts the content and

form of "This Is America" in a manner that uniquely discusses the sociopolitical dilemmas of his nation that in some ways improves upon the original.

REENABLING THE COMMENTS ON "THIS IS AMERICA: WOMEN'S EDIT"

On May 12, 2018, just a week after the original video was released, "This Is America: Women's Edit" was published on YouTube.[6] In a near-identical structure to Gambino's video, Arbour attempted to bring light to the experiences of women in North America, particularly their oppression in patriarchal societies. Such experiences include the shaming of mothers for breastfeeding in public, the atrocity of date-rape drugging, the inappropriate societal pressures to conform to gender roles, and the effects of social media on a woman's self-image. On first glance, one could see distinct parallels in the intended messages of both videos: to unveil the marginalization of an oppressed group in a nation that tries to hide those issues. If handled carefully in both form and content, these systemic issues could be justifiable to explore by recomposing "This Is America." Arbour asserted that her intention was "to honor the spirit of the video which absolutely moved her" and to do so "by adding hers and many women's life experiences and truths to the brave and brutal truths expressed in the original" (qtd. in Haas). However, according to the many comments and video responses to "Women's Edit," it seems that mainly Arbour's individual concerns were expressed in her parody. In response to feedback, Arbour disabled comments, and thus any criticism, on her video. So I'll enable the conversation here; in parodying the form and content in an inappropriate way to serve her own goals, Arbour managed to appropriate Black culture, pigeonhole women's experiences, and ultimately insult the music video she intended to respect.

For this conversation, it is important to note that commenters responded to Arbour with knowledge of Arbour's habit of insensitive appropriation. Her previous videos, such as "Dear Fat People" and "Dear Black People," contain a major, overarching issue: her messaging is confusing. Without Arbour stating her intent explicitly, it is difficult to determine whether the aim is to be covertly racist or to genuinely give constructive messages. When commenters point out this issue, she claims ignorance of certain social issues in order to deflect any criticism. Arbour's history of claiming one message while viewers detect another calls for closer analysis. Jones and Wheeler, as discussed above, suggest that such confusion may be rooted in misalignment between form and content.

We can see evidence that Arbour is undermining (not emphasizing) Gambino's message when we begin by looking at some similarities in form. The set design of both music videos features monochromatic parking decks (although Arbour's parking deck looks much cleaner and tamer compared to the dilapidated deck in the original). The stage directions each include a dance breakdown at the end of the video (Gambino erratically dances on top of a car in the finale, while Arbour and a small entourage tap dance). In both videos, scenes are divided by particular societal issue and punctuated by the beat of the song. However, other than in set design and parallel cinematography structure, the form does not change in any significant way to match an important aspect of the content—the *subtext*, or

the implicit messages one is to gather from a particular work. Parody is critique, and thus, finds the most originality in its subtext. If one wants to change the message of the original to explore another demographic who is marginalized in America, the subtext needs to change along with the form so that the text sends a coherent message. Without purposeful adjustment to subtext, viewers can sense that the recomposition's author either didn't *understand* or didn't *respect* the message of the subtext. In Arbour's case, the erasure of Gambino's subtext causes her to disempower rather than further the socio-political dialogue about racial justice.

Referring back to the similarities, we can see discordance in subtext. First, note the contrast between the vehicles used on set. Gambino's original video uses older cars with doors ajar. Considering the video's themes of gun violence and police brutality, these open doors most likely symbolize the several Black victims shot in their vehicles by police—in particular, Philando Castile. Meanwhile, Arbour's video has newer-modeled cars with closed doors. There is no particular correlation, we can assume from Arbour, between well-conditioned automobiles and sexism. Arbour, then, erases a key element of Gambino's subtext in favor of including an element with no distinct meaning to the parody (to the subject of sexism). The same problem can be seen in one of the beginning shots. In the original, Gambino shoots the Black man who plays guitar in the first seconds of the video. In a parallel scene, Arbour takes a snapshot (with her phone) of a breastfeeding Black woman to portray how people use social media to shame public breastfeeding. Not only does this parallel not make much sense, considering the subtext, but also, it is insensitive. Never are the murders of Black lives equivalent to an attempt to shame a woman caring for her child, and that statement is in respect towards movements against both sex-based and race-based injustice. First, too many women have been murdered by gun violence like the man in Gambino's video due to toxic patriarchy (and racial violence, in the case of Black women) for Arbour to erase an important statement about physical violence for another about social shaming. Second, as Arbour replaces a gun with a cell phone, she undermines Gambino's subtextual use of the same device as a symbol for simultaneously *exposing* and *distracting from* (rather than furthering) injustice.

Arbour further weakens the message of her parody by retaining her habit of explicitly stating her intent instead of providing messages through subtext. For example, in one scene, the camera circles to Arbour being surrounded by a majority of the actors in the video. Next, Arbour states perhaps one of the most ill-received lines in the video: "I'd rather give up my dreams?...rather be the Taliban." The scene fades out. When we return, we watch Arbour apply lipstick—a move reminiscent of Gambino's pause to light a cigarette. Gambino follows this display with a moment of silence, offering viewers a moment to consider. Arbour interrupts the silence. She explains her previous statement: "Not sure everyone's going to get that Taliban line. I was referencing the women who were kicking the Taliban's butt." Our takes on her explanation aside, we can conclude one important thing: explanation was necessary. Arbour's form (whether settings, choreography, or inflection) sent no subtextual messages about Taliban-related/extremist-related women's rights issues (like sexual and domestic abuse, prostitution, slavery, or other forms of violent patriarchy). Rather,

in comparing Gambino and Arbour's scenes, we can see that Gambino gives viewers a moment to relate to his content, while Arbour insensitively assumes that her readers will relate to content that stems primarily from her fears, her dreams, her interpretations.

This parody also suffers from Arbour's appropriations and mocking of Black culture, further suggesting that satire can backfire depending on the rhetor's identity. Throughout the original video, Gambino is shirtless, wearing Confederate pants, acting out odd dances and contortions in a caricature of the stereotypical Sambo, or what is essentially black minstrelsy dancing. On the other hand, Arbour dons a black hoodie and jeans, while also doing odd dances and contortions. Arbour's dancing does not seem to link with any historical context to the stereotypes of white women or even women in general, so we can sense a more insidious issue at play: we are watching something disturbingly similar to a minstrel show. The same can be said of her excessive, appropriative, and racist use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Now, many have debated the relevance of cultural appropriation in great depth, and as this essay concerns the ways videos can be appropriated justly and unjustly, I should do my due diligence to clarify the concept. Appropriation happens across races, nationalities, and cultures. But the issue of White creators appropriating from Black creators is one of societal and systemic reception. Black people have fought and continue to fight to express their culture. At the same time, they are forced to "appropriate" (or rather assimilate to) eurocentric trends, like straight weave and standardized, "proper" speech, in order to conform to the respectability politics in white environments. However, many white people appropriate Black trends and cultural artifacts and are able to capitalize on them without punishment. Cornrows, blaccents, and stereotypical minstrelsy performances of "actin' ghetto," even when criticized by other white people, still bring these appropriators of Black culture fame, money, and enjoyment—while Black originators usually receive none of these things. So, in the case of Arbour's video, her recomposition is unjust because its use of sound (especially inflection) is appropriative. While Gambino's use of AAVE is authentic and nuanced, Arbour's is stereotypical. It even attacks a portion of the audience she supposedly speaks for: Black women.

Thus, I conclude from this analysis that the most prominent issues in Arbour's recomposition are her lack of original subtext and satirical clarity and her dubious credibility as an advocate for the rights of all women. She does not take into account the importance and the nuance of many of the original text's satirical elements and instead simply copies them without transforming them within the context of a general American women's experiences. Granted, this would have been a difficult endeavor for Arbour to pursue. On the one hand, not all American women share the exact experiences with white patriarchy, and on the other, there may not be too many experiences that American women specifically face in context to the sexism prevalent worldwide. However, if approached carefully, perhaps with a more inclusive set of rhetors to deliberate with, it could have been done. Arbour serves as the forefront of the music video instead of the other, diverse women and their experiences, which distracts and alienates the viewer from her intentions. This issue, along with a history of exclusion, further prevents viewers from empathizing

with the sociopolitical messages within the work. When we consider that it only took Arbour a week after the Gambino released "This Is America" to create her recomposition, it seems to hinge on performative, cash-grab activism rather than a critical look into the ways in which America exacerbates the marginalization of its women.

FINDING THE REST OF MALAYSIA IN "THIS IS MALAYSIA (PARODY)"

The next recomposition of discussion, "This is Malaysia," was uploaded to YouTube about a month after the Gambino's original, on June 13, 2018. Its rhetors included director Ryan Lee and writer Daniel Mok, with the main performer credit attributed to Jin Lim, the creator of the video's channel, JinnyBoyTV. A variety of Malaysian influencers also joined in for the project. Within the song's content (conveyed through lyrics), the video lauds Malaysia as a diverse, culturally rich nation, proud of its heritage and citizens. It's a friendly country, the video praises, where people respect all the women, eat delectable foods, and live in complete harmony, despite their diverse set of ethnicities and religions. "*Kita semua* Malaysia!"—or "We are all Malaysia"—prevails as the central theme of the video (Lim et al.). The phrase is repeated in the song's final strain, as faces flash across the screen, a sequence reminiscent of Michael Jackson's "Black or White," until the video's optimistic end.

In the first few viewings, "This is Malaysia" seems innocent in its form and content—devoid of worn-down scenery, bloody imagery, and sociopolitical tension. And that's perhaps its first, significant problem: the video deviates from Gambino's in both form and content so much that there are hardly any parallels. After Lim finger-shoots down an unspecified man protesting for "Cina Rights," the video escapes from the parking lot setting and transitions to feature performers in different, colorful areas of Malaysia (Lim et al.). The video takes away any ambiance Gambino created of feeling trapped in a void of perpetual, echoing violence. Scenes of police brutality and extreme violence are replaced with scenes of unapologetic patriotism and lectures of Malaysian courtesy. While Gambino's Sambo caricature parodied media-enabled distraction, "This is Malaysia" instead made such distraction the main event, with its use of trendy dances of 2018. All of this celebration, again, seems fine and even worthy of appreciation, as it positively advertises Malaysia for non-natives, until we remember that the video is a parody of Gambino's "This Is America." To best describe the form from a perspective outside of the nation, "This is Malaysia" essentially feels like a three-minute tourist advertisement and patriotic boast of the country. The performers in the video rap about their food, culture, and patriotism, but there are no moments of self-reflection to better the nation other than through "playing our part" (Lim et al.). The purpose of "This Is America" was to unveil particular issues within a society through the perspective of a marginalized group. It was created to be a reflection and a critique, not a praise and a celebration, like this particular Malay successor. Rather than creating a pastiche, the video is parody, an intention that the rhetors acknowledge in the title. I do not think they meant their content to humiliate the spirit and intentions of the original; however, even if they didn't mean to do so, the creators inverted the message of "This Is America." Further,

because of JinnyboyTV's position as a popular Asian YouTube channel, other countries followed suit, further muddling the sociopolitical message of Gambino's original.

The music video's second problem is highlighted in a comment thread under the video. According to the comment thread, which was one of the most liked on the video, other Malaysians took issue with the parody not being as diverse in its representation as it claimed Malaysia to be. The first comment of note mentioned the absence of those from Borneo Malaysia, states otherwise known as Sarawak and Sabah; many users reinforced this concern (N0000 N0000). Another popular comment mentioned the video being inclusive to a degree, but not fully inclusive (TheProyan LOLING). This critique can be validated by some of the statements made in the video, such as when performer Shafaren Hamid compels viewers, "learn to speak Malay" (Lim et al.). But for a diverse and inclusive country, is learning Malay so particularly necessary? Is it necessarily just to say so, when those of Malay, Indian, and non-Chinese descent are discriminated against in housing and employment if they don't speak Chinese (Balakrishnan)? At the same time, discrimination is aimed at Malaysians of Chinese descent: the expression "*Balik China*," which means "go back to China" in English, is exclaimed multiple times at the beginning of the video; while Chinese-speaking people are privileged to an extent in Malaysia, they are also being told to leave the country in which they were born and raised. Why weren't these injustices elaborated on more?

Another statement that seems problematic to the inclusive environment portrayed in the parody is the sentiment, "Don't call us Malay now, don't call us Chinese now, don't call us Indian now" (Jin et al.). This lyric feels awfully reminiscent of colorblindness in America—of 'we're all American, no matter if you're Black, White, Yellow, Red, Purple, etc.' Contrary to the video's version of Malaysia, actual Malaysia is definitely racialized; in most social situations, "race is of the utmost salience" (Kahn 165). According to Malaysian content creator Nandini Balakrishnan, racial discrimination is pervasive in the country, and Malaysia features its own share of institutional racism. Article 153, for example, allows the housing market to prefer Chinese tenants and employees over those of Malay and Indian descent (Balakrishnan). Indian people are stereotypically considered gangsters, or what Balakrishnan calls the "3D" (dirty, dangerous, and difficult), but good at English. Malay people are the majority in the nation and, as a result, have voting power, but most of the Malay working class still live under archaic rules and stereotypes of corrupt Malay politicians. And there are native people of Malaysia whose names are often used as derogatory slurs and whose lifestyles are reduced to "living in trees" (Balakrishnan). Colorism, a universal social issue, also exists in Malaysia. Dark skin is considered worse and dirtier than fairer skin tones; Balakrishnan, for example, was bullied extensively in her younger years due to her darker skin as a girl of Indian descent.

Yes, it can be unifying to know each other through our nationality, but because our nationalities also intersect with our many other identities, we cannot simply delete our racialized identities for the greater good of one's national pride. Not while racism exists both socially and institutionally, and not while Malaysians continue to fight over who is truly

Malaysian. According to Malaysian YouTuber Adam Shamil, the foundations of Malaysia were not just in the people on the Peninsula (which was Malaya under British rule), but also in the people of North Borneo, Singapore (which is now its own nation), Sabah, and Sarawak. Yet, Shamil argues, the indigenous people of Malaysia Borneo are continuously erased from the nation's history. Shamil's view is also that everyone in the nation is equally Malaysian, or at least should be. But he acknowledges that racism and the erasure of different ethnicities is a problem the people of Malaysia are still fighting:

> This land is a land for all Malaysians irrespective of your race, religion and the colour of your skin. Whether you are Malay, whether you are Chinese, whether you are Indian, whether you are Bajau, whether you are Kadazan, whether you are Murut, whether you are Rungus or whether you are Dayak, all of us are proud Malaysians who are equal partners of this land gifted by god. (Shamil)

In a thread of responses to TheProyan LOLING's comment, users discuss issues between Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo Malaysia and whether these issues matter when it comes to *being* Malaysian—despite ethnicity or geographical location. Religion and politics are also heavily discussed and debated. So, the question arises: if there was this much debate within a single comment thread, why wasn't this tension the center of the video? Why did JinnyBoy TV take the route of inverting the content of "This Is America," when there could have been so much to unpack and learn about racial injustice (and justice) in Malaysia? For the simplest answer, it seems that "This Is Malaysia" was created as a well-intentioned video, meant to boost Malaysian morale. However, its rhetors appropriated the wrong video for their purposes. Malaysia, although a beautiful, culturally rich and diverse nation, is part of a politically racist and anti-racist world that is noteworthy to discuss. To simply state that people aren't their ethnicities but are, instead, their nation-states it to veil the sociopolitical issues of the nation (Kahn 165). A just recomposition of "This Is America" should reveal, not veil, sociopolitical issues. What makes matters more interesting is that, contrary to Arbour's recomposition, this video (despite constructive criticisms) received a lot of praise. There were not many Malaysians who saw this parody as unjust. Maybe the immense patriotic, hopeful feelings some Malaysians felt through this video allowed them to overlook the mistakes. Or perhaps both creators and commenters may not even know the extent that recompositions could be unjust?

WHEN PASTICHE IS POWER: "THIS IS NIGERIA"

On May 25, 2018, "This Is Nigeria" was uploaded to YouTube. If Gambino's original was a shock to American audiences, then Falz's recomposition was a storm to Nigerians across the sea. Just as "This Is America" unveiled and showcased the United States' affinity for violence, even among its people, "This Is Nigeria" expressed major political issues in its own country—issues like the lasting impact of neocolonialism, police brutality, political corruption, and the overreliance of religion to sugarcoat the harsh reality of it all. Falz created a *pastiche*, not a parody, because he honored

Gambino's original purpose: to start discourse. In an interview with *Hello Nigeria*, the rapper stated that his purpose was "to awaken everyone" so they can stand against the injustices plaguing their nation ("This Is Nigeria: Falz"). As stated by Falz, Nigerian celebrities (akin to American celebrities) are too distracted by entertainment and the flashy lifestyle, so much so that "the irregular has become regular" to people in Nigerian society ("This Is Nigeria: Falz"). These irregularities, for Falz, are the lack of a police force that protects Nigerians and the presence of a police force that harasses innocent Nigerians—especially young men. They were cause enough for Falz to create this video.

Because Falz intended to propel Gambino's message, his video shares many similarities to its original. For instance, the original and its Nigerian recomposition use the same music, and they are both set in a parking lot. They equally feature the chaos of pure violence and criminality. The choice in performance attire is similar as well: Falz is shirtless and barefoot, representing the poverty-stricken criminal stereotype in Nigeria, just as Glover is shirtless in Confederacy-esque pants, satirizing the association of racism and gun violence in America. In one scene, the camera pans towards Falz and a group of women in hijabs, who (reminiscent of Gambino's schoolchildren) distract us from the mayhem and crime happening in the parking lot. The man shot and killed by Gambino in the video's introduction is, in Falz's remediation, replicated with another black man playing an instrument. However, in a twist from the original, the guitarist leaves his seat and kills someone else with a machete, emphasizing the tagline that is repeated throughout Falz's chorus: "everybody be criminal." This signature phrase of the pastiche satirizes how people outside Nigeria think of the average citizen—though, in reality, it is government officials and law enforcement who are the true criminals ("This Is Nigeria: Falz").

Again, there are many parallels, but what makes Falz's recomposition of "This Is America" pastiche and just, as is the focus of this article, is its ability to transform and remix the original form and content to fit within the context of its nation. This contextual transformation can be heard in the music, such as in the cries of "*Ewo*" in the opening of the song. "*Ewo*" is a Nigerian exclamation of worry, shock, sadness, and fear—of lamenting at the terrible conditions Nigerians have been living in. The sentiment can also be heard in the lyrics, which are much more explicit in references to real-life events than Gambino's. An example of this difference is when Falz raps, "Wey da Madam Philomena/Money vanish from you office/36 milli you talk say na animal." These lyrics reference the economic corruption and theft occurring in Nigeria by employers from their employees. In particular, Philomena Chieste, an accountant who claimed that a snake swallowed 36 million Naria—the equivalent of 72,000 USD—from her home, though the money was actually stolen by her superior, Samuel Sale Umoru (Adaoyichie).

By recontextualizing his music video and its scenes/set pieces to Nigerian-specific issues, Falz utilizes form and content justly. There is one scene, perhaps the pinnacle of this pastiche, in which Falz meets up with a group of young men perched on the roof of a black SUV. As soon as this scene opens, a group of what seems to be Nigerian policemen arrive and start harassing the young men. Over the course of the situation, we hear Falz's

voiceover: "Look, sir, I'm sorry...I'm just a student at the University of Lagos... I have I.D. to prove it" (Falana). A man, assumed to be a guardian of one of the boys, comes and pays one of the operatives to refrain from harming the young man. The boy and his guardian escape, while the other men, with no one to save them, are continually beaten. Bystanders in the background of the video—particularly an unnamed celebrity and his mistress—watch this assault. However, they do not interrupt the violence, and instead they leave, as if the brutality is a nuisance to them. It's a horrifying scene that exquisitely encapsulates several themes at once, while also calling out the horrendous corruption of the state.

The police within this scene are known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The original intent of SARS was to be a "panacea for armed robbery" in the nation, but instead its operatives have been recorded harassing, extorting, kidnapping, and even killing innocent people (Idris). The sentiments of the police in Nigeria strike abhorrently similar to those of the United States. Some people (both in Nigeria and the US) argue that such police operatives are only bad individuals and that the institution itself isn't the problem. However, in Nigeria, the law permits SARS to operate in plain clothes with no badges or forms of identification (Busari). It has also been reported that operatives, knowing the power of social media and video recording, take people's phones and swipe them of any incriminating material (Idris). One young Nigerian citizen details the impact of SARS on the innocent in a brutal way:

> I first witnessed their inhumane and corrupt nature in 2015 when my then 37-year-old neighbour was arrested while relaxing just outside the house. He was dragged into an unregistered grey-coloured Honda Accord car covered with only the yellow towel wrapped around his waist. This was despite the plea of the entire neighbourhood for him to be released. We watched as they handcuffed and took him away as if he was a common criminal. It took 24 days of serious negotiation before he was released. By February 2018, it would be three years since the incident occurred, but my neighbour is still bedridden and battling erectile dysfunction as a result of the damage done to his spinal cord during the fiasco. (Idris)

As Falz stated in his interview, his video focused on such injustice and brutality to help awaken the country, to stir Nigeria to actively counter political corruption and systemic violence ("This Is Nigeria: Falz").

In other words: *This* is just recomposition. "This is Nigeria" retains the spirit of the original, while also remixing it in both subtle and explicit ways unique to the nation, even referencing particular cases from the native country. The video's just direction and performance are the keys to its success, but Falz also maintains Gambino's activist goals in his recomposition. Although his target audience is his fellow Nigerians, Falz's video is inclusive and connects issues of police brutality and white supremacy in Nigeria to worldwide, systemic problems for *all* Black people.[7] Through his pastiche, we see the push to fight together to end systemic violence as a respectful nod to Gambino's acknowledgment of the true racism in America. We should thank Falz for

elevating Gambino's message while embracing the two nations' conflicts as one.

THIS IS A-MEME-ICA & THE VICE OF UNJUST MASS RECOMPOSITION

Hopefully, my analysis of two parodies and a pastiche of Gambino's "This Is America" provides some insight into what differentiates *just* from *unjust* recompositions, at least in a set of videos from major content creators. No essay would be able to fully analyze the myriad of "This Is America" recompositions by everyday users; nevertheless, I believe such mass recomposition is an important topic of discussion. Gambino's "This Is America," for all its gravity as an antiracist piece, is also listed on the Know Your Meme website, specifically as an object-labeling meme. Object labeling, the Know Your Meme entry informs us, captures a still-shot of a moment within a video or film and then renames objects within that particular shot ("Childish Gambino's"). The shot is usually a humorous moment within the said production, but for "This Is America," these shots were some of the most gruesome images in the music video, such as the shootings of the Black guitarist and the choir. Noticing the inappropriateness of this practice, Beckett Mufson published a *Vice* article titled "For the Love of God, Don't Meme Childish Gambino's 'This is America' Music Video." Beckett criticized these memes as "inappropriate and dumb" because they disregarded Gambino's warnings of media desensitization. In response to Beckett, a popular Twitter account, @MemeEconomy, responded, "The Meme Economy is not meant for you." That same day, more memes spawned, with the *Vice* article as the target (qtd. in "Childish Gambino's").

The YouTube recompositions analyzed in this essay at least attempt to use Gambino's framework to relay a sociopolitical message—even with unjust recompositions such as "This is Malaysia" and "This Is America: Women's Edit." However, several memes recomposed "This Is America" as only a weapon to humiliate others, such as the memes directed at Mufson and Vice Media. Other memes even belittled the injustices experienced by African Americans, the community for whom Gambino originally championed. For the average social media user, who sees memes as sources of amusement or interest, these unjust pieces of racist memorabilia were swiped through, perhaps laughed at for a moment, and (in the worst cases) shared again. Critics of Mufson's *Vice* article argued that the memes were innocent fun or good-natured satire, but are the memes innocent when they demote the message of a marginalized group? Are they really in good fun when they are used to silence criticism—the same criticism that Gambino was encouraging?

CONCLUSION

The popularity of recomposing "This Is America" primarily occurred in 2018. Since then, unjust recomposition has only intensified. Because we live in an even more digital age, in which users are recomposing every day (whether through creating memes, sharing posts, or even using GIFs in comment sections), everyone can be a regular content creator. That means that everyone has a responsibility to be cautious of what and how they recompose. Further, in 2018, receiving compensations for social media content (other than for established celebrities) was a relatively new phenomenon. A mere three years

later in 2021, anyone has the opportunity to reach celebrity status overnight through social media platforms alone, especially through youth-friendly platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Injustice spans the digital world as much as the real one, posing a great dilemma for marginalized content creators.

While "This Is America" received its slew of unjust recompositions, Gambino had copyright over his creation, as well as the power to re-promote his work and remind audiences about his messages. The video's eventual awards and recognitions became its shiny, well-respected reminders. However, many rhetors, particularly creators of color, do not hold the same privileges as Gambino and are susceptible to cultural appropriation and content theft entirely. Without copyright or social media platforms protecting or compensating their work—not limited to original dances, comedic skits and commentary, and fashion designs, and memes—more popular, and thus powerful, content creators steal these works. Then, under the content appropriator's control, original compositions are erased or overshadowed for mediocre but lucrative recompositions. The situation worsens when credit is given beyond the apps, and White content creators receive praise, preferential treatment, and money for unjust recompositions.[8]

Why are there so many Black creators who are left empty-handed? The simple answer is racism, but moreover, it seems that many users are unaware of combating these injustices by tracing recompositions back to their originals. From memes on Twitter to videos on TikTok to YouTube parodies and pastiches, we must develop literacy on differentiating just from unjust recompositions. We should not support injustice. We should make efforts to call out and boycott unjust forms of media when we see them. We should concurrently elevate the content of Black creators and creators of color, who most likely started the trends. We should also protest for these creators to be fully compensated for their work, as are their white contemporaries—even though a discussion of the social media economy and content compensation is fit for another essay.[9] All of this is easier said than done. However, through these initiatives, we may inch closer to a place where the marginalized are recomposed, where the media is primarily a tool for justice, and where one can witness the appreciation of all cultures in society and say, "*This* Is America."

NOTES

1. Donald Glover, also known as Childish Gambino, works in several entertainment mediums and typically interchanges names depending on the industry. For this essay, I will refer to him as Childish Gambino, his stage name in the rap/hip-hop community.

2. A negative stereotype of a Black man who is typically depicted as lazy, simple-minded, and servile.

3. In reference to the killing of Philando Castile at a traffic stop in 2016 (Helsel and Carrero).

4. In reference to the Charleston AME Church shooting in 2015 ("Charleston").

5. By *antiracism*, I mean any practices that highlight or interrupt racism in our society and support racial equity. My interpretation of racism stems from Ibram X. Kendi's definition, which finds racial inequality and exploitation within policies and institutions, not individuals.

6. "This Is America: Women's Edit" (uploaded to YouTube by Nicole Arbour) is no longer publicly visible; it is currently (on November 19, 2021) listed as "private" on YouTube.

7. On the topic of Falz's activism, he continues to promote the end of such systemic violence to this day. In 2020, Falz held a march with another popular musician, Runtown, in which hundreds of Nigerians turned up in support of the #EndSARS movement (Busari).

8. Even within the past couple years, there have been several examples of false crediting. One case in February 2020 involved Addison Rae, siblings Charli and Dixie D'Amelio, and other white TikTok creators, who were invited to NBA All-Star Weekend with prime seat tickets, sittings in exclusive interviews, and even opportunities to dance on the court and teach basketball players and cheerleaders the Renegade dance, while its original creator, Jaliah Harmon, was ignored until media backlash compelled the NBA to invite her as well (Pruitt-Young). In March 2021, late-night talk show host Jimmy Fallon invited Rae to perform a series of eight popular TikTok dances on his show. However, she created none of them, and the original creators of the dances were only mentioned by their usernames in the YouTube description box after the episode aired live. It was only after backlash that Fallon acknowledged the creators by inviting them on his show the following month (Pruitt-Young).

9. For further reading of that discussion, the most recent protest for fairer compensation for Black creatives has been the Black TikTok Strike. Usually, whenever a viral song releases, TikTok creators choreograph a just-as-viral dance. The song of the month for June 2021 was expected to be Megan Thee Stallion's "Thot Shit." However, many Black TikTok creators decided to withhold their talents to expose both white content creators' and the platform's exploitation and theft from them. White content creators attempted to continue the dance trend, but to many viewers, most original dances from white creators, especially those most notorious for appropriation, seemed lackluster (Pruitt-Young).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Sherman V. Camp, instructor of English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), for their feedback and consideration of this essay for competition, where it later won the top prize. They would also like to thank the UAB Department of English, and especially Dr. Christopher Minnix, for suggesting submission to *Young Scholars in Writing*.

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