



“Fred Was Feelin’ It”:

Echoes of Frederick Douglass in the Voices of  
Gil Scott-Heron and Donald Glover/Childish Gambino

by

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When Donald Glover, aka Childish Gambino, was asked why he created the song, “This Is America,” his reply was short and ironic: “To give Black people something to sing on the Fourth of July.”<sup>1</sup> Just like the holiday, his video recording of the song blew up all over the Internet. When it first hit, I got a call from my son, John: “Mama, you’ve got to see this!”<sup>2</sup> The ripple effect and impact of this video was like a tidal wave across the country and around the world. It certainly blew my mind, and I contributed to the cultural clamor by texting and emailing my constituencies to check it out.

At the time I was preparing a paper for a symposium on the works of Gil Scott-Heron at the University of Montpelier in France, and had been thinking about Scott-Heron’s song, “Winter in America,”<sup>3</sup> and so I immediately connected the two songs in terms of themes and presentations. The video recording of Scott-Heron’s performance is not accompanied with

horrific imagery or a dancing reflective of the lyrics; however, the haunting harmonics and the rhythm patterns suggest a continuum between these two songs that reiterate the frightening reality that continues to threaten and undermine the livelihood of Black citizens in the United States, as well as the environmental and political health of the nation and the world.

But it was a conversation about Childish Gambino's thematic purpose with a colleague and historian, Professor David Goldberg, who related it to the speech by Frederick Douglass,

“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”<sup>4</sup> presented to The Rochester Anti-Slavery Society at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York on July 5, 1852. Although this speech by the foremost African American political figure of his era prefigures Glover and Scott-Heron by almost two centuries, the thematic intersections are evident, and the three pieces interface and reiterate similar despair about American values and circumstances.

While appreciating the invitation and confessing his uneasiness about his capacity and subsequent delivery, Frederick Douglass opens his famous speech by acknowledging the accomplishments and the historical significance of the American Revolution. However, Douglass’s cursory praise does not preclude his critique, as he repudiates even the slightest suggestion that the holiday that celebrates liberty for White America does not even have the slightest connection to the sentiments of the enslaved or free people of color as he rhetorically queries his audience as to whether the announced topic for his speech was crafted as a crude mockery of his biography:

*“Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? And am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us”?*<sup>5</sup>

Douglass, however, seizes the occasion to advocate for justice, as he emphasizes the offense of a so-called “democracy” that profits and tolerates slavery is indeed both deeply immoral and fundamentally hypocritical:

*“The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, lowering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!”<sup>6</sup>*

### Gil Scott-Heron’s Global Impact

Gil Scott-Heron did not give speeches like his predecessor, Frederick Douglass, but he did protest and illuminate the oppressive circumstances that plagued the United States when he ascended to the stage to perform his poetry as song. As an African American nurtured in the politics and aesthetic attitudes of that era, Scott-Heron discusses the major influences on his artistry and his character in his memoir *The Last Holiday*, including his upbringing, his education, his activist college years, his early publishing success, his challenges in the music industry, and his music business relationships. Scott-Heron’s poetry and music are in sync with our activist generation.

At Lincoln University he began writing songs with fellow-student Brian Jackson for their group, Black and Blues; Jackson subsequently became his musical arranger. In 1970, Scott-Heron released a mostly poetry-with-percussion album, titled *Small Talk at 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox*, and

from this record “Whitey on the Moon” and “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” received considerable airplay. About his creative process, Scott-Heron said: *“I had an affinity for jazz and syncopation, and the poetry came from the music. We made the poems into songs, and we wanted the music to sound like the words, and Brian’s arrangements very often shaped and molded them.”*<sup>7</sup>

It was about this time that Scott-Heron befriended the percussion-and-poetry group, The Last Poets, founded in 1968 in Harlem by David Nelson, Felipe Luciano, and Gylan Kain. Their works were politically charged, and Scott-Heron responded to that: *“I thought they were bringing a new sound to poetry, and to the community, and I enjoyed it. I was a piano player and still played with different groups, and the songs and poems I had written had a musical tilt to them because they were compositions as opposed to poems over rhythms ... but we were going in the same direction.”*<sup>8</sup> Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” was a huge hit when it was released in 1972, and it clearly demonstrated the influence of The Last Poets on his aesthetics and the impact poetry could have on a general audience beyond books and the limited politics and poetics of “art for art’s sake.”

Scott-Heron and I are of the same generation, born only a year and day apart. Gil Scott-Heron was born on April 1, 1949 in Chicago; I was born on April 2, 1950 in Detroit. We both came of age during the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements, and we were both profoundly affected by these critical historical moments, especially the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. Indeed, his memoir, *The Last Holiday*,<sup>9</sup> takes its title from Scott-Heron’s involvement with Detroit’s Stevie Wonder’s quest to establish Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. birthday as a national holiday. Sadly, Scott-Heron passed away at the age of 60 on May 27, 2011. In 2012, He was honored posthumously with a Life Time Achievement Award at the

Grammy Awards.

My interest in poetry occurred just prior to my entry into American activism on April 4, 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. It was two days after my eighteenth birthday. I joined a student protest at Western Michigan University to acknowledge the tragedy of King's death and to illuminate American hypocrisy. While occupying the Student Union Building, the Michigan National Guard threatened to forcibly remove us. Fortunately, the Board of Regents of the University intervened and accommodated our demands for a Center for Black Studies and the establishment of a Martin Luther King Scholarship Fund for students of color.

Scott-Heron's poetry inspired my aspirations to become a poet, and his cultural presence informed my poetics and my politics, which was still the case during a historical moment in Germany. In the spring of 1984, Gil Scott-Heron appeared in concert at the University of Bremen in West Germany. The audience was largely peace protesters who identified themselves as "'68ers," a term rooted in European activism that developed in tandem with the Civil Rights and Peace Movements in the United States. At the time, I was a Fulbright professor, teaching American literature, protesting the war and writing poetry. And, like Gil Scott-Heron, I was collaborating with jazz musician, Michael Sievert, for performances.

*Green poems are written  
In blue violet striping amber.  
Skeletons signature  
The sidewalks of Bremen:  
"Wir waren dafür.  
Jetzt sind wir tot.  
Was wird der nächste  
Krieg bringen?"<sup>10</sup>*

Shortly after I arrived in Germany in the summer of 1983, I attended a concert featuring Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels in Frankfurt. The venue was overflowing, and people went

wild when Mitch Ryder announced: “Ich bin aus Amerika, aber er ist nicht mein Präsident,” (“I am from America, but he is not my President.”) This public dismissal of Reagan was a declaration of the band’s political stance against what was happening in Germany. Mitch Ryder was voicing the anti-war sentiments of our generation in the U.S. and connecting with a cross-continental peace movement that was vital and thriving in this historical context. I was invigorated and excited that members of this rock and roll band from Detroit contained members who had attended Pershing High School, which was also my alma mater. Another irony was that the short-range, nuclear missiles were called Pershing II’s, a reference in my poem, “Intro: the fourteenth flamingo.”<sup>11</sup>

*Wie ein amerikanisches Drama,  
with black and brown  
Soldiers drinking coca cola  
escorting General Black  
Jack Pershing  
reincarnated as a Missile  
through the Black Forest  
under “saurer Regen”  
to wait for Rotkäppchen  
mit Kermit Kohl.*

Like Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels, the same radical sentiments of the 1960’s-70’s ushered Gil Scott-Scott-Heron political discourse and poetics onto the global stage. The momentum continued, and progressive popular music was still relevant in the 1980’s during the Cold War. In particular, the face-off on the border between East and West Germany persisted, and the United States deployed Pershing II Missiles while the Soviet Union matched the threat with similar weapons of nuclear destruction. My poem, “Wingless Spiders,”<sup>12</sup> is description of this dual in country that had no political power to stop this threat by the two world powers occupying and controlling their divided space:

*The Left gun  
and the Right gum  
face the Line.  
Tanks wait  
by train tracks  
under the trees.  
Leaves listen  
to throbbing hills  
tell legends  
about men  
with double vision—  
wingless Spiders  
who will sacrifice  
ancient  
and injured  
cities.*

*I hold hands  
with the women.  
We make a ring  
around the children.  
The men plant  
flowers forever  
to never forget,  
in our throats  
the trigger  
is cocked.*

Meanwhile, the Anti-War Movement escalated its nonviolent resistance efforts to dissuade the superpowers from igniting their “limited nuclear war”<sup>13</sup> in Germany.

Scott-Heron’s poem, “B Movie” (1981) was very popular with this German audience because it criticizes Ronald Reagan’s reactionary, Republican politics in world affairs that advocated an aggressive, pro-nuclear strategy against the Soviet Union. In the introduction to the poem, Scott-Heron recounts Reagan’s progressive politics during the 1950’s when he was president of the Screen Actors Guild and gallantly stood up to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s harassment of actors and directors in the movie industry for their liberal politics or affiliations with socialists or communists. But then the song mocks Reagan for abandoning and inverting his activist politics by calling him Rea-gon

and metaphorically projecting America's national identity as a "B" movie.

*You go give them liberals hell Ronnie."  
That was the mandate to the new Captain Bligh on the new ship of fools  
It was doubtlessly based on his chameleon performance of the past: as a Liberal  
Democrat  
As the head of the Studio Actor's Guild, when other celluloid saviors were cringing in  
terror from Mc Carthy, Ron stood tall  
It goes all the way back from Hollywood to hillbilly  
From Liberal to libelous, from "  
Bonzo" to Birch idol, born again  
Civil rights, women's rights, gay rights: ...it's all wrong  
Call in the cavalry to disrupt this perception of freedom gone wild  
God damn it, first one wants freedom, then the whole damn world wants freedom*

"We Almost Lost Detroit" also made an indelible impact on the German audience, anticipating annihilation. A nuclear disaster at a power plant almost occurred, which would have desimated my home town, killing millions of people. This song is a warning to the world.

*And we almost lost Detroit  
This time  
How will we ever get over  
Losing our minds  
  
Just thirty miles from Detroit  
Lies a giant power station  
It ticks each night as the city sleeps  
Seconds from annihilation  
But no one stopped to think  
about the people or  
How they will survive*

By simply exchanging "city" with "country," the tension of the threat of a nuclear disaster in Germany reverberates in the lines: "It ticks each night as the city sleeps/Seconds from annihilation." Likewise, Germans could anticipate and identify with the foreshadowing of death in Scott-Heron's "Winter in America," which also acquired transferrable meaning under their extreme and perilous circumstances:

*Just like the cities stagger on the coastline*

*In a nation that just can't stand much more.  
Just like the forest buried beneath the highway,  
Never had a chance to grow...  
Now it's winter in America...  
And ain't nobody fighting cause  
Nobody knows what to say  
Save your soul, Lord knows, from  
Winter in America*

Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson first recorded "Winter in America" in 1974.

Reflective of Douglass's critique, Scott-Heron's lines about the U. S. Constitution, are laudatory, but he also illuminates its failure to achieve its philosophical purpose:

*The Constitution, a noble piece of paper  
Would free society. It struggled but then died in vain  
And now Democracy is ragtime on the corner  
Hoping for some rain  
And looks like it's hoping  
Hoping for some rain*

In concert with Scott-Heron's piece, Douglass's 1852 speech considers *The United States Constitution* as he identifies truths that contradict the failing of the citizens to ascend to its principles by not recognizing the institution of slavery as a fundamental contradiction:

*"Fellow-citizens! there is no matter in respect to which, the people of the North have allowed themselves to be so ruinously imposed upon, as that of the pro-slavery character of the Constitution. In that instrument I hold there is neither warrant, license, nor sanction of the hateful thing; but, interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT. Read its preamble, consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? Is it at the gateway? or is it in the temple? It is neither."<sup>14</sup>*

Concurrently, Scott-Heron's song is a plaintive response to Douglass's concern, and its blues phrasing mourns the death of an idea of a nation that has failed its principles. Since the arrival the Pilgrims, there has been the erosion of America's natural resources, the destruction of

its wildlife, and the assassinations of its visionaries and healers, who tried to save the soul of this nation, Scott-Heron's *oeuvre* laments a nation's doom. Just like Douglass, Scott-Heron's warnings are grounded in historical evidence and experience, as exemplified in "B Movie," "We Almost Lost Detroit," "The Bottle," and to a larger extent, his music engages lyrics jazz and the blues—the mood of our generation:

*And now it's winter  
It's winter in America  
Yes, and all of the healers have been killed  
Or sent away, yeah  
But the people know, the people know  
It's winter  
Winter in America  
And ain't nobody fighting  
'Cause nobody knows what to save  
Save your soul, Lord knows  
From winter in America.*

During his heyday, Scott-Heron's creativity engaged popular music and literary production during The Black Arts Movement. While the poetry recordings by Nikki Giovanni, *Truth Is Its Way*,<sup>15</sup> and Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Nation Time*,<sup>16</sup> reached a larger audience in the general population, Scott-Heron recordings were even more dynamic. Not only was he a poet, he was also a musician creating works that became the precursor for rap culture, as exemplified by rap artists, such as Childish Gambino. "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" skyrocketed when it was released in 1970, and the phrase continues to thrive in conversations as racial repression persists and reappears as reality.<sup>17</sup> Interdisciplinary productions of poetry readings with instrumentalizations connected with the origin of African American poetry as song, and this retrieval is best reflected in the career of Scott-Heron, who published poetry books and recorded them with his songs. Noted for his militant lyrics and critiques of racism and repressive

governmental policies in the United States and elsewhere, he subsequently bemoans the end of the progressive decade of the 1960's and 1970's in "Winter in America."

### "This Is America"

Glover/Gambino has written, produced and directed an impressive catalogue of music videos since 2012. His unique style combines rap and popular music with dance and creative imagery. His work is an extension of Gil Scott-Heron's interdisciplinary presentation of poetry with music. Both artists realized the need to incorporate other art forms to maximize the impact of their message. Glover/Gambino's recent creative focus is on his award-winning television series, *Atlanta*, with surrealistic and Afrofuturistic plots that explore contemporary issues. His talents as a writer, actor, musician, director and producer converge in *Atlanta*. In a range of unusual episodes that are not limited to the setting of Atlanta, he subverts stereotypes and advances his artistic activism by challenging the imagination of his audience with themes that defy predictable formats than typical, television programming. By working in this medium, his provocative voice is affecting audiences by expanding the imagery of music videos and/or complimenting them with scenarios that require focus and reflection on the part of audience. He is charting new territory by expanding the language of imagery that contains social consciousness and that challenges the imagination to "Stay Woke."

At the same time, Glover/Gambino has released songs that contain political comments on the problematic social conditions in the United States. "Redbone's" refrain, "stay woke," reiterates the need for political awareness and to remain completely conscious in Jordan Peele's film, "*Get Out*." To set the tone for the film, foreshadowing the problematic circumstances of Chris, a young Black man played by Daniel Kaluuya, who enters a dangerous

setting in the home of “the white girlfriend’s parents’ house.<sup>18</sup>” The theme and imagery of modern slavery in the film connects with the song’s lyrics and historical memory embedded in the film. The refrain in “Redbone” foreshadows the main character possible fate in “The Sunken Place”<sup>19</sup>:

*But stay woke, Stay woke  
Niggas creepin’, They be creepin’  
They gon’ find you, They gon’ find you  
Gon’ catch you sleep’n’, Gon’ catch you sleepin’,  
put your hands up now, baby  
Ooh, now stay woke  
Niggas creepin’  
Now, don’t you close your eyes  
But stay work, Ooh  
Niggas creepin’, They gon’ find you  
They gon’ find you  
Gon’ catch you sleepin’,  
Ooh Gon’ catch you, gon’ catch you  
Now stay woke  
Niggas creepin’  
Now, don’t you close your eyes*

Douglass’s words and Scott-Heron’s fusion of poetry and song converge in the creative genius of Glover/Gambino and Ludwig Goransson, who co-wrote “This Is America.”<sup>20</sup> The lyrics and the music video juxtapose a celebration of materialism with violent tragedy. Just as Douglass describes a nation that is “hideous and revolting” and devoid of humanistic or spiritual values, Glover/Gambino’s song and music video reflect this spiritual corruption as it has affected Black Americans, descendants of slaves, who are no longer in chains, but are chained to a destructive society. The lyrics engage a popular metaphor of a Black man as a “dog,” a “big dog,” always enclosed, always on guard and still in chains.

Glover laments that too many Black people conform to the national character of profit over people: “*I’m so fitted (I’m so fitted, woo)/ I’m on Gucci (I’m on Gucci).*” The phrase, “*I’m on Gucci,*” suggests it is a drug. In order to maintain this lifestyle, they have become the

conveyors and the victims of violence from within and without, indulging the misguided values of American society, equating freedom with wealth: *“We just want the money.”* Glover’s song illuminates the consequences that Douglass predicted in 1852: *“And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, lowering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!”*<sup>21</sup>

While viewing “This Is America,” it is important to notice the frivolity of the dancers with the refrain reiterating “partying” and “money.” They appear to be happy and having a good time, but the lines of warning reoccur throughout the song: *“This Is America/ Don’t catch you slippin’ up/ Don’t catch you slippin’ up/; or, “Police be trippin’ now/ Yeah, this is America.”* Racial inequities in the criminal justice system is an extension of slavery. Both in its violation of civil rights in encounters with police and with the judicial system. Douglass protests this pattern of enacting laws that specifically discriminate against slaves and that disproportionately subjugates and executes them:

*“The slaveholders themselves acknowledge it in the enactment of laws for their government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. There are seventy-two crimes in the State of Virginia, which, if committed by a black man, (no matter how ignorant he be), subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of the same crimes will subject a white man to the like punishment. What is this but the acknowledgement that the slave is a moral, intellectual and responsible being? The manhood of the slave is conceded.”*<sup>22</sup>

Today, the disproportion of arrests, insufficient legal representation, and consequential mass incarceration of people of color benefits a society that would rather imprison a population than to educate them, and that would rather repress and kill them than to liberate them. Private

corporations that own the prisons are permitted to profit from the exploitation of free or below minimum wage labor of inmates, taking advantage of the Thirteenth Amendment, whereby slavery (forced labor) was abolished “except in the case of imprisonment.”

The legacy of slavery is racial hatred, which inspired the recent resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the emergence of similar seditious organizations, such as The Proud Boys, The Oath Keepers and the Michigan Militia, whose members plotted to kidnap and kill the Democratic Governor of the State of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer. Donald Trump promoted evil ignorance and racism in order to secure the support of racists for his election to the presidency in 2016, and his failed re-election in 2020. This thinking has poisoned and circumvented the mental and spiritual health of the nation; or, as Douglass conveys to his white audience: *“You profess to believe, that, of one blood, God made all nations of men to dwell on the face of all the earth,” and hath commanded all men everywhere to love one another; yet you notoriously hate (and glory in your hatred) all men whose skins are not colored like your own.*”<sup>23</sup>

Racism persists and the dancing figure of Glover/Gambino—bare chested, barefoot, dressed in tattered pants—is symbolic of a slave’s condition. Despite their dismal circumstances, Douglass explains that slaves were expected to be happy, and to express this feeling through song, which was a cruel and ironic expectation:

*“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.”*

Police violence terrorizes the Black community from the outside, gun violence disrupts all matters of description of living conveyed in the video imagery, including a church choir, which could be a double entendre regarding the death of spirituality in some Black churches, or the mass murder of worshippers in the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015 by white supremacist, Dylan Roof.

The lyrics and the imagery in the music video, “This Is America,” become more aggressive and outraged, in tandem with the tone and temperament of Frederick Douglass’s speech that contemplates and renounces the 4<sup>th</sup> of July: “...and its popular characteristics, from the slave’s point of view. Standing, there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting.”

“This Is America” portrays and rejects the behavior of young Black people, who imitate the “character and conduct of this nation. . .” Douglass would certainly perceive of such behavior as “hideous and revolting.” No doubt, he envisioned a more noble future for the descendants of liberated slaves. “This Is America” not only projects the self-destructive consequences of embracing soul-less materialism, the video also includes the image of Glover/Gambino, pulling the trigger to end it. His contorted body movements seem robotic, and when he picks up a machine gun and begins to annihilate the other performers, he becomes a soul-less, evil spirit, engaging the death dance of the grim reaper. The young Black people collapse, and this deadly, caustic imagery relates to their contemporary circumstances as historical legacy, ending the celebration of the Fourth of July in “This Is America,”

## Feelin' It

*“America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery — the great sin and shame of the nation.”<sup>24</sup>*

Douglass explained this nearly two centuries ago, and Gil-Scott’s succinct and direct lyrics are a refrain for Douglass’s complaint. Scott-Heron begins by lamenting the treachery of White America against the Native Americans, who welcomed the Pilgrims, and the decimation of the buffalo that once roamed the plains. He characterizes America as a soulless nation ruled by vultures. His juxtaposition of “s-ditch racist marching across the floor” with the vanishing peace sign” forecasts doom, destruction, and the white season of death, “Winter in America.”

“This Is America” extends and expands “Winter in America,” as a representation of what a nation of death looks and sounds like today. There is no effective leadership, the people are distracted by superficial aspirations, prepared to do whatever is necessary to acquire wealth and to have a good time. *“Look at how I’m livin’ now.”* The dealing and the killing are venues to acquire a lavish lifestyle. *Grandma told me, “Get your money Black man.” “You just a black man in this world. You just a bar code. . .”* with a price on your head, just like a slave. How much are you worth?

Douglass, Scott-Heron and Glover/Gambino connect with their audiences by conveying their voices in the most effective settings and venues for their times. Whereas Douglass gave

speeches, and published his periodical, *The North Star*, he also took advantage of the invention of photography to project himself into society. He became the most photographed American of the nineteenth century. Scott-Heron was also visually present, performing his words with music and in videos that impacted American popular culture, and Glover/Gambino extended his presence by accessing multi-media formats. Frederick Douglass's warning to a nation celebrating its hypocritical existence is a theme that flows into the lyrics of Gil Scott-Heron, advocating for change during the nineteen sixties, seventies and subsequent decades, and into the performances of Donald Glover/Childish Gambino, a voice for contemporary generations, addressing audiences that rarely read and are addicted to technology. Hence, he focuses his creative energy into music videos and television programming.

Their thematic purpose is to counter a deadly society by supplying insight to inspire activism and to stimulate critical, creative imaginations, whether America wants to hear what they have to say, or not.

Douglass's speech on July 5, 1852, contains themes and poetic phrasing that Scott-Heron offers in refrain and that reverberate in Donald Glover/Childish Gambino's reason to give Black folks something to sing. Because in our throats, the trigger is cocked.

*Is this the land your Fathers loved,  
The freedom which they toiled to win?  
Is this the earth whereon they moved?  
Are these the graves they slumber in?*

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Donald Glover/Childish Gambino, quote from interview, TMZ Program, July 1, 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> <http://ChildishGambino#ThisIsAmerica#Guavaisland.com>
- <sup>3</sup> Gil Scott-Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, "Winter in America," released January 1974.
- <sup>4</sup> Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings, Ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999). <http://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2945>.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Gil Scott-Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday* (New York: Grove Press, 2012) p. 58.
- <sup>10</sup> Translation from German to English:
- |                      |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| "Wir waren dafür.    | "We were before,      |
| Jetzt sind wir tot.  | Yet, now we are dead. |
| Was wird der nächste | What will the next    |
| Krieg bringen?"      | War bring?"           |
- <sup>11</sup> In the these lines of the poem, I describe the German experience as an American Drama with the military presence and the threat of nuclear destruction. "General Black Jack Pershing" is a name General Pershing acquired because during World War I, he commanded the Black troops in the segregated U.S. Army, and "sauer Regen" is German for "sour rain," which in English sounds like "sour Reagan." "Rotkäppchen" is Little Red Ridinghood" from the fairy tale, and "Kermit Kohl" refers to Prime Minister Kohl as Reagan's puppet, like Kermit the frog.
- <sup>12</sup> Melba Joyce Boyd, "Wingless Spiders," *Thirteen Frozen Flamingoes* (Bremen, Germany: Die Certel Press, 1984), p. 13.
- <sup>13</sup> "The limited nuclear war" was the phrased coined by the United States Government to quell American dissent regarding the buildup of nuclear armaments in West Germany during the Cold War with the Soviet Union pursuant to the end of World War II and the occupation of Germany by the Allied Forces.
- <sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, Op cite.
- <sup>15</sup> Nikki Giovanni and The New York Community Choir, *Truth Is on Its Way*. Benny Digs, Director. Right On Records, 1971.
- <sup>16</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Its Nation Time*. Visionary Music. LP. Black Forum Records, B-457L, 1972.
- <sup>17</sup> See "Analyzing Scott-Heron: Why the revolution will not be televised," by Mudia Iyayi, appeared in the online as part of *the Black History Month issue, in collaboration with the Western Black Students' Association and Interrobang, Fanshawe College's student newspaper, February 5, 2021*.
- <sup>18</sup> "Don't go to the white girlfriend's parents' house" is warning repeatedly offered by Chris' best friend, Rod, who is a TSA officer at the airport.
- <sup>19</sup> In the film, *Get Out*, written and directed by Jordan Peele, "The Sunken Place" is the place in the brain where the consciousness of the host is contained while the implanted brain controls the thoughts and actions of the body.
- <sup>20</sup> Donald Glover/Childish Gambino and Ludwig Goransson, "This is America," © Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd, Reservoir Media Management Inc, Universal Music Publishing Group, Warner Chappell Music, Inc. 2018.<https://youtu.be/m2zKdlcOV5s>
- <sup>21</sup> Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July." <http://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2945>.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July." <http://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2945>.

Suggested Videos: Gil Scott-Heron, "Winter in America": <http://you.be/m2zKdlcOV5s>  
Gil Scott-Heron, "B Movie": <https://you.be/6lvpNY10Hzs>  
Childish Gambino, "This Is America": <https://youtu.be/VY0jWnS4cMY>