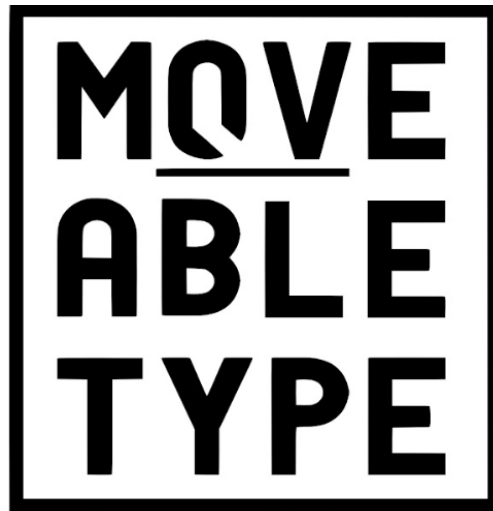




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The Soundtrack to Revolution: Examining Rap as a Resistance Against the Black Man's
'Existential Deviation' in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*

ALEXANDER WILLIAMS

'To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively
conscious is to be in a state of rage almost all of the time'.

- James Baldwin ¹

When we discuss the Black man as a psychological subject, we must keep in the forefront of our discussion the fact that 'alongside phylogeny and ontogeny, there is also sociogeny'; these branches of biological and social systematics lend themselves, as Frantz Fanon argues, to a psychological exploration of the 'existential deviation [...] white civilization and European culture have imposed' on the Black man. In this paper, I will argue that not only are wake work and rap forms of ontological resistance against the American hegemony and its systems of oppression, but also reparative solutions to the psychopathology of the Black man's existential deviation. This paper will explore how Childish Gambino's existential deviation during his childhood and adolescence is rooted in his inability to be accepted by both his white and Black contemporaries, forcing him to occupy the fringe between the racial communities of Stone Mountain, his childhood home.

Keywords: wake work, hip-hop, Childish Gambino, Frantz Fanon

The Black man's alienation has never been an *individual* question, nor shall it ever become one. When we discuss the Black man as a psychological subject, we must keep in the forefront of our discussion the fact that 'alongside phylogeny and ontogeny, there is also sociogeny'; these branches of biological and social systematics lend themselves, as Frantz Fanon argues, to a psychological exploration of the 'existential deviation [...] white civilization and European culture have imposed' on the Black man.² In my reading of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) I interpret his conceptualization of the Black man's 'existential deviation' to encompass the psychological disalienation the Black man develops in relation to his self, his body, and his ability to exercise agency within the socio-political systematics the white hegemony has designed to assail him (6). Fanon's text acutely describes the psychopathology of a Black man in the twentieth century, elaborating similar ontological concerns to those advanced by Christina Sharpe, Katherine McKittrick, and W.E. B. Du Bois, but the Black man's psycho-existential complex from Fanon's temporal moment has only grown in complexity and malice during the twenty-first century.³ 'Ontology,' as it is discussed in this paper, will be defined as the lived experience of being, reality, and mode and how these existential mediums coalesce within an individual's body and positionalities. Fanon claims 'the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the

¹ James Baldwin, 'To Be In A Rage, Almost All The Time', *NPR*, 1 June 2020

² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated from the French by Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 1967). p. xv. All further references are taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in text.

³ Christina Sharpe's text *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Katherine McKittrick's article 'Mathematical Black Life', and W.E.B. Du Bois' text *The Souls of Black Folk* all speak to shards of this psycho-existential complex.

white man' (69). Against this universalizing abdication, I would argue rap and Sharpe's conceptualization of wake work, specifically how rap fulfils wake work's hauntological demands, are, in fact, potent forms of ontological resistance against the American hegemony and its wider power asymmetries in the socioracial order. In fulfilling wake work's hauntological demands, rap offers the promise and hope of the integration, acceptance, and acknowledgement of Black subjectivity amidst the daunting presence of ghosts and the abusive systems of power responsible for their creation.

In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe traverses between visual, literary, and theoretical archives to portray the contemporary Black existence defined by the wake of slavery, and the violence consistently accomplished by an antiblack singularity. This wake, which 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' leaves behind Black death and the 'hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying'.⁴ This 'wake work' describes how the modern Black body must bear McKittrick's 'new world blackness': a blackness originating and emerging in violence, death, and the cumulative trauma produced by the antiblack singularity.⁵ In this paper, I will argue that not only are wake work and rap forms of ontological resistance against the American hegemony and its systems of oppression, but also reparative solutions to the psychopathology of the Black man's existential deviation. We can observe both Fanon's existential deviation and the weaponization of rap as a means of ontological resistance within Childish Gambino's construction and discography, and from these observations, demonstrate the promise rap brings as an ontological emancipator. In creating Childish Gambino as outcast incarnate, the character is Donald Glover's vessel to store and express the valences, prospects, forces, and opportunities he experiences traversing through racially and economically antagonistic spaces. I explore how Gambino's existential deviation during his childhood and adolescence is rooted in his inability to be accepted by both his white and Black contemporaries, forcing him to occupy the fringe between the racial communities of Stone Mountain, his childhood home. Fanon's explications on the Black man's existential deviation reflect many innate components of the Black man's ontogeny but do not explicitly consider the ghosts embedded within new world blackness, which I will argue, must be at the forefront of these inquiries. Fanon admits 'the black Americans are living a different drama' than a Black man of his temporal and spatial position; nevertheless it is possible to expand upon his conclusions and supplement them with a twenty-first-century encounter of the Fanonian 'black problem' using Childish Gambino, a Black man in America, as our main subject of study (3).

In the mixtape *Royalty's* 'We Ain't Them' (2012), 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', reflecting the antiblack violence present in Sharpe and McKittrick's work.⁶ American slavery forced Black bodies to undergo a self-generative and intertwined process in incorporating 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. In its fractured and fragmented state, the enslaved Black body is vulnerable to haunting as it is psychologically constrained under malicious systems of exploitation. In her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008),

⁴ Christina E. Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 3,10.

⁵ Katherine McKittrick, 'Mathematics Black Life', *The Black Scholar*, 44.2 (2014), pp. 16–28, p. 16.

⁶ Childish Gambino, 'We Ain't Them', from *Royalty* (Glassnote Records, 2012).

Avery Gordon defines haunting as the ‘language and the experiential modality by which abusive systems of power make themselves [and] the incontrovertible facticity of racial capitalism’ known.⁷ Abusive and racialized systems of power like slavery, Jim Crow, and its aftermath, mar the Black body, leaving scars and echoes of haunting’s spectral language in their wake. These scars, like Fanon’s existential deviation, are remnants of abusive systems of power, exerting their will on the Black body, bringing chaos into its language via a repetitive compulsion of haunting. The network of psychological neuroses embedded within slavery, and its continuation in socioracial systems of exploitation designed to objectify Black bodies, form the ‘social and economic realities’ Fanon argues must be recognized when discussing the ‘true disalienation of the black man’ (4). Early in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon asserts that we attach a ‘fundamental importance to the phenomenon of language’ because to ‘speak’ means ‘being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such [language]’ (8). Synthesizing Gordon and Fanon’s framing of language as a vector of ontology shows the Black body’s language is haunted by abusive systems of power, forcing the syntax of the colonizer onto its morphology and its ability to ‘speak’. This syntax not only determines the words uttered by the Black body but also the language they emit as a sociopolitical structure trying to define its existential deviation. As a Black man in America, Gambino recounts such familial histories to prove that he, using the English language and thus, in a Fanonian context, assuming a culture to support the weight of Western civilization, can disrupt the colonization of his own psychopathology and transcend the modes of life, affect, and community dictated by his colonizers.

To complicate my discussion of Fanon’s existential deviation, I would like to merge its spectral characteristics with that of McKittrick’s ‘new world blackness’, and its relationship with what Christina Sharpe identifies as the ‘antiblack singularity’.⁸ New world blackness acts upon a Black man in the twenty-first century, personified as Childish Gambino, through his historic designation as an economic object via the ‘proved and certified archives of ledgers, accounts, price tags, and descriptors of economic worth and financial probability’.⁹ To invoke Sharpe, the rituals and acts of antiblackness accompanying slavery and these economic documents created such a violent environment the institution morphed into an all-encompassing climate. Sharpe describes a ‘singularity’ as a ‘weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances’, meaning the antiblack singularity is a phenomenon occurring around the set of political, economic, and racial circumstances that dehumanized and violated African peoples.¹⁰ Enslaved African bodies were recorded in state-sponsored documents like ledgers and logs as *property* and, by dying as such, were left in the American archive as economic *objects*, but producing a *human* ghost. Gordon posits the ghost as a manifestation of modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, repression, and their concrete impacts on the people most affected by them, and on their shared conditions of living. To probe into a Black man’s historic designation as an economic object necessitates a collision with the language of the economic archive, the colonizer’s language, that has erased the humanity of his ancestors and left in its stead the need for Sharpe’s wake work: the haunting labor a living Black body undertakes to humanize Black ghosts from an American economy of skin pushing for Black death. I believe this complicated network of ontological and psychic positionalities encompasses a Black man in America’s existential deviation, and while the depth of this network remains horribly daunting

⁷ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Chicago: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. xvi.

⁸ McKittrick, p. 16.

⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁰ Sharpe, p. 3.

to overcome, rap can, at least, present the opportunity to use the language of the colonizer as a means of achieving sociopolitical and economic mobility. Bound by the historic designation of nonperson, Childish Gambino equips the African oral tradition embedded within hip-hop to combat American necropolitics and the antiblack singularity in which Black life is rent and torn.

In *Camp*'s 'That Power' (2011), Childish Gambino provides a concrete profiling of his existential deviation within the geographical context of the American South, a region known for its extreme racial divide and violence. In the song's first verse, Gambino raps:

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.¹¹

In this verse, we can observe Gambino's disalienation as a negotiation between how a Black body is racialized, and the subjectivity that is granted as an exterior effect instead of being an interior effect with an outward orientation. The 'white dudes' Gambino refers to are malicious representations of the American hegemony willing and able to weaponize a Black body's blackness against itself. Calling Gambino 'white' because of his personal demonstration of blackness while simultaneously discriminating against him because of this same blackness reflects Gambino's disalienation: the attack uses the designation of white to subvert Gambino's identity as a Black man while also reinforcing that Black is subhuman and worthy of violation. Gambino rapping he is being 'stared at by Confederates' alludes to the historical geopolitics of Stone Mountain, it is the site of the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. Many of the white people he encountered growing up are, in essence, political actors seeking to reinforce a Confederate agenda. These violent and discriminatory actions are not isolated incidents unique to Gambino but, instead, are social manifestations of the antiblack singularity that has survived slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. Gambino's experience with Stone Mountain's racial communities is an expression of his existential deviation and subsequent double consciousness in America, 'a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world'. As an outcast, Gambino was always looking at himself through the eyes of others, and for Du Bois, measured his soul both by the blackness he knew to be, and the whiteness forced upon him: therein his psyche was a distinct 'two-ness...two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder'.¹² Gambino's fragmented bodily schema reveals his embodiment of division: to Fanon, the *self* is a dialectic composition of a 'body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world', but disrupting this process of composition, as abusive systems of power do, divides the Black body from itself and prevents the formation of a complete bodily schema.¹³ In this division, the Black man becomes a conjunction of social, phenomenological, and psychological disruptions, behaving as an animated vessel containing internally opposing forces, also known as the 'two-ness' Du Bois attributes to the American Negro's consciousness.¹⁴ Despite the repeated attacks on his racial identity and social agency, 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 as he alludes to with the line 'Stone Mountain, you raised

¹¹ Childish Gambino, 'That Power', from *Camp* (Glassnote Records, 2011).

¹² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.

¹³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 70

¹⁴ Du Bois, p. 44.

me well' because he can use rap as a form of revenge against his haters and the Confederate legacy ingrained within the South.¹⁵

In my reading, one of Childish Gambino's most important heuristic purposes is to demonstrate how rap, as a form of Fanon's 'collective catharsis', alleviates the melancholia that accompanies new world blackness (96). These critical considerations are at the forefront of wake workers like Gambino who converge Fanon's attempt to explain 'psychopathologically and philosophically the *being* of the black man' with the spectrality embedded within the Black body (6). In *Because the Internet's* 'II. Earth: The Oldest Computer (The Last Night)' (2013), Gambino negotiates these phenomenological tensions with the ontological implications of twenty-first century technology:

Yeah, break free from all of the insides
The godless denied us
But we don't give a damn bout the next day
We were never here, never know if the world change
Common sense, the consequences
Retweet the truth, then regret the mentions
We are the wireless survivors of things gone
Slaves to the unnamed never live long
Live and die by the line 'Never know fear'
Even I won't survive, is it unfair?
Is it unfair? Cause I don't care
When I step on that ant on the grass
Progress only thing that'll last (*last, last*)
3005, the year that we fear only God will survive
To be alone is alive.¹⁶

The first couplet of Gambino's verse 'Yeah, break free from all of the insides/ The godless denied us' is a veiled allusion to the psychopathology of a Black man in Gambino's specific temporal moment. Gambino first orients his listener to the psychic landscape of blackness as a means of preparing them to understand how those afflicted by new world blackness, 'the wireless survivors of things gone', live as necropolitical manifestations of economic violence. The 'things' Gambino alludes to are the Black bodies designated by the American hegemony as economic objects and the 'wireless survivors' the descendants of enslaved African people who must conduct wake work to humanize Black ghosts, the 'things', from the economic archive. As a victim of the antiblack singularity's repetition compulsion, Gambino weaponizes his colonizer's language to activate Black ghosts from the economic archive and produce their personhood from an 'afterlife of property'.¹⁷ Conducting the haunting labor of humanizing Black ghosts requires an intimate relationship with the spectral world, so it is no coincidence the word 'slaves' follows the lines 'We were never here, never know if the world change' and 'Retweet the truth, then regret the mentions', because the concealment of Black subjectivity that pervaded Fanon's temporal moment continues to persist into Gambino's. Wake work re-temporalizes the laborer and their experience of a Black past, present, and future where haunting is the language of

¹⁵ Childish Gambino, 'That Power', from *Camp* (Glassnote Records, 2011).

¹⁶ Childish Gambino feat. Azealia Banks, 'II. Earth: The Oldest Computer (The Last Night)', from *Because the Internet* (Glassnote Records, 2013).

¹⁷ McKittrick, p. 18.

‘working against meaning, working for meaning, [and] working in and out of meaning’.¹⁸ In the case of Childish Gambino, we can observe his experience with an altered Black chronology through his lines ‘Progress only thing that’ll last (*last, last*) 3005, the year that we fear only God will survive’. The ‘we’ being used in this couplet reflects the collective register of the Fanonian black problem’, so when Gambino describes the ruin that will precede the year 3005 he is operating from a similar critical framework as my own, one that argues ruin pervades the collective Black destiny.¹⁹ In the twenty-first century, the social and economic reality of a Black man in America is one of extreme haunting, but, the prevalence of rap as an art form gives the contemporary Black man an opportunity to channel in resistance or intentionally their haunting reality into a practice of concerted awareness and transformation.

To Du Bois, inside the American Negro are ‘two warring ideals’ and ‘two unreconciled strivings’ that drive them to discover the meaning of Black identity.²⁰ This quest of discovery, as it did for Childish Gambino, can often give way to a need for revenge, which then in turn becomes a palpable neurosis within their existential deviation. In *Culdesac*’s ‘Fuck it All’, Gambino explicitly recounts his need for revenge and the psychological damage this need, coupled with his existential deviation, caused:

Cause I used to be poor, I used to be unconfident
I used to hate these haters, now it’s just the opposite
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
And I hope you’re doing well and feeling better ‘bout yourself
Don’t know if you can tell, but change is usually for the better
I used to like these bitches but couldn’t afford to get ‘em
But now I’ll take your girl, yeah player pay homage
That’s why I fuck these bad mamas, Kate Gosselin
I’m trying to tell the world I’m nothing to be trifled with
Donald Glover staying hotter than some rifle spit
They only wanna fuck with you after you made your way
But when you started out you couldn’t pay ‘em to stay
But now I got ‘em lined up in the lobby door
It makes me wonder what this rapping shit’s a hobby for
Oh that’s right, because I’m gifted in another field, and another field, and another field
They say my public persona don’t have enough appeal
I take a lesson from Kanye and give ‘em something real
I’m getting all this attention I wanna do it right
That’s why I’m performing for you like every single night
To all my fans who’s saying Donald Glover about to blow
Just give me six months so you can say I told you so.²¹

¹⁸ M. NourbeSe Philip and Setaey Adamu Boateng, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 204.

¹⁹ Fanon, p. 70.

²⁰ Du Bois, p. 4.

²¹ Childish Gambino, ‘Fuck it All’, from *Culdesac* (Glassnote Records, 2010).

Like Lord Byron, Gambino blurs the line between human and literary construct: he is one rapper whose 'hero was his poetry, or whose poetry existed for his hero'.²² As we can observe in the above lines, Gambino details the psychological healing he had to create for himself in order to move past the disalienation and 'living hell' forced onto him by his peers. Gambino's mentions of his marginalized economic status: 'I used to be poor', 'I used to like these bitches but couldn't afford to get 'em', and 'But when you started out you couldn't pay 'em to stay' reflect the economic nature of his disalienation and the continued economic marginalization Black bodies must navigate in America. However, the fact that this verse is written in the past tense, particularly with lines that point to a passing of time 'Cause I used to be poor, I used to be unconfident/ I used to hate these haters, now it's just the opposite', 'I used to like these bitches but couldn't afford to get 'em/ But now I'll take your girl, yeah player pay homage', and 'But when you started out you couldn't pay 'em to stay/ But now I got 'em lined up in the lobby door' means Gambino has already progressed past the need for revenge and that he has used his gifts in 'another field, and another field, and another field' to achieve socioeconomic mobility. This passage of time demonstrates there was a past Gambino, who was ill-equipped to combat the visceral consequences of his existential deviation, and a present Gambino who has changed and is on his way to 'becoming something better'. The present Gambino recognizes the responsibility of his recently-attained cultural position because of his 'gifts'— 'I'm getting all this attention I wanna do it right'—and now seeks to combat disalienation in the collective register. Gambino notes his existential deviation could have led to violence or some other antagonistic chain of events, but he believed acting upon this violence would reflect a weakness he already reconciled within his psyche. In an American socioracial order that often demonizes the Black man into a violent thug and criminal, Gambino believed committing these acts of violence or revenge would prove the white hegemony and his 'haters' right: that given the opportunity or choice, Gambino would choose violence and prove that he *is* dangerous. Instead, Gambino psychologically navigated through the violence inflicted upon him to become 'something better' and used his confidence to transcend the brutalities and trauma in his existential deviation. If we are to move toward a Fanonian revolution, we need to not only recognize how abusive systems of power like colonization and slavery restrict the Black body and its language, but also how the Black body can weaponize the language of the colonizer to achieve sociopolitical and economic mobility. Furthermore, we need to recognize how rap, as the descendant of the African oral tradition, is a dynamic, revolutionary artform entrenched in Black possibility, or rather a reparative futurity entrenched within the lessons of the past and the reality of the present.

The African oral tradition embedded within hip-hop, in its function as a weaponization of language, exposes the intergenerational racial and economic violence responsible for the Black man in America's psychopathology, 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'.²³ Such 'incomplete forms of containment' are economic in nature for the Black body as the Black ghost reminds us the 'slave is possession, proved to be property', so it would follow that Black freedom is 'embedded within an economy of race and violence', with this economy of violence being housed within the economic archive.²⁴ Rap, in its function as a 'channel, an outlet whereby the energy accumulated in the form of aggressiveness can be released', is a performative collective catharsis designed to humanize the Black ghosts locked within this economy of race and violence (112). Bound by the historic designation of

²² Peter L. Thorslev Jr., *Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Chicago: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 4.

²³ Gordon, p. xvi

²⁴ McKittrick, p. 17

nonperson, rappers repurpose the African oral tradition and the language of their colonizers to combat the American hegemony and the antiblack singularity in which Black life is rent and torn. For Fanon, revolution is a permanent state of struggle. Rappers exemplify this by embodying archives of Black resistance, in which knowledge is passed down through generations via the coding and weaponization of language. Throughout this paper we have explored Fanon's concept of existential deviation and its relationship to Sharpe's antiblack singularity and McKittrick's new world blackness and even observed how Childish Gambino has weaponized rap to combat his own existential deviation, but the question remains: where do we go from here? Synthesizing Fanon's existential deviation with the Black body in America should illustrate the potency of the Fanonian 'black problem' in the twenty-first century, but what does it actually *mean*?²⁵ What does rap's reparative functionality concretely accomplish in our day-to-day lives? For many, like me, it gives Black people 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. Fanon is quick to point out the 'true disalienation of the black man implies a brutal awareness of the social and economic realities', an awareness that has become increasingly visible thanks to rap's widespread appeal.²⁶ Rappers like Childish Gambino use the oral tradition to paint acutely the plight of the Black man in a white world, but the economic opportunities rap affords Black men give them a chance to create revolution, the kind of hopeful reimagining Fanon did not live to see.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

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Discography

- Childish Gambino, 'Fuck it All', from *Culdesac* (Glassnote Records, 2010)
- 'That Power', from *Camp* (Glassnote Records, 2011)
- Childish Gambino feat. Azealia Banks, 'II. Earth: The Oldest Computer (The Last Night)', from *Because the Internet* (Glassnote Records, 2013)

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