On Afropessimism and Afrofuturism: The Black "Boogeymen" of Childish Gambino and Ghali[1]

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The boogeyman is a mythical figure of global folklore. Although the name, description, and details about this creature's exploits vary by location, the legend of the boogeyman continues to circulate in different cultures and countries.[2] Like other folktales, boogeyman narratives reflect the social order in a given geographical region and historical epoch.[3] As such, tales about this figure—who operates at the contours of civic belonging—ultimately illuminate anxieties of a specific sociocultural context. Oral accounts of boogeymen often share key elements: (1) this monster is capable of shifting its physical appearance and (2) it serves a predominantly didactic function. Stories about the boogeyman are disseminated in order to instill good behavior in children.[4] In short, in the oral tradition markers of the boogeyman's race and gender are often ambiguous or inconsequential, and the intended purpose of this legend is to uphold social order by disciplining transgressors.

The boogeyman has resurfaced continuously in popular culture, and, to borrow from Karra Shimabukuro's notion of "modern folklore,"[5] this creature has been reimagined in response to particular (perceived) sociohistorical exigencies. Chiefly, the boogeyman has served as fodder for horror fiction. Short stories featuring boogeymen penned by authors Stephen King and Clive Barker in the 1970s and 1980s—when Second Wave Feminism agitated for additional advancements in women's rights, including curbing domestic violence, and Black activists continued lobbying for civic equality, including fair housing and equal employment opportunities—have been adapted into films.[6] King's boogeyman is a middle-aged man with a "rotted, spade-claw hand,"[7] a "rubbery, frightening grin"[8] and "a sick, yellow smile."[9] His monster is also misogynistic, racist, and violent. He resents his wife for her unplanned pregnancies, uses racial slurs, and is physically imposing. Barker's "The Forbidden" adds elements of seduction to earlier versions of the "boogeyman" legend. Named the Candyman in Barker's story, this creature uses candy-coated razor-blades wrapped in bright paper to attract and kill his victims. Graduate student Helen, the protagonist, also succumbs to his alluring essence—namely, his "cotton candy"[10] scent and the dizzying effect of his glance. Barker's boogeyman has a hook for a hand and a nest of bees that inhabits his rotted torso. With the exception of these nonhuman features, Barker's monster, like King's, possesses physical attributes that echo his psychological malady:

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[1] Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers and editors for their generous readings and valuable feedback.

[2] For an in-depth study on the "boogeyman" in global folklore see Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 23–47.

[3] Ibid., 42.

[4] Ibid., 10–11; 23–47.

[5] Karra Shimabukuro, "The Bogeyman of Your Nightmares: Freddy Krueger's Folkloric Roots," *Studies in Popular Culture* 36, no. 2 (2014): 46.

[6] Stephen King's short story, "Boogeyman," was first published in the March 1973 issue of the men's magazine *Cavalier*, and later included in the author's first anthology, *Night Shift* (New York: Double Day, 1978), 100–114; Clive Barker, "The Forbidden," in *Books of Blood*, vol. 5 (London: Sphere Books, 1984).

[7] Stephen King, "The Boogeyman," 112.

[8] Ibid., 101, 110.

[9] Ibid., 109.

[10] Quotes from "The Forbidden" are from Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, ed., *Clive Barker: Dark Imaginer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 118.

his cheeks are "jaundiced,"[11] his "thin lips"[12] are a "pale blue,"[13] and "his flesh [is] a waxy yellow."[14] Interestingly, then, both King's and Barker's boogeymen shed the androgynous form often present in oral accounts. Their monsters are *white men* and social outcasts, characterized by mental and physical afflictions, and they enact violence on *women* as well as children. Thus, in these examples of modern folklore the boogeyman could be interpreted as a kind of symbolic projection of conservative white men's unbridled anxieties about potential shifts in the social order and the patriarchal family dynamic. In other words, King's and Barker's boogeymen may actually reveal white men's perception that they must eliminate purported threats for the purpose of maintaining the status quo and (re)asserting their dominance.

Barker's "boogeyman"—while retaining the essential quality of signifying cultural boundaries and transgressions—has undergone further modifications in media adaptations. "The Forbidden" inspired the *Candyman* franchise.[15] This series of U.S. horror films released between 1992 and 2021 swaps Barker's pale "boogeyman" for Black actor Tony Todd, and it replaces the British tenement of the source text with Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing projects. In light of these changes, I argue *Candyman* issues a scathing commentary on anti-Black subjugation that can be studied through the lens of "Afropessimism." Jared Sexton and Frank B. Wilderson III are widely considered the originators of this critical framework of interpretation.[16] These scholars and their interlocutors seek to uncover and illuminate "civil society's dependence on antiblack violence."[17] Different from Marxist, postcolonial, and feminist frameworks, which often analogize anti-Black subjugation with the affliction of other oppressed beings, Afropessimists submit that an accurate account of the Black experience must include the specificity of Black suffering.[18] Indeed, while Afropessimism is composed of many nuanced arguments, at the core of this meta-theory is a central question: notwithstanding perceptions of progress and inclusion (e.g. emancipation, abolishing *de jure* segregation, the election and appointment of Black persons to political and juridical positions), why does the fundamental configuration of anti-Blackness (e.g. health and wealth disparities between Black and non-Black communities, the association of Blackness with abjection) persist? Afropessimists assert that the global Black experience, in all its political, intellectual, and cultural forms, is the perpetual cycle of slavery.[19]

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[11] Ibid., 119.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] There are four films in the series: *Candyman* (dir. Bernard Rose, 1992), *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (dir. Bill Condon, 1995), *Candyman: Day of the Dead* (dir. Turi Meyer, 1999), and *Candyman* (dir. Nia DaCosta, 2021).
[16] Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *Tensions*, no. 5 (2011): 1–47; Jared Sexton, "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts," *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*, no. 1 (2012), https://csalateral.org/issue/1/ante-anti-blackness-afterthoughts-sexton/; Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Frank B. Wilderson III et al., *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Racked & Dispatched, 2017), https://monoskop.org/images/f/f2/Wilderson_III_Frank_B_et_al_Afropessimism_2017.pdf; Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020).
[17] Patrice Douglass, Selamawit D. Terrefe, and Frank B. Wilderson III, "Afro-pessimism," *Oxford Bibliographies - African American Studies,* accessed September 2024, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190280024/obo-9780190280024-0056.xml.
[18] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 14–17, 41; C. Darius Gordon, "Just What is Afropessimism and What's it Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?: Unpacking New Contributions to Black Educational Thought," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 26, no. 1 (2023): 19.
[19] Wilderson et al., *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*, 8–9.

In other words, the Black/non-Black paradigm of modern society is structured by the same conceptualization that underpins the master/slave relation, and Black existence in its entirety is defined by "social death." Blackness, then, is neither a political nor cultural identity.[20] Rather, akin to the paradigmatic position of the slave—and, in some sense, evocative of the "boogeyman" figure—Blackness is a marker of a nonhuman other against which conceptions of humanity are established and the sociocultural status quo is maintained. In this configuration, the disavowal of Blackness serves to validate the ontological coherence of the human, or, as João H. Costa Vargas puts it, the notion that "one *is* because one *is not* Black."[21] This axiom, while straightforward, does not oversimplify interpretations of anti-Black subjugation. It bolsters Afropessimists' claims that anti-Blackness is a ubiquitous, transhistorical, but also specific, mechanism of control used to project the irreconcilability of Black "nonbeings" with humanity: in so doing, it legitimizes all forms of anti-Black violence and oppression. It is also the ideological fulcrum upon which a seemingly global commitment to anti-Black solidarity is structured and maintained (e.g. the enduring Black/non-Black binary).

Returning to *Candyman*, this film franchise invents a disturbing backstory involving a forbidden interracial romance and slavery. In brief, *this* "boogeyman" is the ghost of a slave who was lynched, mutilated, and stung to death by bees for pursuing a white love interest. The series also implies that the title character's lust for violence is motivated by revenge. Moreover, the depiction of Candyman, first as a slave and then as a monster, supports Afropessimists' assertion that social institutions and structures both shape, and are shaped by, a Black/non-Black binary that bars Black people from the category of "human" and, as such, denies to them "social recognition, volition…and the valuation of life."[22] The "boogeyman" portrayed by Black actor Tony Todd is the manifestation of a monster, who, like generations of Black slaves, is inherently bound to the essential role of "social death."

The decision to set *Candyman* at Cabrini-Green can also be interpreted through the lens of Afropessimism. The Cabrini-Green complex, constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, was part of a long-planned set of public housing developments in Chicago.[23] Originally, these row houses and apartment buildings were envisioned as progressive communities to be spread throughout the city. However, the city council refused to construct public housing projects in white communities, thereby forcing them to be wedged into inner-city neighborhoods of Black occupants in the Lower North Side of the city. Due to illegal redlining, tenants of Cabrini-Green were unable to qualify for alternative housing. These discriminatory practices—which Afropessimists maintain are entrenched in anti-Black systems and structures of society—produced a self-fulfilling prophecy. By the 1980s, Cabrini-Green became a national symbol of degradation and community neglect. The walled-off, overcrowded, difficult-to-access design of Cabrini-Green facilitated a rise in gang violence and crime, thereby fueling sentiments of anti-Blackness. The Chicago Housing Authority eventually abandoned the maintenance of the neighborhood's basic infrastructure, in turn creating subhuman living conditions for the predominantly Black, poverty-stricken residents.[24] Ultimately,

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[20] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 14–15; Gordon, "Just What is Afropessimism?" 19.

[21] João H. Costa Vargas, *The Denial of Antiblackness: Multiracial Redemption and Black Suffering* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 32.

[22] Wilderson et al., *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*, 8.

[23] For a detailed history on Cabrini-Green and accounts of residents' experiences, see Ben Austen, *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the Fate of American Public Housing* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018).

[24] Deirdre Pfeiffer, "Displacement Through Discourse: Implementing and Contesting Public Housing Redevelopment in Cabrini Green," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 35, no. 1 (2006): 43.

then, the *Candyman* setting appears to be an intentional provocation to acknowledge Chicago's racist history—particularly the city's hostility towards Black residents[25]—yet, in alignment with afropessimistic thought, the films do not propose a means of dismantling the Black/non-Black paradigm that is predicated upon Black suffering.

The [Black] "Boogeyman"

When examined through the theoretical framework of Afropessimism, film adaptations of Barker's "boogeyman" compel the spectator to recognize that this fictional monster of folklore has materialized into a real-life target of anti-Blackness. Taking stock of the historical legacies of racial oppression that perpetuate the myth of the ravenous Black rapist in American culture, Jody Miller defines the "boogeyman" as "the archetypal image of the dangerous (Black) male stranger, lurking in the shadows, targeting the stereotypic innocent (white) female victim."[26] Miller's description underscores the sinister intent of *this* iteration of the "boogeyman." Unlike the original legend, it is the creature, rather than its would-be "victims" (mischievous children), that must be disciplined. Furthermore, this "boogeyman" is identified by specific gender (male) and race (Black) attributes. As a consequence, the Black/non-Black structural paradigm identified by Afropessimists is upheld and, in turn, the Black male body—denuded of its humanity—is transformed into a visible scapegoat of danger and violence that must be neutralized. Examples in which media outlets simultaneously justify police officers' excessive brutality and demonize Black men as brute criminals and sadistic predators are numerous.[27] Whereas uniformed agents are praised for their bravery in mainstream media accounts, now-dead Black "boogeymen" are imbued with menacing qualities; they are in fact described as "aggressive," "angry," and "thugs."[28] Accordingly, engaging in an afropessimistic analysis of these trends, it is clear that in the present day "Blackness itself is criminalized";[29] Black people are racialized objects rather than rights-bearing humans, and there is no restorative solution, even in a post-abolition society.

Unlike the multiple linguistic variants of "boogeyman" present in global folklore,[30] this frightening figure is rendered as the "uomo nero" (Black man) in the Italian language. Lyrics of the popular lullaby, "Ninna nanna, ninna no," serve the same disciplinary function as other boogeyman legends; they warn children that misbehavior could provoke their kidnapping by the "uomo nero."[31] Likewise, Sergio Rubini's Felliniesque film, *L'uomo nero* (2009), is interspersed with unsettling flashbacks in which the title character, portrayed by Pietro Ciciriello, haunts a seven-year-old child. Both texts associate the "uomo nero" with danger and darkness. The monster of the lullaby dons black clothing, its face is obscured by a hood, and the version that appears in

[25] In 1966 community organizer Dorothy Gautreaux and other tenants of public housing complexes filed a lawsuit against the Chicago Housing Authority. They alleged that the public housing program was ideated and executed in a racially discriminatory manner that perpetuated racial segregation. The Chicago Housing Authority was found liable in 1969, and much of Cabrini-Green was demolished between 1995–2011. In the first film of the *Candyman* series, scenes set in Cabrini-Green were filmed on location and in surrounding areas marked by urban blight.

[26] Jody Miller, *Getting Played: African American Girls, Urban Inequality, and Gendered Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 2.

[27] Calvin John Smiley and David Fakunle, "From 'Brute' to 'Thug': The Demonization and Criminalization of Unarmed Black Male Victims in America," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 26, no. 3–4 (2016): 35–66.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Wilderson et al., *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*, 9.

[30] Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman*, 42–46.

[31] Seven versions of the lullaby are available here.

Rubini's film is a shadowy figure filmed in low-key lighting. Thus, while it is true that these configurations of the "boogeyman" bypass direct associations of terror and criminality with race (Ciciriello is a white Italian actor), as Marina Warner points out in her study of folklore figures, this linguistic tradition of accentuating "racial differences" between humans and monsters remains unchanged in Italy.[32] The expression "uomo nero," and the continued (sub)conscious use of this term, evokes nuanced negative connotations of (anti-)Blackness in Italy—a country that has not only been hostile towards Black Italians and Black immigrants, but has also yet to fully acknowledge that anti-Black "racism is a pervasive element in Italian society and a constitutive factor in the process of national formation."[33]

In Italy, the perception of Black men as deviant aggressors has an even longer history than the U.S. Italy has never been an ethno-racially "pure" country. Yet, prior even to Italian Unification, the "race/reproduction bind"[34]— the false belief that race is biologically reproduced—played a central role in projecting a coherent vision of national Italian identity that was (and remains) uniformly white.[35] Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, assumptions about race, biology, and moral integrity nurtured anxieties about safeguarding a supposedly superior Italic bloodline. Criminologists and anthropologists like Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, Guglielmo Ferrero, and Giuseppe Sergi authored pseudoscientific manuals on biological determinism and race that compounded internal divisions within the fledgling country. At the time, Mediterranean identity was considered "meno bianco e più meticcio, meno biologico e più storico" (less white and more mixed, less biologically-advanced and more primitive) than a "pure" Roman lineage.[36] Southern Italian men were therefore considered to be genetically inclined to immoral behaviors and sexual pathologies.[37] This configuration of desirable/undesirable Italians is not a precise parallel to the Black/non-Black paradigm analyzed by Afropessimists. It nevertheless associates Blackness (vis-à-vis the phenotype and often darker complexion of Southern Italians) with subhuman criminality; moreover, it anticipates a recurring trend in the visual culture of Fascist Italy, namely that it is white Italians' civic duty to defuse the threat of non-Italian Black "boogeymen." In Italian Fascism's empire cinema, male characters of African and Arab origin replace Southern Italian men as genetically inferior savages and sexual predators.[38] Recalling a

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[32] This is worth noting because in countries like England, "'black-man' is no longer used as an alternative phrase for 'bogey'… as it was in Middle English." Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman*, 25.

[33] Caterina Romeo, "Racial Evaporations: Representing Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature," in *Postcolonial Italy*: *Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, 221–36 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 230.

[34] I borrow this term from Alys Eve Weinbaum who interrogates assumptions about ethnicity, race, and the biologically reproductive body in ideologies of racism, nationalism, and imperialism. See Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 5.

[35] Lucia Re's article, "Italians and the Invention of Race," is a foundational work on this topic. See Lucia Re, "Italians and the Invention of Race: The Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890–1913," *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–65, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/96k3w5kn.

[36] All translations are mine. Gaia Giuliani e Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e nero: Storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani* (Florence: Le Monnier-Mondadori, 2013), 21.

[37] Among others, see Mary Gibson, "Biology or Environment? Race and Southern 'Deviancy' in the Writings of Italian Criminologists, 1880–1920," in *Italy's "Southern Question*": *Orientalism in One Country*, ed. Jane Schneider (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 99–116; Pasquale Verdicchio, "The Preclusion of Postcolonial Discourse in Southern Italy," in *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, ed. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 193–95.

[38] The African and Arab men in *Maciste contro lo sceicco* (dir. Mario Camerini, 1926), *La sperduta di Allah* (dir. Enrico Guazzoni, 1929), and *L'Esclave blanc* (dir. Augusto Genina, 1927) are barbaric savages and sexual predators.

key tenet of Afropessimism, by virtue of their stark contrast to white Italian men these aggressive adversaries serve a dual purpose: they both convey the paradoxical relation between "Black" and "human," and they project the perception that (anti-)Blackness is a necessary structural position that serves to delineate the contours of Italian society and culture.

Italian visual culture of the present day has seen an increase in positive representations of Black people and Black culture.[39] However, I agree with Giulia Ferri that "il complesso apparato di stereotipi, immagini e discorsi prodotto dal colonialismo continua ad informare la cultura e la società italiana non solo a livello di immaginario ma anche di rapporti sociali" (the complex apparatus of stereotypes, images, and discourses produced by colonialism continues to inform Italian culture and society not only at the level of imagination but also of social relationships).[40] The non-national, Black [male] body continues to serve as a kind of visual repository upon which to project concerns about Italy's ambiguous ethno-racial identity. Since the early 1990s, Italy has experienced prolonged periods of mass immigration. The transformation of the country into a destination site for immigrants from African countries has stoked the historically negative view of "outsiders" in Italy. Media reports of strife between these migrant communities and law enforcement has led to the widespread perception that Black immigrants—especially Black men—are dangerous and violent criminals.[41] In turn, incidents of discrimination against migrants, second-generation Italians of African and/or Middle Eastern heritage, and Black Italians have been excused, if not justified, as necessary for national security. On multiple occasions, Matteo Salvini, who, in addition to being a leader of the xenophobic Lega party, is an Italian senator and has served as deputy prime minister of Italy and minister of infrastructure and transport since 2022, has used his platform to spread racist, anti-immigration rhetoric and associate Black people with violence and criminality. Let us recall, for example, Salvini's response to the 2018 Macerata shooting. In a tweet published by Salvini after Luca Traini—a twenty-eight-year-old white Italian man who ran as the Lega's candidate in a regional election in 2017—shot and wounded six victims hailing from Africa, the politician placed the blame for the racially-motivated attack squarely on mass immigration, claiming: "L'immigrazione fuori controllo porta al caos, alla rabbia, allo scontro sociale. L'immigrazione fuori controllo porta spaccio di droga, furti, rapine e violenza" (Uncontrolled immigration leads to chaos, anger, and social conflict. Uncontrolled immigration leads to drug dealing, theft, robberies, and violence.).[42] For Black Italian Johanne Affricot, the Macerata shooting immediately brought to mind the "Unite the Right" white supremist rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, and it signaled to her the start of "la caccia

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I borrow the expression "Italian Fascism's empire cinema" from Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

[39] Among other examples, I refer to films and television series including *Zero* (Netflix, 2021) and *Autumn Beat* (Prime Video, 2022); advertisements such as Valentino, "Born in Roma" (2019–24); and fashion such as the "United Colors of Ghali" capsule for Benetton (2021) and Stella Jean's collections.

[40] Giulia Fabbri, "L'afrofuturismo tra Stati Uniti e Italia: Dalla memoria storica ai viaggi intergalattici per re-immaginare futuri postumani," *California Italian Studies* 10, no. 2 (2020): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.5070/C3102047104, 7–8.

[41] Among others, see Angelica Pesarini, "'Africa's Delivery Room': The Racialization of Italian Political Discourse on the 80th Anniversary of the Racial Laws," in *Languages of Discrimination and Racism in Twentieth-Century Italy*, ed. Marcella Simoni and Davide Lombardo (Cham: Springer Nature, 2022), 199–220; and Marco Benoît Carbone, "Migrants, Refugees, Invaders: Responses to the Riace Model's Inclusive Citizenship Project," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 28, no. 4 (2023): 415–32.

[42] Matteo Salvini @matteosalvinimi, "La violenza non è mai la soluzione, la violenza è sempre da condannare. E chi sbaglia, deve pagare. L'immigrazione fuori controllo porta al caos, alla rabbia," X (formerly Twitter), February 3, 2018, https://x.com/matteosalvinimi/status/959821942831435776?lang=ar.

al nero" (the hunt for Blacks) in Italy.[43] Recent posts published on Lega's official Instagram account reinforce Affricot's concern. A series of AI-generated images of Black men of African origin are depicted as violent "boogeymen."[44] They are Islamic terrorists,[45] knife-wielding criminals that threaten carabinieri,[46] and aggressive predators that sexually assault white Italian women and children.[47] As such, Black men who arrive in Italy today remain bound to the country's legacies of anti-Black discrimination and racism.

Glover/Gambino

Black creatives from across the globe have taken on the task of exposing, dismantling, and revising racist perceptions that have subjugated, alienated, and vilified Black persons as less-than-human "internal enemies of civil society."[48] Oftentimes producing art from pain, rap artists of the now global hip-hop movement have recounted the past and present Black experience, and they have reimagined what it could be. Socially conscious hip-hop tracks, which seek to overturn the subordinate position of Black communities within historically oppressive racial/ class hierarchies, are inculcated with messages about anti-Black racism and discrimination, as well as references to systemic inequalities that perpetuate this subjugation.[49]

In the section that follows, I examine the socially conscious visions of Black "boogeymen" by two artists of widespread appeal and noteworthy success, African American actor, writer, producer, and rapper Donald Glover, who performs under the alias Childish Gambino, and second-generation Italian rapper of Tunisian parents, Ghali. Like Camilla Hawthorne and Angelica Pesarini, I, too, acknowledge that "Italy and the United States undoubtedly have different histories of race and race relations."[50] However, again aligning myself with Hawthorne and Pesarini, I submit that Glover/Gambino's and Ghali's uncanny release of tracks with the same title, "Boogieman," offers a compelling example of "Black diasporic solidarity."[51] Both performers,

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[43] Johanne Affricot, "'È iniziata la caccia al nero': I fatti di Macerata visti da una nera italiana," *Vice Italia*, February 5, 2018, https://www.vice.com/it/article/luca-traini-macerata-razzismo/.

[44] A *Lega* spokesperson responded to detractors' critique that this use of artificial intelligence is deceptive, claiming: "Il punto però non è l'immagine…Il punto è il fatto. Ogni post si basa su notizie vere provenienti da giornali italiani, con nomi, date e luoghi" (The point isn't the image…The point is the facts. Each post is based on real news from Italian newspapers, with names, dates and places). See "'La Lega usa l'Intelligenza artificiale per creare foto razziste': Pd e Avs presentano una segnalazione all'Agcom," *Today.it*, April 20, 2025, https://www.today.it/politica/immagini-razziste-intelligenza-artificiale-lega-salvini-segnalazione-agcom.html.

[45] @legaofficial, Instagram, April 18, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DIlTvhpRfgA/.

[46] @legaofficial, Instagram, April 19, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DIoTSI5Nwc0/.

[47] @legaofficial, Instagram, April 9, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DIPLFFLRV_F/; @legaofficial, Instagram, April 14, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DIbo3p6xWkM/; @legaofficial, Instagram, April 15, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DIeEICzNJ2j/; @legaofficial, Instagram, April 18, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DIleDjTtk3D/.

[48] Douglas et al., "Afro-pessimism."

[49] For more on socially conscious hip-hop as a tool of resistance against racism, discrimination, and systemic inequalities, see K. H. Lavar Pope, "Protest into Pop: Hip-hop's Devolution into Mainstream Pop Music and the Underground's Resistance," *The Lehigh Review* 13 (2005): 79; Tony Mitchell, ed., *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 10; Simon Howard, "'Fuck Tha Police': Conscious Hip-Hop Increases Black People's Group-Based Anger and Collective Action Intentions," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* (2024): 1–2, https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000673.

[50] Camilla Hawthorne and Angelica Pesarini, "Making Black Lives Matter in Italy: A Transnational Dialogue," *Public Books*, December 11, 2020, https://www.publicbooks.org/making-black-lives-matter-in-italy-a-transnational-dialogue/.

[51] Ibid.

through their musical compositions, highlight "connections among geographically disparate Black struggles"[52] in the global effort to address and overturn sentiments of anti-Blackness. More precisely, contributing to ongoing conversations sparked by Afropessimists and Afrofuturists, Glover/Gambino's and Ghali's artistic interventions recenter the historically dismissed Black presence in history and culture in the U.S. and Italy from the perspective of Black men. First, an analysis of song lyrics and audiovisual elements in both versions of "Boogieman" elucidates the artists' shared Afropessimistic impulse to implore their listeners to confront the reality that modern society's generation of a Black/non-Black paradigm has shaped negative perceptions of Black communities, particularly Black men. Subsequently, through observations of the afrofuturistic qualities experimented with by Glover/Gambino and Ghali, I illustrate the songwriters' active and imaginative (re)tellings of the "boogeyman" legend through a Black cultural lens.

Donald Glover is a multi-hyphenate artist. He has received numerous accolades in the television, film, and music industries for his manifold creative productions that interrogate stereotypes of Black culture, the exploitation of Black performers, and anti-Blackness. Glover was raised in Stone Mountain, Georgia—at the time a primarily white suburb approximately twenty miles east of Atlanta. He attended a majority-white high school and graduated from the Tisch School of Arts at NYU with a degree in dramatic writing. In numerous interviews, Glover has shared the impact of his upbringing on his artistic vision. He recalls being exposed to icons and acts of anti-Black discrimination and racism, like omnipresent confederate flags displayed in Georgia suburbs and his white classmates' parents' perception that his Blackness rendered him an unsuitable romantic partner.[53] Glover also reveals that he struggled to identify with a like-minded community, which often left him feeling isolated, like "an alien."[54] America of the 1980s and 1990s—when Glover came of age—saw the rise of relatively few Black celebrities, among them Oprah, Michael Jordan, and Eddie Murphy. Even in spaces curated by Black artists—like concerts performed by rock and hip-hop band N.E.R.D.—Glover was an anomaly in a crowd of white fans.[55] These experiences, and the feelings of isolation they engendered, were exacerbated at the start of Glover's career. His early experiences in television network production—first as a writer on *30 Rock*, then as a cast member on *Community* (2009–2016)—impressed upon him the lack of Black voices and Black representation in American entertainment.[56] Actively seeking to fill this lacuna and disrupt the "blackness [a]s always seen through a lens of whiteness"[57] pattern, Glover parlayed his success from *Community* into developing the project for which he is best known, *Atlanta* (2016–2022). This television series—created by, produced by, and starring Glover in the role of a college dropout-turned-manager to a rising rap artist—explores issues of race and belonging for Black subjects through the lens of Black American culture. Glover's award-winning comedy-drama, which has been called a "love letter to hip-hop culture…and Blackness itself,"[58]

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Billy Niles, "Everything We Still Don't Know About Donald Glover's Remarkably Private Life," *ENews*, September 24, 2018, https://www.eonline.com/news/971099/everything-we-still-don-t-know-about-donald-glover-s-remarkably-private-life.

[54] Reggie Ugwu, "Why Donald Glover is Saying Goodbye to Childish Gambino," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/17/arts/music/donald-glover-childish-gambino-bando-stone.html.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ugwu, "Why Donald Glover"; Tad Friend, "Profiles: Donald Glover Can't Save You," *The New Yorker*, February 26, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/05/donald-glover-cant-save-you.

[57] Friend, "Profiles: Donald Glover Can't Save You."

[58] Touré, "Why 'Atlanta' is the Blackest Show Ever," *New York Times*, November 13, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/11/opinion/atlanta-finale.html.

is also groundbreaking in terms of recognition and representation. For *Atlanta*, Glover became the first Black director to win an Emmy in comedy, and this show is one of the few American television series to feature an all-Black writing staff.[59]

As a hip-hop artist Glover has released five studio albums, fourteen mixtapes, and four EPs under the moniker Childish Gambino. Glover/Gambino's most-streamed single, "This is America" (2018), debuted at number one on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100, and it was the first hip-hop track to be awarded a Grammy for Song of the Year and Record of the Year.[60] The song lyrics dissect connections between attitudes of anti-Blackness and acts of anti-Black violence. The music video[61]—which amassed ten million views in twenty-four hours and is hurtling towards a billion clicks on YouTube—depicts multiple examples of anti-Black racism and discrimination, among them graphic portrayals of commodified Black pain, the 2015 Charleston Church Massacre, and the fatal police shooting of Philandro Castile.[62]

Similar themes emerge in a lesser-studied single produced by Glover/Gambino. "Boogieman"—note the spelling change—the third track of the artist's third studio album, *Awaken, My Love!* (2016), is, in no uncertain terms, a censure of U.S. law enforcement's dark history of brutalizing Black (male) bodies. This track implores the listener afropessimistically to confront cycles of anti-Blackness that have normalized unchecked violence inflicted upon Black communities. The "Boogieman" soundscape creates a sonorous link between protests against institutionalized segregation and racism that erupted into deadly riots in urban U.S. cities in the mid-to-late 1960s[63] and the Black experience of the racially divided America of the present day. Heavily syncopated basslines and melodic progressions of the funk music genre—including what appear to be samples from a combination of Funkadelic songs[64]—are layered beneath Glover/Gambino's thoughtfully crafted lyrics. In the first verse of "Boogieman," the singer-songwriter addresses directly the ongoing anti-Black policing practices described by Afropessimists[65]: "With a gun in your hand, I'm the boogieman."[66] These lyrics also underscore

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[59] One additional American tv series with an all-Black writing staff is *Family Reunion* (Netflix, 2019–22). Other series like *Black-ish* (ABC, 2014–22) and *Dear White People* (Netflix, 2017–21) address issues of race, identity, and belonging from the perspective of a Black protagonist and cast, but they were not created by an exclusively Black writing staff.

[60] Jason Bisnoff, "'This is America' Makes History For Hip-Hop; Dominates Big Categories At Grammys," *Forbes*, February 11, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonbisnoff/2019/02/11/this-is-america-makes-history-for-hip-hop-dominates-big-categories-at-grammys/.

[61] See the official "This is America" music video here (accessed April 2025).

[62] There is a large body of work on race, racism, and Black identity in Glover/Gambino's music, particularly concerning the significance and impact of the "This is America" music video. While a complete account of scholarship on this topic is too long to include here, it is striking to note that multiple works, including a monograph and several articles, draw inspiration from the song's title. See, for example, Katie Rios, *This is America: Race, Gender, and Politics in America's Musical Landscape* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021); Kesha James, "'This is America': Repurposing the White Gaze Through Imitation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 110, no. 1 (2024): 7–26; Jennifer Lin LeMesurier, "Winking at Excess: Racist Kinesiologies in Childish Gambino's 'This is America,'" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2020): 139–51.

[63] 1967 is considered the deadliest year of the "race riots." More than 150 riots occurred in cities across the U.S., including Cleveland, Newark, and Detroit. See Leland Ware, "Civil Rights and the 1960s: A Decade of Unparalleled Progress," *Maryland Law Review* 72, no. 4 (2013): 1093.

[64] I refer, in particular, to "Hit It And Quit It," the third track of *Maggot Brain* (1971) and "Good to Your Earhole," the first track of *Let's Take It to the Stage* (1975). Both albums capture the African American community's shared emotions of anger, grief, and resistance against systemic racial oppression.

[65] *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*, 8–9; Steve Martinot and Jared Sexto, "The Avant-garde of White Supremacy," in *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*, 49–66.

[66] Childish Gambino, "Boogieman," track 3 on *Awaken, My Love!*, Glassnote Records, 2016.

the tendency toward, and seemingly irresolvable fallacy of, white authority figures identifying Black men with danger and aggression. Exploring further this trend, in one of the final verses of "Boogieman" Glover/Gambino connects the implications of misidentifying the true aggressor with the fate of the Black community: "But if he's scared of me, How can we be free?"[67] Glover/Gambino's rhetorical question is afropessimistic, insofar as it is a kind of heuristic strategy for diagnosing the ways in which Black people are positioned and punished within the prevailing social structure of American society. Like Wilderson and his Afropessimist interlocutors, Glover/Gambino's lyrics do not offer a solution to anti-Blackness. There can neither be redemption for Black subjects, nor an end to Black suffering, because delineating the contours of humanity is predicated upon their subjugation and "social death." Indeed, building on Kimberly Fain's interpretation of "Boogieman," in a society where "the one who wields the power of the state [i.e., the police] acts as the threatened arbiter of justice,"[68] Black persons—in particular, Black men—cannot be unshackled from legacies of discrimination and racism.

Along with the aforementioned examples of Afropessimism, elements of Afrofuturism can also be identified in Glover/Gambino's "Boogieman." In an essay published in the early 1990s, Mark Dery first defined "Afrofuturism" as "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of the twentieth century technoculture—and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future."[69] Dery's definition, which emerged from interviews with African American scholars about the underlying reasons for the limited representation of African American authors in the genre of science fiction, has since been expanded upon by artists, activists, and researchers aiming to capture the full scope of Afrofuturism.[70] In her presentation at the 2017 Sonic Acts Festival, titled "Afrofuturism: Imagination and Humanity," Ytasha Womack—one of the leading experts in, and an active creator of, Afrofuturism—describes this movement more broadly, explaining that it is "a way of looking at the future and alternate realities through a Black cultural lens."[71] Afrofuturism bridges together technology, imagination, magical realism, and mysticism through a broad range of creative expression, including literature (science fiction), music, visual arts, film, and dance. At its core, it encompasses a greater function than distinct artistic aesthetic. Put simply, Afrofuturism is an artistic mode of self-liberation and self-healing precisely because it empowers Black people to

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Kimberly Fain, "The Black Aesthetic: Musical Revolution in Childish Gambino's *Awaken, My Love!*" *Ploughshares at Emerson College* (blog), February 5, 2017, http://blog.pshares.org/index.php/the-black-aesthetic-musical-revolution-in-childish-gambinos-awaken-my-love/.
[69] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1994), 180.
[70] "Afrofuturism" defies a straightforward definition. Ytasha Womack's primer, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Lawrence Hill Books: Chicago, 2013), provides an accessible introduction to this ever-expanding philosophical, literary, and visual aesthetic, and it highlights a burgeoning community of artists creating Afrofuturist works. Womack draws principally on an archive of works produced by African-American artists. However, in her chapter on "afro-surrealism," she includes examples of Afrofuturism in a global context. I list the limited scholarship on Afrofuturism in the Italian studies discipline in the section on Ghali in this essay. Other recent, but by no means exhaustive, works on Afrofuturism include Kevin M. Strait and Kinshasha Holman Conwill, eds., *Tools for Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2023); Isaac Vincent Joslin, *Afrofuturisms*: *Ecology, Humanity, and Francophone Cultural Expressions* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2023); and Aaron X. Smith, ed., *Afrocentricity in AfroFuturism: Toward Afrocentric Futurism* (Jackson: The University of Mississippi Press, 2023).
[71] See a recording of Ytasha Womack's presentation here (accessed September 2024).

commemorate the significant, yet traditionally silenced, role their ancestors played in history, transform their current circumstances, and imagine a [utopic] future—a human right which, Afropessimists would aver, that has been historically and socially denied to them.

Returning to an analysis of "Boogieman," this track—and the entire *Awaken, My Love!* album—not only critiques anti-Black violence but also celebrates the transformative power of Black diasporic culture. The title "Boogieman," reclaims the central role of Black artists in music history, referencing "boogie woogie," a rhythmic subgenre of the blues that emerged in African American communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[72] Rooted in the blues—a genre shaped by the lived experiences of African Americans in the post-Emancipation South—"boogie woogie" evolved into a dance-oriented style that fostered joy, communal expression, and cultural resilience.[73] Beyond its significance as a musical innovation, "boogie woogie" was a cultural assertion that exemplified Black creativity and served as a foundation for American popular music more broadly, including rock and roll and swing. "Boogieman" also samples from psychedelic soul, funk, and R&B, in turn paying tribute to pioneering Black musicians (particularly George Clinton and the Parliament-Funkadelic collective) whose innovations helped define these genres and contributed to Afrofuturism's rich musical legacy.[74]

The art for *Awaken, My Love!* is yet another example of Glover/Gambino's experimentation with Afrofuturism. The album cover is an obvious nod to the cover of Funkadelic's 1971 album *Maggot Brain*, but there are some key differences worth mentioning. In the source art, Black model Barbara Cheeseborough—who graced the cover of the first issue of the African American women's magazine *Essence* in 1970, was a cover model for *Harper's Bazaar Italia*, and became the trendsetter of an Afrocentric ideal of beauty—is buried up to her neck in dirt and screaming. Keeping in mind the sociohistorical context during which *Maggot Brain* was released—i.e. shortly after the deadly "race riots" of the 1960s and the murders of prominent figures of the Civil Rights Movement—an undying Cheeseborough, in emitting a cathartic scream, could be interpreted as a symbol of Black resistance. Additionally, George Clinton's lyrics might suggest that she is the personification of Mother Earth, the origin and creator of life, who, despite being constantly subjected to human-inflicted violence, nevertheless survives. The album cover of *Awaken, My Love!* features a photograph by Ibra Ake, Glover's long-time collaborator and the creative director of the Childish Gambino persona. In the edited photograph, model Giannina Oteto is otherworldly and ethereal. Her face is illuminated in a deep blue hue, creating a kind of cosmic effect that calls to mind the astral imagery recurrent in multidisciplinary and multimodal works of Afrofuturists. Oteto wears an intricate bone-like headdress designed by Laura Wass. This piece, as a material signifier of the multidimensional possibilities of existence imagined in Afrofuturism, is both ancient and futuristic, blending Egyptian motifs with avant-garde geometric elements. Thus, if the

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[72] Paul Oliver, "African American Music of the Twentieth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, edited by Christopher Brigsby, 354–73 (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2006), 362–65; Cheryl L. Keyes, "The Aesthetic Significance of African American Sound Culture and Its Impact on American Popular Music Style and Industry," *The World of Music* 45, no. 3 (2003): 105–25.

[73] Oliver, "African American Music," 362–65; Keyes, "The Aesthetic Significance of African American Sound Culture," 114–15.

[74] In a subsequent section of this article, I mention Sun Ra, who is considered one of the pioneers of Afrofuturism and one of the first artists to adopt an Afrofuturist approach to music. For additional examples of key, but in no way exhaustive, Afrofuturist musicians, see Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi*, 10, 17–18, 22, 53–76; 146–50; Kevin Clark, "Artists Who Define Afrofuturism In Music: Sun Ra, Flying Lotus, Janelle Monae, Shabaka Hutchings & More," *Grammy Awards*, October 18. 2022, https://www.grammy.com/news/10-artists-who-define-afrofuturism-in-music-sun-ra-shabazz-palaces-janelle-monae-eryka-badu-grace-jones-flying-lotus.

aesthetics and styling of the *Awaken, My Love!* album art acknowledge the histories of Black pain and resistance present in lyrics performed by Clinton and Gambino, here a Black woman and maternal figure is not bound to cycles of human-generated conflicts experienced on Earth (unlike the *Maggot Brain* cover). Rather, this art, and the complete *Awaken, My Love!* project, gestures towards an historically as-yet unimaginable future for Black communities. Indeed, it is also worth noting that Glover/Gambino composed this album in anticipation of the birth of his second son. The expectant father refers to his children in multiple songs on the album and, in "Stand Tall," the final track of *Awaken, My Love!*, Glover/Gambino encourages them to pursue their dreams and stay positive in times of adversity.[75]

Ghali

Ghali Amdouni is a Milan-based musician who performs under the stage name Ghali. The record-breaking rap artist—who was born to Tunisian parents and did not legally obtain Italian citizenship until he was 18—is one of the most successful artists of Italy's contemporary hip-hop music scene. As a solo artist, he has released four studio albums, all of which have peaked in the top five positions of the Federation of the Italian Music Industry chart. Though hailing from a different geographical region and part of a different generation than Glover/Gambino, Ghali shares an artistic vision and career trajectory that were influenced by his upbringing. On multiple occasions, the now thirty-two-year old has remarked that he identifies as an Italian with Tunisian parents.[76] And, similar to Glover/Gambino's observation about the lack of Black celebrities in the America of the 1980s and 1990s, the Milan-based artist, who came of age in Italy of the 2000s, recalls that he, too, grew up without examples of successful Black, second-generation Italian role models to emulate.[77] In solidarity with other members of the global Black diaspora, the Tunisian-Italian rapper has used his celebrity platform to concomitantly fill this void for the increasingly diverse youth generation. Additionally, as Clarissa Clò and Enrico Zammarchi point out, although Ghali "is reluctant to be pigeonholed in a political category,"[78] his work masterfully denounces sentiments of anti-Blackness and racism within and beyond Italy. Ghali has been particularly outspoken about embracing vulnerable populations that are unjustly discriminated against due to their race and cultural heritage. In tracks like "Wily Wily (2017)," "Cara Italia" (2018), and

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[75] Donald Glover's engagement with Afrofuturism includes his early campaign to play Spider-Man, voicing Miles Morales—a half-Latino, half-Black teenage Spidey—in the third season of the *Ultimate Spider-Man* animated series (2014–2015), and portraying Lando Calrissian in *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (dir. Ron Howard, 2018). In a 2018 *SNL* sketch, Glover—playing Lando—hosts a "galactic summit for all Black humans," humorously critiquing the lack of Black representation in science fiction, a topic previously probed by Afrofuturist science fiction author Octavia Butler. Glover's recent project, *Bando Stone and the New World* (2024)—his fifth and purportedly final album produced under the Childish Gambino moniker, as well as a forthcoming film with the same title—continues this commitment, imagining a post-apocalyptic world led by Black survivors.

[76] Among other interviews, see Ghali, "Italian Rapper Ghali Aims to Save Migrants from Drowning in the Mediterranean," interview by Leila Fadel, NPR, August 31, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/08/31/1196943490/italian-rapper-ghali-aims-to-save-migrants-from-drowning-in-the-mediterranean.

[77] Alice Santini e Geremia Trinchese, "Ghali: 'Direi di nuovo "stop al genocidio" a Sanremo. Sono single, non sono mai riuscito a portare avanti una relazione,'" *Vanity Fair Italia*, October 8, 2024, https://www.vanityfair.it/article/ghali-intervista-giovani-musica-politica-guerra-fede-amore; Ghali, "Italian Rapper."

[78] Clarissa Clò and Enrico Zammarchi, "'Stran(i)ero nella mia nazione': Hip-Hop from Southern Alie-Nation to Afro-Italian Nation-Hood," in *Contemporary Italian Diversity in Critical and Fictional Narratives*, ed. Graziella Parati, Marie Orton, and Ron Kubati (Lanham: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2021), 35.

"Bayna" (2022), for example, Ghali not only raps about the discrimination faced by minorities, migrants, and Black Italians, but also seeks to enlighten his global audience about Muslim culture.[79] The overarching message of these songs, as well as Ghali's other projects—which include collaborations with multinational brands like Benetton, McDonald's, and IKEA—is that education plays a central role in dismantling racial and cultural biases and, ultimately, fostering inclusivity. In the following pages, I analyze Ghali's subversion of the racist trope of the dangerous Black male predator in "Boogieman" (2020). I also highlight the rapper's recent and ongoing contributions to the Afrofuturistic (music) movement, which remains an understudied topic in the Italian Studies discipline.[80]

Ghali released "Boogieman"—the second track of his sophomore album, *DNA* (2020)—one month before publishing the full project. This rhythmic dance track, which features vocals by Sardinian hip-hop artist Salmo (Maurizio Pisciottu), reached number one on the Italian singles chart and was certified double platinum. Like Gambino's eponymously titled track, Ghali's "Boogieman" offers a targeted, yet subdued, response to racist discourse about Black men and Black masculinity disseminated by Italian politicians like Salvini. In an interview on *Radio Deejay*, the rapper explains the song title's double meaning.[81] First, it refers to the legend of the "boogeyman," known as "uomo nero" in modern Italian. Second, like Glover/Gambino, Ghali modifies the spelling of "boogey" to "boogie," thus employing a synonym for "dance." Neither racial animus nor police brutality are addressed in the lyrics of Ghali's song. However, the "Boogieman" music video visually dismantles the racist trope of the Black "boogeyman" that pervades Italian and American culture.[82]

The opening scene of the official music video, a kind of audiovisual prelude to the shorter studio cut of the song, plays on the sentiment of anti-Blackness that Afropessimists identify as both a byproduct of, and a contributing force to, institutional racism directed at Black persons. This episode, filmed in *chiaroscuro* and accompanied by the dull hum of white noise, creates a sense of unease reminiscent of a horror movie, not unlike the *Candyman* series. The camera, unsteady and handheld, adopts an unidentified onlooker's point of view. It zooms in on a young white female—a metonym for vulnerability and innocence—playing with a miniature knight figurine outside her family's apartment. When the distance between the off-camera voyeur and the oblivious subject of its gaze contracts, the pajama-clad girl casts the toy aside and bounds up the

[79] For scholarship on this topic, see Michela Adrizzoni, "On Rhythms and Rhymes: Poetics of Identity in Postcolonial Italy," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 13, no. 1 (2020): 5–8; Lisa Dolasinski, "'In Between' Ethnic Heritage and Italian Identity: The Global Hip-Hop of Mahmood and Ghali," *The Italianist* 42, no. 1 (2022): 127–32; Clò and Zammarchi, "'Stran(i)ero nella mia nazione," 33–35.

[80] Giulia Fabbri's "L'afrofuturismo tra Stati Uniti e Italia: Dalla memoria storica ai viaggi intergalattici per re-immaginare futuri postumani," is one of few works published by an Italian Studies scholar that sheds light on Afrofuturism in Italy. In this article she analyzes Liberian Italian beatmaker Karima 2G's artistic orientation from a feminist Afrofuturism perspective. Fabbri also describes 2018 as a watershed date for interest in Afrofuturism in Italy. This year saw the publication of the second edition of *Techno: Ritmi afrofuturisti* by Claudia Attimonelli, who Fabbri identifies as one of the first Italian scholars to dedicate her research to Afrofuturism and to introduce this movement in Italy. The following year the journal *Roots & Routes: Research on Visual Culture* dedicated its thirty-first issue to Afrofuturism (available here). Italy has also seen an uptick in events geared toward public engagement on this topic, including cycles on African culture and the African diaspora at the MAXXI (2018), a panel on "Feminist Afrofuturism" organized by La casa internazionale delle donne in 2019 (program available here), and the presentation of "The Afro-Futurist Manifesto: Blackness Reimagined" at the 2022 Venice Biennial Art Exhibition. See Claudia Attimonelli, *Techno: Ritmi afrofuturist* (Milan: Meltemi, 2018).

[81] "Ghali presenta il nuovo album 'DNA' a Deejay Chiama Italia," by RadioDeejay, YouTube, February 20, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgQFxHH3JiM.

[82] See the official "Boogieman" music video here.

stairs, presumably to retire for the evening. In her absence, the camera lingers on the staircase, as if it were capturing the perspective of a sadistic stalker. Zooming in further on the discarded toy and then accelerating its pace, the camera pans the stairs and communal hallway of the building, which is enveloped in darkness.

In the episode that follows, the music video subverts negative expectations that the viewer has been conditioned to anticipate. Unlike the *Candyman* pattern, the young girl does not fall victim to a dangerous Black "boogeyman" lurking in the shadows. Rather, after her departure, the unsettling hum is replaced by an up-tempo electro-pop beat that signals the official start of the song. Nearly forty seconds into the music video, the camera films Ghali in close-up. The rap artist, who is both creator and consumer of this dance track, assumes the "boogieman" persona. He exits the apartment complex while performing a series of hip-hop moves and continues his performance in the alley where Salmo awaits him. For the remainder of the music video, the pair engages in "cose stupide" (dumb things).[83] Reveling in the freedom of a nocturnal Baggio, they smoke cannabis, cruise around in a classic sedan, and meet up with motocross racers. Ghali's behavior, though immature, is not violent, threatening, or menacing, and he is not depicted as a subhuman "internal enemy of society." Indeed, not only does *this* vision of a Black "boogieman" disavow negative associations between Blackness and criminality, but it offers the viewer multiple examples of Ghali's interactions with diverse members of the Baggio community. This stands in sharp contrast to the fate of Tony Todd's character in *Candyman*; it also unbinds Black subjects from social death.

The music video to "Flashback"—the ninth track of *DNA*—creates a visual link to "Boogieman," and, as intimated by the song title, it imagines an alternative (tempo)r(e)ality of self-liberation for Black communities that have historically been targets of racism, discrimination, and violence. The principle storyline of the "Flashback" music video, though recounted in fragmented episodes, is straightforward and simple.[84] Ghali defeats his adversary—a sadistic white cowboy—and attains freedom, autonomy, and power. One could certainly examine in this music video, through the lens of Afropessimism, the connection between cowboy imagery, on the one hand, and Black subjugation and erasure, on the other. My observations center, instead, on afrofuturistic elements of "Flashback," not only because I see Ghali as part of the musical lineage of Afrofuturism, but also because I want to highlight the less common model of the Black hero in speculative fiction produced in the West.

Returning to the music video, "Flashback" transports viewers to a kind of post-apocalyptic fantasy future. Impersonating the figurine that appears in the opening scene of the "Boogieman" music video (00:07-00:20), in the "Flashback" music video Ghali assumes the role of embattled, but nevertheless victorious, knight (00:07-00:44). The armor-clad cavalier, no longer bound and held at gunpoint by his captor, is illuminated in a cosmic-blue hue of streetlights. He traverses a dystopian cityscape and ascends to a position of leadership and power. Yet Ghali is not an ordinary ruler, and he does not exist on a plane of linear temporality. In another transition—this time to the future—the knight-turned-king wears an intricate gold headdress. Similar to the headdress that appears in the album art for Gambino's *Awaken, My Love!*, the piece worn by Ghali (2:17-2:50) yokes together multiple temporalities and cultures of the global Black diaspora. It appears to be influenced by elaborate headdresses of ancient Egypt, and it resembles a kind of stylized hijab worn by some Muslims.

[83] Ghali, "Boogieman," track 2 on *DNA*, Sto Records, 2020.
[84] See the "Flashback" music video here.

In another fragmented scene, the source of Ghali's power is revealed. Perched under the glow of an oversized moon set ablaze, Ghali transforms into a supernatural being (2:51-2:54). The pupils of his glowing yellow eyes constrict, and his locks become defensive snakes ready to strike. This supernatural king draws inspiration from Greek gorgon Medusa, or—more fittingly, given Ghali's African heritage—Wadjet, the matron and protector of Egypt.[85] Coming full circle, Ghali's mutability and androgyny (conveyed by the aforementioned accessories, i.e. hijab and headdress) recall the transformative capabilities of "boogeymen" described in oral accounts and legends mentioned earlier. Yet, not only are children unharmed in the "Flashback" music video, but, in much of Ghali's media, they appear in significant roles and symbolize a utopian future.[86] Differently, too, from the projection of the sadistic Black "boogeyman" portrayed by Tony Todd in *Candyman* and demonized by non-Black politicians and police officers, the supernatural being performed by Ghali de-emphasizes negative qualities of hypermasculinity. Recalling, again, the art for Gambino's *Awaken, My Love!* album, Ghali's allusion to Wadjet is also a matrilineal reference. Moreover, much like the previously mentioned otherworldly overtones of Black model Giannina Oteto, in the "Flashback" music video Ghali inhabits a Black temporality that is both ancient and futuristic.

The intersection of ancient myth, magical realism, and astral imagery in "Flashback" is a common feature of Afrofuturist creations. However, the assemblage of these elements in this music video—in conjunction with Ghali's most recent artistic direction—calls to mind a particular pioneer of this movement, Sun Ra.[87] In the early 1950s, poet, artist, and musician of "space music," Sun Ra, began to develop an "Astro-Black mythology"[88] that combines aspects of ancient African history and futuristic visions of intergalactic peace and harmony. Throughout his multidecade career, Sun Ra continuously integrated ancient Egyptian iconography into science fiction. At live performances with his Arkestra, in his sci-fi film *Space is the Place* (1974), and in the cover art for multiple albums, he displayed symbols of his namesake, Egyptian god Ra, the king of all other deities and the father of creation. The Afrofuturist also self-identified as an alien who aspired to liberate Black people from destructive forces of racism and discrimination with the transformative powers of music and technology. Significantly, in the words of Daniel Kriess, "at the heart of Sun Ra's work was a decidedly pan-racial vision of a techno-utopia, premised on scientific knowledge, aesthetic energy, and expanded awareness."[89] Thus, in brief, Sun Ra's "cosmic" philosophy identified art as an effective means of enlightenment, and was not aimed at an exclusively Black audience.

Ghali, following the path of the manifold Black musicians that have continued Sun Ra's mission, is re-energizing the Afrofuturist movement in Italy and beyond. As already mentioned, the award-winning artist has used multiple platforms (e.g. music, fashion, social media) to educate

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[85] Wadjet was typically depicted as a snake-headed woman.

[86] Among other examples, consider the central role of children born to immigrant parents in the "Cara Italia" music video, lyrics to "Paprika"—which propose uniting Italy and Tunisia through the birth of a multicultural infant—and the official art of "Niente panico," which is in fact a photograph of Ghali as a child.

[87] For more on Sun Ra as an innovator of Afrofuturism, see Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi*, 58–62; Adriano Elia, "The Languages of Afrofuturism," *Lingue e linguaggi,* no. 12 (2014); Lorenzo Montefinese, "From Slaveships to Spaceships. Afrofuturism and Sonic Imaginaries," *Roots & Routes: Research on Visual Culture*, no. 31 (2019), https://www.roots-routes.org/from-slaveships-to-spaceships-afrofurism-and-sonic-imaginaries-by-lorenzo-montefinese/.

[88] Hua Hsu, "How Sun Ra Taught Us to Believe in the Impossible," *The New Yorker*, June 28, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/07/05/how-sun-ra-taught-us-to-believe-in-the-impossible.

[89] Daniel Kreiss, "Performing the Past to Claim the Future: Sun Ra and the Afro-Future Underground, 1954–1968," *African American Review* 45, no. 1–2 (2012): 201.

and enlighten a global audience about topics like Muslim culture, racially motivated discriminatory policies, and his greater vision of global inclusivity. However, *DNA* marks a decisive moment in the rapper's experimentation with Afrofuturism. Commenting on the significance of the cover art and its connection to themes explored in this album, Ghali remarks: "Ho voluto 'vedermi uscire' dal mio corpo. Se si osserva bene, i miei sono gli occhi di un sognatore e il mio sguardo di speranza. Ci sono elementi fantasy, la voglia di credere in qualcosa che non si sa se esiste" (I wanted to "see myself leave" my body. If you look carefully, mine are the eyes of a dreamer and my gaze is of hope. There are fantasy elements, the desire to believe in something that you aren't certain exists).[90] Ghali's words, and the cover to *DNA*, are an exemplary model of the liberating force of speculative fiction and escapism enabled by Afrofuturism. The focal point of the album cover is a spaceship floating above a kind of utopian paradise, and, significantly, this colorful scene is generated by Ghali. To explain further, Ghali, like Sun Ra, is an enlightened being who transcends the destructive forces of discrimination and racism and is thereby capable of spreading consciousness about pan-racial harmony through music and technology.

Ghali's first appearance as a competitor in the 2024 Sanremo Music Festival further illustrates his orientation towards Afrofuturism.[91] In anticipation of his debut performance of "Casa Mia," Ghali utilized technology to tease the message of his then-newest single to a global audience. He began posting images and reels of his alien friend, Rich Ciolino, on Instagram.[92] Ghali's posts—which were viewed, shared, and liked by more than 3.6 million followers—drew an analogy between the feelings of exclusion experienced by Black Italians and extraterrestrials, an analogy that has also been made by Liberian-Italian beatmaker Karima 2G and writer-activist Lucia Ghebreghiorges.[93] Rich, who accompanied Ghali onstage at Sanremo and has since become a mainstay in the rapper's public appearances, is a material manifestation of the "T.V.B. message of inclusion" Ghali issued in an earlier song that catapulted him to international stardom, "Cara Italia (2018)."[94] The official music video for "Casa Mia," which costars Rich, adheres to Ghali's practice of inserting icons of his Tunisian heritage, including a traditional rug, silk scarf, and what appears to be a *barnous* worn by his extraterrestrial sidekick (00:24-00:27).

The lyrics to "Casa Mia" are a surreal dialogue between Ghali and his alien companion. The rap artist recounts human-generated conflicts experienced on Earth, like discrimination against immigrants and second-generation Italians:

> Ma che ci fai qui da queste parti?
> Quanto resti e quando parti?

[90] Cecilia Ermini, "Ghali: 'Con *DNA* mi metto a nudo,'" *Il manifesto*, February 21, 2021, https://ilmanifesto.it/ghali-con-dna-mi-metto-a-nudo.

[91] For a post on Ghali's Sanremo performance, see Enrico Zammarchi, "Un Marziano a Sanremo," *H-TransItalian Studies* (blog), February 13, 2024, https://networks.h-net.org/group/blog/20023986/blog-un-marziano-sanremo-enrico-zammarchi.

[92] Rich Ciolino has a separate Instagram account, which has been active since January 26, 2024. On multiple occasions, the endearing extraterrestrial has posted about the impact of Ghali's message of inclusivity in "Casa Mia" on children, i.e., the literal and figurative future of Italy.

[93] On the use of this analogy by Karima 2G and Ghebreghiorges, see Fabbri, "L'afrofuturismo tra Stati Uniti e Italia," 14–16.

[94] The "Cara Italia" music video is an example of Ghali's early experimentation with Afrofuturism. In the music video (view here), Ghali uses disjunctive time and speculative fiction to imagine a future Italy that is antiracist and inclusive. See Dolasinski, "'In Between' Ethnic Heritage and Italian Identity," 31.

(Hey, what are you doing around here?
How long are you staying and when are you leaving?)[95]

Ghali also critiques humanity's compulsive exertion of violence to map boundaries of exclusion:

Ma come fate a dire
Che qui è tutto normale?
Per tracciare un confine
Con linee immaginarie bombardate un ospedale
Per un pezzo di terra o per un pezzo di pane
Non c'è mai pace

(But how can you say
that everything is normal here?
To draw a boundary
With imaginary lines you bomb a hospital
For a piece of land or a piece of bread
There is never peace)[96]

Notwithstanding the atrocities described by Ghali, the overarching message of "Casa Mia" is one of peace. In the post-chorus, which also happens to be the final verses of the song, Ghali asks:

Ma qual è casa mia?
Ma qual è casa tua?
Ma qual è casa mia?
Dal cielo è uguale, giuro

(But which one is my home?
But which one is your home?
But which one is my home?
From the sky they look the same, I swear)[97]

In other lyrics from "Casa Mia," the Tunisian-Italian rapper states:

Sto già meglio se mi fai vedere
Il mondo come lo vedi tu
(I'm already better if you show me
The world as you see it)[98]

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[95] Ghali, "Casa Mia," track 2 on *DNA*, Sto Records/ Warner Music, 2024.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ghali, "Casa Mia."
[98] Ibid.

Such observations imply that a shift in perspective—what Sun Ra might call "the fiery truth of enlightenment"[99]—is fundamental in the global effort to dismantle structures of racism.

In conclusion, although neither Glover/Gambino nor Ghali has self-identified as an Afrofuturist, both artists use creativity to reimagine alternative visions of the "boogeyman"/ "boogieman" through a Black cultural lens. Their approaches differ, yet they similarly aim at re-centering a Black presence and enlightening audiences of different backgrounds, cultures, and races. Glover/Gambino challenges listeners to confront the deadly impact of systemic, anti-Black racism on Black communities, specifically Black men. In "Boogieman," he conveys the role that (anti-)Blackness continues to play in the misidentification of the true "monster aggressor." For his part, Ghali also criticizes racially motivated discrimination. However, his socially conscious raps lean into messages of universal compassion and inclusivity that do not always prioritize the specificity of Black suffering. Moreover, the Tunisian-Italian artist's ongoing appearances with Rich—a non-threatening "monster"—provide an effective performative and rhetorical tool for invalidating negative perceptions about immigrants, Black Italians, and vulnerable populations more generally.[100] Nevertheless, Glover/Gambino's and Ghali's artistic interventions are not entirely novel, and in fact can be considered part of a long history of Black musicians—like the pioneer of Afrofuturism, Sun Ra—that have fantasized about mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. This legacy, however, raises important questions that remain unanswerable at present, such as: How many more clever analogies and performances of Black pain must be generated by Black artists in order for society to truly acknowledge, and ultimately dismantle, racist systems and structures that continue to stoke sentiments of anti-Blackness? Will there be a watershed moment in *this* spatial-temporal reality in which members of the global Black diaspora no longer have to fantasize about a life of inclusivity, belonging, and joy?

[99] Sun Ra Arkestra, "The Enlightenment," track 1 on *Jazz in Silhouette*, El Saturn Records / Impulse! Records/ Evidence Music, 1959.

[100] Ghali (and Rich), like Afro-Italian artists Amir Issaa and Karima 2G, has expanded his creative practice to include writing. *Il mondo come lo vedi tu* (2024)—a children's book written by Rich Ciolino and Pierdomenico Baccalario with a preface by Ghali—is, at its core, a modern Afrofuturist allegory.