

Media Analysis: Kodak Black's *Spar*

“I'm Not a Politician, but You Can't Ignore this Stuff”

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In this essay I will analyze and discuss the music video for Spar, by hip hop artists Dreezy, 6lack, and Kodak Black. This music video was released to YouTube on December 5th of 2017 by Dreezy and Interscope Records. (Interscope Records 2017) The intended audience of this music video is hip hop fans and young people. The music video was created in a cartoon style, similar to that of television show The Boondocks (found on Hulu streaming services), in which a Black family living in a white suburb is satirically and comically observed through daily life experiences. The music video was released during Donald Trump's presidential term, and its content criticizes this era and its political, societal, and economic context.

To situate the music video, it begins with scenery of cities, apartment buildings, the Washington Monument, and the White House. After those opening images and the introduction of the contributing artists, an image of artist 6lack behind a podium is shown. 6lack is standing in front of what appears to be the American flag. This image situates the video immediately as a political message. 6lack's verse during this image discusses the United States' neglect for Black people, and how Donald Trump plays a role in perpetuating and exacerbating that neglect. The lyrics aligned with this image, the chorus, are "they not rewarding us, they disregarding us, and if I go to D.C. I'm tryna spar with Trump. I'm not a politician, but you can't ignore this stuff." (0:27-0:37) His verse continues on, and returns to the chorus again during the depiction of Trayvon Martin, a Black boy who was killed for being seen as a threat in a Florida white neighborhood, when the only things he was actually 'armed' with were skittles, Arizona Ice Tea, and a hoodie over his head. The video frame zooms in on 6lack's hand, as he reaches to put a bag of skittles into his pocket, then puts the hood of his sweatshirt up. (1:13) Only a minute into the music video, there are extremely heavy depictions of racial issues, especially brutality against Black people. The concepts of gender and media representation combined reveal negative and detrimental ways in which Black men and women are portrayed. The implications of these portrayals are serious, even deadly. The presumption of Black men being dangerous, heavily perpetuated in corporate media, contributes to events such as the murder of Trayvon Martin, and the justification of those events. Challenging the media portrayals of Black women and women of color as overly-sexualized objects, this media depicts artist Dreezy as strong

bodied, individual, and empowered. We see a strong female body, toned and dressed in jeans and a simple tank top, with an empowered stance, arms crossed. This media challenges the dominant media representations of black women as hyper-sexualized characters, and of black men as thugs and criminals. Race as a social construct explains these characteristics as socially constructed by humans, rather than inherent biological traits.

It is critical to consider the messages about ethnicity, race, and class that the images imply and the story being told. Along with the depictions, are racial messages being told within the lyrics. The entirety of this music video is an explicit message about being Black in America. Dreezy, the female artist on this song, says: “If I tell people where I’m from they might think I got a gun.” (1:22) This specific line, like multiple other bars from the song, is a sharp depiction of the racial assumptions non-Black people make about Black people. These assumptions that people so commonly make about Black people and other people of color come from a deep-rooted and purposeful history of structural and systematic racism in the United States. The sociological concept of ‘race as a social construct’ is evidence to this purposeful and encouraged racism. As identified in the *Statement of the American Sociological Association on The Importance of Collecting Data and Doing Social Scientific Research on Race*, “the concept of race in the United States... has changed, as economic, political, and historical context have changed.” (American Sociological Association 2003) Race has historically been used to protect the power of white people or the dominant class, often leaving Black people marginalized and disadvantaged. More specifically, racism and the United States’ perpetuation of it contribute to a white supremacist agenda; “popular culture has assisted in the maintenance of a white supremacist and racial hierarchy since it’s American inception.” (Racism and Popular Culture Dirks and Mueller 2007) This media however, was produced to do the opposite, and expose and challenge those protected hierarchies.

Dreezy’s Spar music video aims to criticize the structural and systematic implications of racism, as well as display her frustration with and exhaustion from these issues. The images depicted in the video do challenge notions of particular ethnic or racial groups or people of a particular class. Evidence of this is heard in multiple lines of the song, including: “If I tell people where I’m from they might think I got a

gun”, as previously discussed. (1:22) Another major critique within the video is during Dreezy’s verse, where she says: “It’s a black and white world but I only see green.” (1:45) The imagery seen during this line is of Dreezy standing on the steps of some government building with large stacks of money behind her. This scene follows remarks made by the rapper about unjust and abundant police shootings: “Damned if it be another RIP” (1:42). The line referring to only seeing green, references and critiques the intersection of racism and classism central to U.S. capitalist ideologies. Similarly, in rapper Kodak Black’s verse, he says: “Ain’t old enough to hit the club and fill my cup with rum, but I can go die in the army goin’ to war for them.” (2:41-2:47) He calls out the intersection of racism and militarism in U.S. culture. The video acts as an aid to the growing agenda of criticizing and changing the United States’ government, and other modes that perpetuate racism and racist media. This music video can be considered one of the “protests that have risen up in various forms against corporations, athletic organizations, and other purveyors of racial used popular media.” (Racism and Popular Culture Dirks and Mueller 2007) In these examples of prioritizing capitalism and militarism, we see the ways in which popular culture can be appropriated to subvert hegemonic media messages, a sociological concept explaining how dominant culture maintains itself.

The music video also includes portrayals that act as examples of institutionalized racism. The most useful image to provide as evidence to this is the scene in which a black and gold silhouette of Colin Kaepernick is shown kneeling with his fist up and closed, in an empty football stadium. The lyrics to this scene are: “This can’t be land of the free if kneeling might cost your position. I’m supposed to respect the system that calls our brothers sons of bitches?” (2:04-2:12) In this scene and in those lyrics, Dreezy references former 49ers football player and civil rights activist Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick lost his quarterback position after kneeling during a NFL game’s playing of the national anthem in protest of racial inequalities and police brutality against Black people. Kaepernick became an activist on the field and encouraged many other athletes to follow his lead. Unfortunately the aftermath of his protest, an American right, was that he was effectively banished from his profession. The league essentially conspired to deny him a new contract and as a free agent was unable to secure a position on any team,

despite his talent and skill. Another event that happened after Kaepernick's protest was Donald Trump's critique of it. In 2017 Donald Trump gave a speech in Alabama, in which he said that NFL owners should say "get that son of a bitch off the field." This was a direct attack on Kaepernick, and a direct depiction of institutionalized racism. Donald Trump, the president at the time, explicitly expressed his displeasure with Kaepernick's activism. This was a form of institutionalized racism, as he contributed to "racial [inequities] within institutions and systems of power, such as places of employment [and] government agencies." (YWCA Lechtenberg 2020) In those lines Dreezy explicitly addresses the attack on Kaepernick as a system. She addresses the attack as a larger one embedded in United States' systems, rather than an attack that came from a single individual.

The Spar music video helps us understand and apply several sociological concepts. Concepts such as race, gender, class, media, ideology, and hegemony are all visible through the story being told. The social and cultural significance of the portrayals within this media challenge mainstream stereotypes of Black people. The construction and relationship of race and class are also critiqued in the video, as Dreezy remarks "I only see green." To conclude, this music video is a powerful site for interrogating racial representations and the meanings of race.

References

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