

Donald Glover's hit music video "This is America"

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"This is America" is the latest music video from American musician and actor Donald Glover, who records rap music as Childish Gambino. Posted to YouTube on May 5, within 24 hours the video had been viewed 12.9 million times and the song debuted at #1 on the Billboard chart. It has now been viewed more than 200 million times.

Of course, many trivial or worse videos have attracted an ephemeral, mass following. But the appeal of Glover's effort can't easily be accounted for by merely faddish or fickle popular taste; it seems both too troubling and too "artistic." The video has struck a chord, and perhaps a nerve.

Too rarely these days does real life make even a guest appearance in the generally artificial and conformist world of popular music, except in the form of stupid, empty posturing. "This is America" takes up this very issue, hinting at the contrast between the reality of America's epidemic of mass shootings and police violence, on the one hand, and, on the other, the selfish, wealth-obsessed and violent attitudes so heavily promoted by the pop music industry. That Glover's video has gone viral suggests there is a desire for more complex and critical content.

"This is America" is a jarring and challenging four minutes. The song begins with a refrain sung cheerfully over a sunny guitar line: "We just want to party!/ Everybody's dancing!/ We just want the money!" etc. We see Glover in close-up. He's dancing to the beat, but his contorted facial expressions tell us there's something wrong or out of kilter. This first sequence comes to a gut-wrenching conclusion when Glover produces a pistol and shoots the guitar player in the head. A sinister new beat drops on time with the gunshot. Glover looks directly into the camera and says, "This is America."

Throughout the rest of the video, Glover offers in part a parody of self-satisfied, empty "gangsta" rap, rapping about guns and money, clothes and cars and selling drugs. But behind and around him, somewhat out of focus in the background, various chaotic scenes unfold, including police on the chase, crowds of people running through tear gas or smoke, a burning car, and children on a balcony recording it all with their smartphones. Glover steps out of character, looking incredulously at what's happening around him, and then looking directly into the camera with evident concern, before jumping right back into the performance.

A troupe of schoolchildren dance energetically and playfully around him amid all the goings-on. The violence juxtaposed with the children is a particularly disturbing image that remains with the viewer.

At one point, a church choir appears and sings, "Grandma told me, get your money, black man!." Glover shockingly mows down the whole group with an assault rifle, and again deadpans to the camera, "This is America." One instantly recalls not only the Charleston church shooting of 2015, but the entire tragic series of mass shootings in America.

The piece at its strongest reflects a broadly felt, if still amorphous, opposition to homicidal violence, police brutality, war and the society that produced these phenomena. "This is America." Just two months ago, millions demonstrated nationwide against school shootings. The video, released in the wake of the protests, seems associated with similar angry, horrified moods.

This is definitely an artistic performance, not a supposedly unmediated "rap." Glover seems at times to be looking at and mocking himself as a celebrity and all the rubbish of contemporary popular culture, with its self-centered and highly promoted personalities. It's a

vague sentiment, but genuinely felt.

In the video's enigmatic final sequence, Glover is seen apparently sprinting for his life, followed by a crowd of indistinct figures. Are they running with or after him? There's a sense of immense and imminent danger, but what's behind it?

As "This is America" became a viral hit, various reactionary commentators leaped on the video's ambiguities and, ignoring its socially critical content, pronounced it instead a manifesto of racist politics and the "black experience." They scoured every inch of the video for references to racism that may or may not have been intended.

The *Washington Post* got the ball rolling in a May 8 article, writing that Glover's character "appears to represent how white American culture oppresses black people." Glover and his team "pack every frame with visual references to racism and related violence in the United States."

The article goes on to cite a Tweet by Justin Simien, the director of the dreadful television series *Dear White People*, which suggests that one of the men killed by Glover is played by Trayvon Martin's father (he isn't), and that the delicate way Glover aims his gun is meant to resemble a particular depiction of the iconic "Jim Crow" character.

The "Jim Crow" theory took off, and most other commentaries since have accepted it as the starting point for further investigation. Some claim that Glover's gray jeans are meant to bring to mind a Confederate Army uniform from the Civil War! It's not clear what sense that would make.

A comment from Tre Johnson in *Rolling Stone*, also on May 8, entitled "Donald Glover's 'This Is America' Is a Nightmare We Can't Afford to Look Away From," reveals the striving for wealth and position that motivates such nonsense. He writes that "This Is America" shows how black artists, "keep recycling our trauma into art, which mainstream America then consumes and judges on the same scale as black entertainers' less burdened white peers." He goes on to complain that (multi-millionaires) Kendrick Lamar and Beyoncé have lost Grammy awards to white artists! (They have won 11 and 20 Grammys, respectively.)

For his part, Glover has maintained complete silence on the meaning of his video, deflecting questions about

it from talk show hosts and reporters.

There was clearly a lot of talent involved in the making of "This is America," from the effective music, written and recorded by Swedish film and television composer Ludwig Göransson, to the creative camera work that surprises the viewer throughout the video.

The spirited dancing of the kids and Glover is something of a breath of fresh air itself. Choreographed by Rwandan-born Sherrie Silver, the dancing loosely combines various popular dances from across Africa and America for a result that is unpretentious and fun, which contrasts nicely with both the "real life" violence as well as the phoniness of Glover's "gangsta" character, making each more troubling by comparison. (Late in the video, at 3:16, Glover dances on top of a car—who dances like that?!)

Glover is a talented actor as well, and his performance really carries the video. The way he seamlessly and convincingly moves into and out of character effectively makes the point that "gangsta" rap is largely a charade.

"This is America"



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