

Netflix's *Trigger Warning with Killer Mike*: Provocation and pessimism from the Atlanta rap artist

By Nick Barrickman
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Netflix is currently airing *Trigger Warning with Killer Mike*, a six-part documentary series developed by and starring Atlanta rapper and political activist Michael “Killer Mike” Render (born 1975).

The show consists of episodes in which Render conducts social experiments in a manner that seeks to address particular social problems confronting the population in the United States. His “experiments” tend to range from the sincere but misguided and intentionally “provocative,” on the one hand, to the quite reactionary, on the other.

Render, a Grammy award-winning rap artist and one-half of the successful “independent” hip hop group Run the Jewels (formed with Brooklyn, New York with rapper/producer Jaime “El-P” Meline), is a highly contradictory artistic figure. At his most thoughtful, Render is capable of articulating certain truths about American society in both his music and public statements.

Render’s outspoken criticism of police brutality and militarism (such as his denunciation of Democratic President Barack Obama’s war in Libya in 2012’s “Reagan,” for example) has struck a chord in the current political and artistic environment, winning the artist a devoted following and credibility among his supporters.

Unhappily, Render combines occasional flashes of insight and intellectual courage (and humor) with a tendency merely to shock or resort to juvenile behavior, albeit with something of an anti-establishment “twist.”

In 2016, Render joined the campaign of “socialist” Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. Whatever Render’s intentions, he thus became part of Sanders’ effort to channel a growing movement of opposition among young people and workers behind the Democrats’ eventual nominee, Hillary Clinton. (Render has indicated his continued support for Sanders in recent interviews).

With *Trigger Warning* (a term used to indicate offensive or provocative material), Render’s failure to draw necessary

political conclusions from these experiences has only deepened his disorientation and confusion.

The pilot episode “Living Black” is typical. The premise of the show is that Render spends half a week living entirely within the “black economy.” He explains in the narration: “Before we had de-segregation, black people had to deal with one another. If you went to a dentist, they were black, if you went to a doctor, more than likely you’d have a black doctor. If you wanted food, you went to a black store. So from top to bottom, the ecosystem from a dollar perspective stayed black. Hence we had a true black working class, a true black middle class; we could send our kids off to college.”

Unsurprisingly (and deservedly), the effort to “self-segregate” goes poorly, with Render reduced to sleeping on a park bench after he is unable to obtain “black-owned” lodging while on tour. Aside from the obvious absurdity and retrograde character of promoting a racially exclusive economy in the modern world, one is forced to ask themselves: who does this benefit? Since the inner city riots and rebellions of the 1960s convinced the American ruling elite and the Nixon administration in particular to promote “black capitalism” as a means of blunting political opposition, tens of thousands of African-American millionaires have been minted, to no betterment for the majority of the black population, which today is one of the most socially unequal demographics in American society. “Black-owned business” is not a benefit to anyone but black business people.

Likewise, that a mass Civil Rights movement emerged in the United States in the middle of the last century to do away with Jim Crow segregation seems to be largely lost on Render, who at the end of the episode foolishly calls on “white allies” to “put their money where their tweets are” and support these black-owned businesses!

Elsewhere, in “F**k School,” Render’s visit to a first grade class is particularly misguided. Rather than suggesting

that the problems facing the education system are the result of a lack of resources or a social crisis confronting youth, Render blames education itself. “We’re teaching kids useless knowledge: ‘What are the classic novels?’—‘Algebra.’ But in reality, we should be teaching them to dream realistically,” he says to the audience. Despite the unexpected and somewhat unique form that Render’s vocational courses eventually take, the damage has been done.

Thankfully, the remaining episodes take up less blatantly reactionary themes. However, keeping the opening parts of the series in mind, it is difficult to tell whether later installments—such as “White Gang Privilege,” where Render urges local gang members to create “Crip-a-Cola” soft drinks to monetize their street name, or “New Jesus,” where Render seeks to create a new religion whose place of worship is an off-hours strip club—are satirical efforts to mock proponents of “black empowerment” or are seriously advocating such views. One tends to think (or hope) the former.

Remarking on Render’s previous musical work, the WSWS noted: “The most frustrating element... is that despite [Render’s] evident preoccupation with pressing social questions, [he is] not able... to create a more consistently serious and compelling work.” Render’s inconsistency lay in “the impact... of several decades of political reaction and the absence of a broad-based and socially progressive movement.”

Concluding, we said, “Run the Jewels’ members are genuinely vulnerable to various influences, including anti-social and lumpen ones. The majority of humanity, i.e. the working population, does not appear on the group’s radar as a means of combating the myriad injustices the duo sees.”

It is unsurprising that the entertainment press and various liberal publications have sought to promote *Trigger Warning with Killer Mike* as, for example, “by all means, revolutionary” (*Collider*—the entertainment website and YouTube channel) and a “vaguely excellent political documentary” (the *Guardian*).

Eric Jenkins, writing in the pseudo-left *Socialist Alternative*, laments Render’s explicit turn toward identity politics and explains it as “the result of the intense political situation in the U.S. at the end of 2018 and beginning of 2019,” as well as his “being thrown back into a space of confusion in comparison to his politics as a Bernie Sanders surrogate.”

It does not occur to Jenkins and his ilk that Render’s “space of confusion” stems in part *precisely from* the demoralization produced by Sanders’ support for Clinton in 2016, which helped open the door for right-wing demagogue

Donald Trump—a process facilitated by Socialist Alternative and the rest of the fraudulent “left” in America. Jenkins and his organization will again support Sanders in the 2020 election as he prepares to reprise his foul efforts to smother the emergence of genuinely socialist politics in the working class.

Render’s frustration is particularly tangible in the episode “Outside the Box,” in which the rapper seeks to assemble a musical “super group” of individuals from varying backgrounds to produce a song (debuted at a Run the Jewels live show) that strives for maximum discord. The effort to bring people out of their respective “boxes” by placing them next to those with views hostile and offensive to them nearly results in a physical altercation.

Trump’s election was profoundly disorienting for well-off middle class layers. Many in this layer drew the right-wing conclusion that Trump’s electoral victory was an expression of the backward and reactionary character of the working class population itself, rather than the result, above all, of the intense disappointment with and even hatred of the Obama administration and the right-wing, anti-working class Clinton campaign.

This outlook has found a bizarre expression in some cases (as with Kanye West’s promotion of Trump). Render’s turn toward individualism and the embrace of identity politics, as well as a belief that one needs to accommodate and “hear out” offensive ultra-right viewpoints to solve the growing social conflicts in society, also express this demoralization and muddle-headedness.

Ironically or not, Render’s growing pessimism coincides with an upsurge of militancy within the working class internationally. Though Render may not yet be aware of the implications of these struggles spreading worldwide and threatening longstanding political regimes, it is entirely possible that the social and political ramifications of these struggles may yet revive “Killer Mike” Render. We will see.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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