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Black Joy in the Hour of Chaos: '911 is a Joke' and Its Multiple Messages of Resistance

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The video "911 is a Joke" offers more than just a critique of America's healthcare system disparities. The rapper Flavor Flav shows a gleefully absurdist call to action for oppressed peoples and their allies. In this essay, I examine the video of "911 is a Joke" to argue that the music samples and Flavor Flav's visual performances urge us to find the joy in rejecting subordination to White Supremacy.

Keywords: Public Enemy, Flavor Flav, Black Lives Matter, Healthcare, COVID-19

Whether manifest through music, dance, visual art, or fashion, Hip Hop has always served as a medium for self-expression by youth who live "behind the veil" in America.[1] Even though Hip Hop music typically provides a window into personal struggles and triumphs, communal or intimate violence, or inspiration for individual transcendence, some of its artists also explore the institutional contours of the societies in which they live. Emerging in the period of Socially Conscious Rap, Public Enemy is one such group.[2]

Public Enemy ("PE") stands as one of the seminal rap groups of the 1980s because of their Black Nationalist/Pan Africanist militancy in "Reagan's America." The group also is known for exploding Hip Hop music production past the bounds of what seemed possible. Moreover, the group distinguished itself from other rap groups through its profound signifying in its songs, stage performances, and music videos. In combination, these elements make their work timeless and relevant to any oppressed people in America.[3] One of their more under-appreciated songs, "911 is a Joke," seems appropriate given the current global health crisis caused by the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus and its adverse effects on the Black community. In this essay, I examine the video of "911 is a Joke" to argue that the music samples and Flavor Flav's visual performances urge us to find the joy in rejecting subordination to White Supremacy.

Overview: 911 is a Joke

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[1] Fernando Orejuela, *Rap and Hip Hop Culture*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p.2; see also Michael Eric Dyson's "Foreword" to Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. xi-xiv. As to the "veil" metaphor, see W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*.

[2] Tayannah Lee McQuillar, *When Rap Music Had a Conscience: The Artists, Organizations, and Historic Events that Inspired and Influenced the "Golden Age" of Hip Hop from 1987 to 1996*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007, pp. 10-12, 55, 65-67 and 95.

3 Shea Serrano and Arturo Torres, The Rap Yearbook: The Most important Rap Song from Every Year Since 1979. Discussed, Debated, and Deconstructed. New York: Abrams Image, 2018, p. 72 (where the author describes "Fight the Power" as a humanist call to action).

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"911 is a Joke" offers a critique of racial disparities within America's healthcare system. The lyrics of the song point to the fact that the nation's emergency response system (to get help, a person dialed "9-1-1" on their phone) serves Black people poorly, if at all. One of five singles released from the 1990 album "Fear of a Black Planet" debuted nearly a year after its more famous sibling "Fight the Power." Although "911 is a Joke" enjoyed much commercial success, it has been largely overshadowed by songs like "Fight the Power," "Burn Hollywood Burn," or "Welcome to the Terrordome." However, the music samples used in "911 is a Joke," and the images from the official video marshal pop culture references that, at the same time, reinforce and transcend the lyrics. These images also convey methods of resistance to subordination; this is especially true of the performances of the group's jovial trickster, Flavor Flav. Flavor Flav once told an interviewer that "I write about what I see every day in life but put it in such a form that you gotta really dig your nails in deep to find out what I'm talking about. You know what I'm sayin'?"[4] As a whole, the sounds, visual arc, and references require serious examination as they issue a call to action that is worth heeding 30 years later, a call to claim the power to name the problem, reflect on possible solutions, and celebrate Black resilience in the face of structural hostilities.

"911 is a Joke" contains samples from 10 different recordings, from artists like Michael Jackson to lesser-known groups like Incorporated Thang Band and Mico Wave. In addition to sampled drum lines from the song "I Feel Like Dancing," by the group Bad Bascomb and a guitar riff from "Devil with the Bust" by Sound Experience, there is a looped voice-over of multiple individuals; comedian Eddie Murphy screaming "somebody call an ambulance!" followed by another voice dramatically saying, "there's not a minute to spare." A few beats afterward, there is a voice calmly saying, "don't worry," while Murphy (from a different comedy album) yells, "ha, ha, very funny motherfucker!" The conjoined declarations indicate the anticipated response to encountering a person in medical distress and signaling other possibilities that I will address later. In this video, the repeated declarations provide a semblance of the expectation in America, the myth of equality that silhouettes the reality of Black disadvantage.[5]

As the song continues, the other samples stand out as reference points for listeners. A durable reference comes from the continuous use of the drumline from Lyn Collins' hit song "Think (About It)." As I will discuss later, a key component of "911 is a Joke" is Flavor Flav's command for Black communities to reflect on their experiences, to do precisely as the sampled song title suggests. A bit more abstract is the sample from Michael Jackson's song "Thriller." Instead of hearing Michael Jackson singing, the listener hears actor Vincent Price's maniacal laughter at the song's end.[6] The choreography from the "Thriller" video also plays a pivotal role in the choreography of "911 is a Joke," suggesting that this particular sample does more than tap the neural networks of aural memories. Whenever Flavor Flav dances in the church, the church's Afro Choir usually dances with him. In many instances, the congregation also will dance or sway with him. Indeed, the congregation mimics the Zombie Dancing from the "Thriller" video. Thus, the sample of a cackling Vincent Price and the implied image of the Zombie Dance also reinforce the notion of inevitable demise. In this space of impending doom, Flavor Flav skips through various characters representing multiple modes of struggle.

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4 Mark Dery, "Public Enemy: Confrontation." In That's the Joint!, edited by Forman and Neal, p. 419.

5 Based on an analysis of 911 is a Joke" on "the website Who Sampled: Exploring the DNA of Music, at https:/whosampled.com/PublicEnemy/911-is-a-Joke.

6 www.whosampled.com "911 is a Joke".

The Three Flavors

The video begins with a close-up of Flavor Flav, lying motionless in a coffin when he suddenly rips off his sunglasses and his eyes pop open as he screams, "Hit Me!" Around his neck dangles his ever-present clock, as well as what appears to be a leather necklace in the shape of Africa bearing the words "Zulu Nation." The music commences upon his command. The samples roil as the audience watches Flav's eyes roll around and a self-conscious grin form on his face. In recounting how the song came into existence, Flav (who shares writing credits with Shocklee and Sadler) acknowledged that Chuck D urged him to write a song for the album. "I went and got high and wrote the record. I went and got ripped, I went and got out of my mind, and I started speaking all kinds of crazy shit 'cos usually back in the days when I used to smoke, it used to broaden my ideas and everything."[7] Although this is a PE song, the studio recording and official music video clearly belong to Flav.

Flavor Flav, often thought of as the "hype man" or comic relief for the group's main rapper Chuck D rarely had solos on Public Enemy's discs. The solos that he did have reinforced the image of a character intended to lighten the heavy mental and sonic load created by Chuck D's dense, historical lyrics and nearly baritone delivery. Flav's silliness and apparent lack of discipline meant that not everyone in the collective wanted him in the group, and, once in, not everyone wanted him to remain in the fold.[8] Less charitable critics might even refer to Flav as a buffoon, similar to the cinema "coon" image best recognized in the performances of Stepin Fetchit. Yet, the group's official video for the song "Burn Hollywood Burn" directly undermines that notion.[9] The notion of Flavor Flav acting as a release valve for the pressure created by Chuck D makes some sense, especially since Chuck's voice was an oddity in a Hip-Hop era populated by high-pitched or nasal shouters. Yet, Flav is more than a hype man or pressure release; Flav represents an alternative subversive practice that is insightful, provocative, and whimsical, all at once. His eclectic mix of influences, "jazz scatters and jive talkers...Redd Foxx...Gil-Scott Heron…[and] the Last Poets," proves the point.[10] Flav offers nuance and contradiction that blurs the bright lines often drawn by Chuck D's lyrics. The "911 is a Joke" video allows audiences to see these features more clearly than they would if they only encountered Flav on wax or cassette tape. The opening scene foreshadows the centrality of Flav throughout the official music video.

The viewer sees three (3) different versions of Flavor Flav throughout the video. The image from the opening scene is "Casket Flavor," while the second image that we see is of "Preacher Flavor." Preacher Flavor spits his verses and dances behind or near a church pulpit. The third image presented to the audience is "Family Flavor," a character more limited in screen time than the first two. The viewer encounters Family Flavor just before the song's first verse as we watch a Black family sharing dinner. Augmenting the lyrics that Flav recites, the presence of the Three Flavors acts as a visual aid toward empowerment for the audience. Each personification of Flavor

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7 Russell Myrie, *Don't Rhyme for the Sake of Riddlin': The Authorised Story of Public Enemy*. New York: Grove Press, 2008, p. 148.

8 Chang, p. 247; McQuillar, p. 95. See also "Public Enemy" Prophets of Rage," a BBC documentary by James Hale, 2011.

9 "Burn Hollywood Burn," time mark 2:25-2:39 (a short skit features a White casting director asking Fklav is he would be willing to play the role of a "controversial Negro...a servant who...shuffles a little bit and sings," to which Flav angrily rips off his sunglasses and responds "Yo, man, what?!?"); see also Orejuela, p. 112. For a discussion of the "coon" stereotype in film, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1996), pp. 7-8.

10 Dery, "Public Enemy: Confrontation," p. 420.

plays a unique role that dovetails with the others, in this instance, a victim, a witness, and an interrogator of the injustices of the American healthcare system. Leaving aside any potential religious implications, the Three Flavors seem to suggest that since so many citizens already feel as if they are victims or witnesses to injustice, they also should embrace a persona that challenges the system that seems to relish their annihilation.

At about twenty seconds, the scene shifts from the church to a Black home. The viewer sees family members gathered around a table, eating dinner. At either end of the table are father and mother figures. On the screen, Family Flav is seated next to the father figure, played by Samuel L. Jackson. The scene's focus is the dinner table, and a look around the room suggests that this may be a blue-collar, middle-class abode. The family members are dressed in informal attire, tracksuits or sweatpants for the male figures and a casual blouse and pants for the mother figure. The walls are gray but clean, and art adorns one wall above a small, polished desk. The entryway to the dining room has French doors, and the shadows on the wall suggest sunset, as well as a clear view of the sky.[11] Given these clues, a viewer might guess that the family lives in a low-slung dwelling, like a row house or detached home in Queens or Nassau County, Long Island, as opposed to the vertical living spaces of Manhattan, Brooklyn, or the Bronx that featured prominently in Rap music videos. Both the Black church and the Black home can serve as sanctuaries from the cruelties of White Supremacy. Yet, the Black home also becomes the space into which healthcare inequities first manifest in this visual story.

The backdrop for most of the video is the interior of a church. Preacher Flav is at the pulpit, ministering to a flock of Black congregants, most of whom appear to be young adults. On the dais with him are Black men of various ages (to the left of the pulpit) and a choir, all wearing Afro wigs (the "Afro Choir," to the right). The church is a proper setting for a song of this nature precisely because it is a venue of contestation and is supposed to be a place of truth-telling and advocacy.[12] Because Family Flav is visibly silent throughout the video, Preacher Flav and Casket Flav recite the lyrics from their respective places in the house of worship.

When Preacher Flav shouts, spins, and twists during his "sermon," the congregants spin and twist with him. This action/reaction complex echoes the "call and response" in the Black Church tradition. The "call and response" signal to the viewer that the congregation is not intended to be spectators to "the Word." Instead, the congregation actively engages "the Word" to make it manifest in their lives while rejecting the notion of "redemptive suffering" as its own reward.[13] Accordingly, one of the most powerful lessons in the video is the need for the community to tell its truth despite any fear or despair.

Stories of "the Black Tax"

The video for the song is not simply a display of Flavor Flav's wordplay or charisma, but rather the video takes the viewer through two different stories to illustrate the message within Preacher Flav's "sermon." Both stories illustrate what some call "the Black tax," meaning the penalty Black

11 "911 is a Joke," time mark 00:18-00:21.
12 Mary R. Sawyer, "The Black Church and Black Politics: Models of Ministerial Activism." In Larry G. Murphy, ed., *Down By the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion.* New York: NYU Press, 2000, pp. 293-314.
13 James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2011, pp. 91-92.

people pay in American society for simply being an indicator of our anti-citizen status that derives from America's "inclusive exclusion."[14]

As mentioned above, Family Flav is part of the Black family unit having a meal when the maternal figure collapses. The other family members gather over the woman and try to revive her. When the Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) arrive at the home, Samuel L. Jackson's character bows his head and drapes his arms across the shoulders of his "children." The EMTs are unsmiling and make no effort to engage the family as they enter the dining room. They are lethargic and seemingly indifferent to the suffering of the "mother" and the rest of the family. Their body language suggests that they would rather be anywhere else but this home. One of the EMTs eats a sandwich and spills some of his bread onto the collapsed woman. He retrieves the morsel that fell on the victim and continues to eat without apology. Instead of bringing a gurney or stretcher for the victim, they deploy a black body bag and place her inside. They move the body out of the dining room by dragging the body bag on the ground. Once outside the home, one EMTs carries the body bag like a duffle bag as the other continues to munch on his sandwich. Upon reaching the ambulance, the hungry EMT (with a stethoscope around his neck that the viewer never saw him deploy) opens the rear doors while the other carelessly tosses the body bag into the back of the ambulance like yesterday's garbage.[15]

The second visual story involves three friends walking down a city block at night. Their attire, the sheen of snow on the sidewalks, and small snowdrifts at the curb suggest this is a Winter evening. One of the three young men suddenly collapses and begins to have seizures. One of his friends comes to his side while the other rushes to a public telephone to dial "911." The young victim continues to seize throughout the night as the caller waits anxiously by the curb. This story intersects with the family story in the timeline of the music video. While the three young men wait for help, we see the mother's body bag is unzipped, and her glazed eyes scan about the inside of the ambulance. The hungry EMT watches TV on a small, portable device and continues to eat his sandwich; he never looks up and pays no attention to the woman. The second story ends in the early morning of the next day. In the weak sunlight, the friend who called 911 is still at the curb, gesturing frantically and finally ripping his baseball cap off his head in disgust. The victim continues to shake and shudder while the third friend sits motionless near the public phone. A Black boy on a bicycle is the only person moving toward the group; he hands a newspaper to the sitting friend and pedals across their path.[16]

"Thought Leads to Action; Action Leads to…Laughter?"

Given the song's topic, the narrative arc of the video, and the imposition of disrespect into Black safe spaces, a viewer could easily conclude that this song is depressing. Of all the topics PE addressed in its songs, few are as intimate as our interactions with the healthcare system. When we engage the healthcare system, we often feel very vulnerable. We typically must remove our clothing, our bodies are handled in ways that might otherwise be deemed assaultive or abusive, and our fate lies in the hands of strangers. A simple visit to the doctor causes trepidation for most Americans; for Black people who have ample reasons to distrust the system, these fears are magnified

14 troizel d.l. carr, "BRA Book Forum: 'Black Study and Abolition,'" on Black Agenda Report, July 22, 2020, at www.blackagendareport.com.
15 "911 is a Joke," time mark 00:18- 2:05.
16 "911 is a Joke," time mark 1:27-3:15.

significantly.[17] Yet, the song - and especially the music video - offers an alternative to fear. The heavily syncopated soundscape makes the track more danceable than much of PE's early music. The song's great lyrical demand is that we acknowledge our fears and move forward, nonetheless. Additionally, its call to action insists on creating harm-reducing alternatives for millions of Americans. The initiation of such martial feats rests with thinking, understanding, and naming the condition Black people find themselves.

The EMTs in the video are representatives of a larger system. The front-line workers in this video simply give a face to the faceless, corporatized edifice. The EMTs represent a system with nothing but disdain for Black life, a structure that promises to heal while delivering more trauma. The Three Flavors harmed by its acts of commission and omission are willing to speak of their experiences and advocate for the transformation of the system and the self. To this end, it is significant that all of the advocacy - or rapping - takes place in the church. Preacher Flav urges his congregation to stand up and defend themselves and move from passive objects to active agents. He undergoes many transformations or outfit changes. Even Casket Flav defies the shroud of death in his coffin to implore the viewer to contemplate.

Notably, the Three Flavors might be able to name the problem without being sure how to fix it. And that's ok. Within the Black Nationalist/Pan Africanist context, the people can decide how best to fix the problem where they live.[18] Perhaps in our current crises, such a thought seems fanciful, but it has precedence. At the height of the Black Power Movement, the Black citizens of Pittsburgh's Hill District devised their own medical emergency response system. In this hyper-segregated city, police often ignored or even abused the Black community. One of the most egregious examples of this abuse was when police officers refused to carry a Black woman suffering a cranial hemorrhage (they opined that she was "just drunk") to a medical facility. Due to such behavior, the people of the Hill District created "Freedom House." The founders of Freedom House collaborated with a handful of White medical professionals and trained mostly unemployed Black people to be medics in the Freedom House ambulance service. It was this experiment in the bottom-up transformation that shaped "the development of a fledgling EMS system in America."[19]

The landscape of the "Black Tax" stories allows for possible solutions to sprout from anywhere, especially marginalized communities.[20] This perspective is most apparent when a listener compares the expanse of PE's lyrics to the typical, hyper-local focus of contemporary artists in New York who rapped about their particular borough. An example of this is MC Shan's "The Bridge" about Queens, or KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions' responses on "The Bridge is Over" or "South Bronx"), as well as Southern California's NWA who were "Straight Outta Compton." Although PE is from the New York City metropolitan area, the setting of the first story is a home that could be in any Black community in nearly any urban area in the world. Even though

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17 Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: the Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present.* New York: Harlem Moon, 2006.

18 McQuillar, pp. 20-22, 103-106; Chang, pp. 246-250. See also Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997, *pp.* 125-158.

19 NEMSMA: Paramedic Chief, "How Pittsbugh't 'Freedom House' Shaped Modern EMS Systems: During a Time of Racial Tension and Social Upheaval, the Movement Helped form the foundations of the Pre-Hospital Care We're Used Today," January 29, 2019, in ems1.com/ems-education/articles. See also "Freedom House: Street Saviors," a documentary about the creation of the system, at www.fredomhousedoc.com. The caption at the top of the page reads"In **1967**, 26 **HARDCORE** unemployed Black men were recruited off the inner-city streets of Pittsburgh, and trained to become the first **PARAMEDICS, ONLY TO BE FORGOTTEN**." (emphasis in original). The author learned of this subject in an interview of historian Dr. Johanna Fernandez on "It's a New Day," WBAI, July 23, 2020.

20 Chang, pp. 252-253.

the second story takes place on a snowy street, little distinguishes the urban milieu as distinctly New York. As with their other songs, Public Enemy suggests a systemic problem not unique to Black folks in New York.

Using the church as a backdrop also conveys a Black Nationalist/Pan African sensibility regarding "place."[21] Additionally, part of the sensibility is the reflection of the crisis in the bodies of the congregants. Their reactions to Preacher Flav and their dancing suggest not only that they too feel this pain but that the pain is ever-present, as expressed in the Zombie Dance. Even the members of the Afro-Choir flash their own Zombie Dance. Toward the song's end, Flav sings "oww," repeatedly. This declaration has multiple interpretations. As with many singers, the term "oww" can be a way of expressing a love for the music or the beat thumping alongside his vocals.[22] To that end, recall that the song starts with Casket Flav screaming, "Hit me!" But in this context, the "oww" expressed by Flavor also denotes the pain of life and the inaccessibility of care to ease or cure the pain. And everyone, even little kids, sings "oww" in response to Flav. The inter-gendered, inter-generational chorus of voices suggests the breadth and scope of the problem. And when partnered with lyrics like "they don't care 'cause they stay paid anyway," what we imagine to be a dysfunctional health care system is functioning exactly as it was designed - to care for the few and discard the many. The Pan African argument also has indicated that the nation-state we live in has never served our needs. Thus, we should re-examine our devotion to the State.[23] Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, in Flav's hands, this perspective suggests that we should mix humor and joy into our radicalism.

Flav saying "goin' goin' gone!" as the mother collapses in the first story may seem like a funny, throwaway line in keeping with his trickster persona.[24] By using a phrase associated with a baseball announcer's description of a batter hitting a home run, Flav's deep signifying also points to the multiple meanings of the key term in the song's title. At one level, a "joke" is understood as a display of humor with a narrative structure intended to make people laugh, not something to be taken seriously.[25] As some comedians put it, a joke has two essential parts: tension/incongruity and a resolution or surprise ending. At another level, the word "joke" refers to something of poor quality or unlike what it claims to be. At a third level, the "joke" is on us, that White Supremacy and Privilege thrive on the suffering of People of Color ("they be laughin' at you while you're crawlin' on your knees"), and we are foolish to look for a balm in current government institutions. At a fourth level, "joke" also refers to the tradition of African American humor in which we mock those things that seem intractable. PE emerged as a group during the Conservative retrenchment in America following the Human Rights Struggles of the 1960s. To paraphrase Republican Party consultant Lee Atwater, President Ronald Reagan perfected the art of communicating "racism with plausible deniability."[26] Reagan's fiscal policies exacerbated growing racial inequality in America at the same time that Black and Brown communities became the targets for budget cuts and the NSA/CIA-enabled crack epidemic. Reagan's drastic budget cuts to America's urban areas forced

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21 R. Drew Smith, "Black Religious Nationalism and the Politics of Transcendence." In Murphy, ed., *Down By the Roverside*, pp. 317-328.

22 See, i.e., Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Trenchtown Rock," (where the artist sings "one good thing about music is when it hits you feel no pain") on AZ Lyrics at www.azlyrics.com.

23 Smith, "Black Religious Nationalism," pp. 321-323.

24 Mark Dery, "Public Enemy: Confrontation," p. 419.

25 Hetzron, Robert 1991. "On the Structure of Punchlines." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. No. 4 (1): 61–108. Project MUSE.

26 Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 119.

cities to scale back on garbage pickups and close libraries and municipal hospitals.[27] Even though the Reagan administration aided and abetted international drug smuggling and defied Congressional oversight, it was Black and Brown youth who bore the brunt of the carceral state as "Reagan dragged America down the road of mass incarceration."[28]

This was the America that PE confronted. PE served as "Black folks' CNN" long before scholarly texts quantified the economic and political rollback of the promises of the "Great Society," before Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow,* and before anyone ever read Gary Webb's journalistic series "Dark Alliance." The promise of racial equality and integration had failed spectacularly, and large-scale change was only possible through a galvanized struggle featuring a new generation of multi-racial, righteous activists.[29] The group's symbol - a rifle scope's image of a Black man squarely in its crosshairs - depicted just how dangerous this struggle would be. Thus, part of the humor in the song may also be about celebrating our resilience in the face of the death-dealing "Anti-Nigger Machine" that is America's healthcare system.[30] We laugh to mock its power, to celebrate as the poet Lucille Clifton said, "that every day something has tried to kill me and has failed."[31] This illustrates one manner of resistance: to deride our oppressors, even when we cannot resolve the racial tension, the social incongruity.[32]

Consider that a family meal is not just nourishment for the body but also for the spirit of those gathered. As such, the trauma of seeing a loved one collapse in such a setting is only magnified by the callousness of the healthcare system. At the end of the second story, the boy on the bicycle represents "the news" that the system fails us. The fact that the visuals always return to the church and to Preacher Flav and Casket Flav implies that this is where our journeys inevitably will end. The video draws to a close as the Afro-Choir, children's choir, and casket proceed down the church's center aisle. Casket Flav, eyes closed, repeats, "911 is a Joke."

Despite the potential for sadness, perhaps the most compelling message is Flav's unbridled joy throughout the entire video. The short film begins as the camera pans from the bottom of his opened coffin to his face. He is wearing red and white polka dot pajamas, a matching sleep cap, his trademark clock, Zulu Nation medallion, and pink, "campy Batman"-era sunglasses! The song starts as he rips the sunglasses from his face, screams "Hit Me!," and smiles. In the first 20 seconds of the song, there are three more close-ups of Casket Flav, and in most of them, he is being silly, even looking sheepishly into the camera to apologize for his inability to be sober. In this same sequence, there are two shots of Preacher Flav dancingly wildly in his white tuxedo and grey top hat; three members of the Afro Choir pretend to play trumpets during the brass riff in the samples.[33] Once the first verse begins, Preacher Flav emerges from behind the pulpit to spit his first lines. When he recites the first line ("Now I dialed 911 a long time ago"), he is wearing pink-rimmed Ray-Ban sunglasses. But in the jump cut to Preacher Flav aside the pulpit reciting the second line

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27 Anderson, *White Rage*, p. 121-122.
28 Anderson, *White Rage*, pp. 123-130.
29 Dery, "Public Enemy: Confrontation," pp. 409, 417.
30 "Anti-Nigger Machine," another track on the album "Fear of a Black Planet", was a direct discussion of police brutality and the use of police to buttress White Supremacist/Capitlaist/Patriarchy.
31 Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me," 1993. https:/poetryfoundation.org/poems/50974/wont-you-celebrate-with-me
32 "Why Clowns Taste Funny: The Relationship Between Humor and Semantic Ambiguity." *Journal of Neuroscience* 29 June 2011, no 31(26), 9665-9671. DOI: https:/doi.org/10.15231/JNEUROSC.5058-10.2011; Maurice Charney, *Comedy: a Geographic and Historic Guide*, volume 2. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2005, p. 36.
33 "911 is a Joke," time mark 00:01-00:20.

("...don't you see how late they reactin'?"), he is wearing white, "five finger" novelty sunglasses.[34] As the first story arc unspools and Flav and the other family members gather over the collapsed Mother figure, Family Flav smiles and offers his piece of fried chicken to the viewer.[35]

In the second verse of the song, as Preacher Flav describes the travails of the young man having seizures, he is wearing a lime green tracksuit and black, "five finger" novelty sunglasses. When Casket Flav interjects in this same verse, he is wearing white "five finger" sunglasses. When the video reaches its second chorus, Casket Flav is sitting up in his coffin, bobbing his head to the beat as he raps, and wearing the pink "campy Batman"-era sunglasses upside down. Even when the pallbearers carry the casket down the church's center aisle toward the end of the video, Casket Flav is sporting an Afro wig and dancing from the waist up.[36]

Conclusion: Laughing in the Face of Death

"911 is a Joke" continues to resonate in which Black and Brown communities face disproportionately high rates of infection and death. Although its subversive masculine focus mirrors the marginalization of Black women in the Black Church and Black Freedom Struggles, it still has much to teach.[37] The song's lyrics help listeners have a greater appreciation for the nation around them. The images from the video and the indispensable performances of Flavor Flav add significant rhetorical heft for anyone engaging in this piece of art. The samples move the audience beyond what might be perceived as didactic storytelling and into a space in which the viewer can call forth her own experiences as part of the lesson and potential solutions, like "care and mutual aid networks."[38]

Flav reminds us to have fun as we struggle for justice, to see laughter as an antidote to fear. If, as the Bomb Squad claimed, they were trying to create a dense sound that "put the voice of God (Chuck D) in a storm," then these samples combined with Flavor's performance to do something entirely different.[39] Rather than stand in the storm of samples, Flav bounces on the wind, pliable and parabolic. Even if Flav is not quite sure how to end the pandemic of White Supremacy, he urges his audience to resist it gleefully.

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34 "911 is a Joke," time mark 00:20-00:27;online they are referred to as "finger hand frame Masquerade Comdey Novelty Party sunglasses at frameandoptic.com

35 "911 is a Joke," time mark 00:00:34-00:41.

36 "911 is a Joke," time mark 1:28-3:00.

37 Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Women and the Church." In Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbrara Smith, eds., *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. New York: The Feminist Press of the City University of New York, 1982, pp. 141-152; Toinette M. Eugene, "Lifting as We Climb: Womanist Theorizing About Religion and the Family." In Murphy, ed., *Down By the Riverside*, pp. 434-444.

38 Page and Pandit, "Intersections of Justice in the Time of Corona Virus."

39 Laura K. Worrell, "Fight the Power," *Salon*, June 3, 2002. https:/salon.com/2002/06/03/fight_the_power/