Ain't It Funny?

Danny Brown, Black Subjectivity, and the Performance of Neurosis

ALEX BLUE V

Our scene opens with a classic US television trope – a shot of the outside of a large home, situated in an idyllic suburban area, surrounded by trees, on a large, well-manicured plot of land. It is the American Dream that we have been told we should all aspire to – life outside of the chaotic, noisy, dangerous urbanity of the city. The show, titled *Ain't It Funny,* is offered with closed captioning, and "in stereo – where available" ("Ain't It Funny"). To the sound of a short musical intro and an off-camera studio audience cheering, we are quickly presented with the tragic subject, Danny Brown, sitting up with a woman in a large bed, in an even larger room. Danny holds a bottle of malt liquor in one hand and smokes a cigarette with the other; the yet-to-be-identified woman smokes as well. As the music quickly fades away, the focus turns to her as she looks vacantly into the distance – not into the camera – and says, "physical attention from older men makes me feel validated" ("Ain't It Funny"). The studio audience reacts with an "aww." As the camera cuts to Danny, he replies "I'm empty inside" ("Ain't It Funny"). Danny's words are met with silence. Suddenly, the camera quickly cuts to the bedroom door; as it opens, a young boy walks through and the audience reacts with an "oooooh." The child puts his hands on his hips, tilts his head to the side, and presents a knowing smile: "Oh, Uncle Danny..." ("Ain't It Funny"). The audience cheers wildly at the utterance of this catchphrase.

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The music video for "Ain't It Funny," directed by the actor Jonah Hill, presents a distraught, self-destructive Danny Brown[1] in the context of a late 1980s, early 1990s American sitcom airing on the fictional Religious Values Network. Throughout the troubling video, the viewer is constantly forced to acknowledge Danny – who is Black – in pain and asking for help, only to be ignored by most of the other characters and laughed at by the studio audience, all of whom are white. In particular, there are numerous scenes that show Uncle Danny struggling with substance abuse. At one point in the video, he is essentially treated as invisible while sitting in the living room, completely surrounded by family; he smokes a crack pipe and notes that he has a serious problem, only to be met with laughter. "Ain't It Funny" brings to light issues of neurosis, subjection, and voyeurism. The video joins a growing discourse on the abuse of Black people, identities, and bodies as consumable entertainment and spectacle.

BLACKNESS AS NEUROSIS AND THE VOYEURISTIC GAZE

The term *neurosis* was most famously used by Sigmund Freud and can be understood as emotional disturbances expressed through mental illness, psychological distress, and physical reactions (see Freud 31-65). While the use of neurosis to describe various mental illnesses has fallen out of fashion in the scientific and medical worlds in favor of more specific labels for diagnoses (anxiety disorder, depression, etc), the definitions presented by Freud still provide some useful guidance for understanding the concept. In particular, Freud's understanding of neurosis as expressions of psychological distress occurring as a result of experiences of anxiety is useful for understanding parallels between Black life and neurosis. In *Black Skins, White Masks (1952),* Frantz Fanon, writing about the psychology of Black people, states that a "normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world" (111). Contact with the white world is what causes a non-white person to understand that they are not white. As the dominant culture in the United States is white, this contact is essentially a cause for anxiety; a person of color learns that they are viewed as less-than by dominant society by being exposed to it. I am primarily interested in the use of the term neurosis as both a label for mental illness, and as metaphor for the conflicted existence and

1 US rapper Danny Brown is the performer of the song to which the music video is set, and he also portrays the main character, "Uncle Danny," in the music video directed by Hill.

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doubleness[2] experienced as a Black person in the United States. In the case of "Ain't It Funny," I find that the former is heavily influenced by the latter. In the text that follows, I argue that Danny Brown's "Ain't It Funny" can be interpreted as an audiovisual expression of neurosis, which is further complicated by the category of race, by notions of marginalized Blackness against a pervasive, dominant whiteness.

The tensions depicted in "Ain't It Funny" bring to mind questions of positionality posed by Saidiya Hartman in her book *Scenes of Subjection* (1997): whether we are witnesses, merely confirming the truth of the various representations of suffering, or voyeurs, both positions are "fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance" (3). These inquiries raise another pertinent question; whether all participants, voyeur or witness, are complicit in the suffering in similar ways. If someone is watching a film, or reading an account, are they involved in the scene being depicted?

Historically, the existential questions of observation, identity, and participation have been a frequent topic of theorists and philosophers.[3] These issues have also been addressed through the framework of race by a number of Black scholars. Frederick Douglass, for example, wrote an account of the physical beating and subjugation of his Aunt Hester at the hand of her slave master (see 6-8). It was through the observation of this vile act and through the normalization and regularity of such trauma that Douglass understood his identity as Black, and as an enslaved person. Hartman discusses this scene of subjection without reproducing the exact account presented by Douglass:

2 W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* famously introduced the concept of "double-consciousness" in 1903, as Du Bois commented on the current and upcoming difficulties of Black people in the US. Du Bois wrote of feeling a constant twoness due to being Black and suddenly being (partially) considered American, the stress of using the dominant culture's rubric to judge one's self, and the resilience of the Black American, able to live with the conflicting worlds of the Black and White US, having to occupy both, being forced to see yourself through the gaze of others, and managing to live daily with this turmoil (see Dubois 3, 8).

3 Many of the most famous philosophical works have dealt with these questions, from Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (ca. 380 BC) to Descartes positing "cogito ergo sum" (1637). Two particularly pertinent examples come to mind: Louis Althusser's usage of "interpellation" to describe the act of being hailed by the dominant ideology into a subject position (see 174); and Michel Foucault's invocation of the "panopticon," a physical structure that becomes metaphor for the ability to discipline and control subjects (and force them to be the source of their own subjection) through the fear of surveillance that they cannot predict (see 202-203).

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> I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity – the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances – and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of Black suffering. What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. (3)

This positing leads her to investigate the precarity of the blurry line between witness and voyeur.

Fred Moten brings attention to Hartman's refusal to reproduce Douglass's account in his 2003 monograph *In the Break*, noting that in referencing it, she has reproduced it. However, as he notes, "[her] brilliance is present in the space she leaves for the ongoing (re)production of that performance in all its guises and for a critical awareness of how each of those guises is always already present in and disruptive of the supposed originarity of that primal scene" (4). Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) engages all of these explicit and implicit reproductions of Black suffering, arguing that they directly shape Black existence in the present day:

> Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased. Put another way, living in the wake means living in and with terror in that in much of what passes for public discourse *about* terror we, Black people, become the *carriers* of terror, terror's embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror's multiple enactments; the ground of terror's possibility globally. (15; emphasis in the original)

These analyses reveal our constant involvement in the lives and regenerations of these accounts of terror, and the inescapability of this reality. The involvement is not equal, it is often reliant on the subject position of the participant – voyeur or witness. While there are a few instances of bearing witness present in the music video (there are characters who confirm the truth of Danny's suffering), I am more interested in the place of the voyeur, those that watch his suffering with fascination and are complicit in the suffering. The place of voyeurism and mental illness in

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"Ain't It Funny" can be productively analyzed through the critical race framework set forth by Hartman et al.

To frustrate this issue of Danny Brown as the subject of voyeurism even further, issues of performativity[4] must be taken into account, as rappers are burdened with the task of 'keeping it real,' or maintaining 'authenticity,' rapping about actual lived experience, in a way that many other performers are not. As noted in Michael Eric Dyson's "The Culture of Hip-Hop" (2004) and Jonathan D. Williams' "Tha Realness" (2007), hip-hop remains fascinated and entangled with authenticity, and that is a function of the genre's roots as the cultural expression of African Americans.[5] Daniel Dewan Sewell, commonly known by his stage name Danny Brown, is a rapper from Detroit, Michigan. Brown has often been seen as a 'party rapper,' due in part to his rowdy live performances,[6] his proclivity towards ostentation, his frequent mentions of cocaine, MDMA, and other social drugs in his lyrics and interviews, the hypersexual lyrics in many of his songs, and the timbre of his unmistakably aggressive, strained, high-pitched lyrical delivery. However, over the course of his career, his lyrics have also often addressed mental

4 Performativity, as noted by editor Henry Bial in *The Performance Studies Reader* (2013), is a term layered with multiple meanings, the most prevalent two being "performative" as a variation on the theatrical, and "performative" referring to an utterance that does not truly or falsely express an already-existing condition, but actually performs an action on its own (the utterance of "I do" to perform the act of marrying is a classic example) (see 123). The tension between these two definitions of performativity has been at the forefront of debates about hip-hop for quite some time in the US. As reported by Lily Hirsch (2014) and Amanda Holpuch (2015) in *The Guardian,* a bevy of rappers have had prosecutors attempt – sometimes successfully – to use their own lyrics and album covers as evidence of wrongdoing in court cases.

5 Constant incantations of 'the real' are also used as a way to demarcate the border between black and white (the former grants quick access into hip-hop, the latter must earn it), and the genre and the mainstream – though that border is blurred to the point of being illegible. As Dyson, Williams, Murray Forman, and many other scholars have observed, authenticity is necessary cultural currency within hip-hop. This endless pursuit of realness has been weaponized against performers throughout the history of the genre. As I wrote in the previous footnote, prosecutors have used lyrics as evidence of wrongdoing against defendants, assuming that rappers are *always* performing real depictions of their lives.

6 One of the more extreme examples occurred in 2013, when a young woman in the crowd began to engage in unsolicited oral sex on Danny as he was rapping his song "Monopoly." He continued to perform as if the act was quotidian to his live performances.

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health and illnesses such as paranoia, anxiety, and depression; he has also frequently rapped about drug use as a means of self-medication[7] to address mental instability, death, suicide, and constant exposure to trauma as a condition of life within the city of Detroit. In "XXX" the title track from his 2011 album *XXX* – a nod to both his age in Roman numerals, and a means of classifying the album as carrying X-Rated content – Danny Brown references his anxiety over having a successful music career after years of trying, his diminishing mental health, and his struggle with substance abuse:

I never leave the house, ain't slept in three days
Poppin' pills, writin', drinkin' and smokin' haze
Weaving kicks and snares, tryna dodge these hooks
Keepin' it original's something that's overlooked
The way a nigga goin', might go out like Sam Cooke
Or locked up, calling home for money on my books
'Cause if this shit don't work, nigga, I failed at life!
Turning to these drugs, now these drugs turned my life!
And it's the downward spiral, got me suicidal
But too scared to do it, so these pills'll be the rifle
Surpassing all my idols, took the wrong turn
But can't go back now, so let that blunt burn
'Cause now it's my turn if I fuck it all up
It took a while to get here, now I depend on these drugs.
(Brown, "XXX")

In the beginning of "Downward Spiral," the opening track from Brown's 2016 album *Atrocity Exhibition,* he raps "I'm sweatin' like I'm in a rave, been in this room for three days, think I'm hearing voices, paranoid and think I'm seein' ghosts; oh, shit!" Danny Brown's lyrics and performances have been influenced not only by his personal experiences, cultural understandings, and representations of mental illness, but also by a number of artists – often outside of the hip-hop genre – who have presented varying expressions of mental disorder.[8] As J. Bradford

7 In Brown's lyrics, this self-medication often leads to hallucination and psychosis, which are typically considered separate from neurosis in Freudian psycho-analysis.

8 Danny Brown's album *Atrocity Exhibition* (2016) takes its name from both the Joy Division song "Atrocity Exhibition" (1980) and the novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* by J.G. Ballard (1970). The Joy Division song opens with the lyrics, "Asylums with doors open wide, where people had paid to see inside; for entertainment they watch his body twist, behind his eyes, he says, 'I still exist.'" The book by Ballard is a set of linked

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Campbell writes in "The Schizophrenic Solution: Dialectis of Neurosis and Anti-Psychiatric Animus in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*":

> Of course, no textual representation of mental illness or literary engagement with psychiatry is entirely self-contained. Rather, it is inevitably and in staggeringly intricate ways connected to the various discourses – popular, scientific, medical, and otherwise—that seek to condition what mental illness means, to whom it applies, and to whom it belongs. (447)

Throughout his article, Campbell meticulously rehearses the historical treatment of Black subjects in discourses of mental illness and psychiatric care. He finds numerous instances of Black people considered inherently happy and therefore unable to be neurotic subjects, or even considered a solution to white neurosis because of their assumed happy dispositions (see 447-450). Traces of this historical attitude are at the forefront of the music video for Danny Brown's "Ain't It Funny." Consequentially, the video not only serves as an audiovisual expression of neurosis as it is also a representation of the possibility of a neurotic Black subject, and the probability of Black neurosis when constantly subjugated by dominant whiteness and white voyeurism. In the music video, Danny's drug abuse is reactionary, growing more and more the more that he is made a spectacle. He receives no empathy from the studio audience, eventually driving him to view anthropomorphized versions of the substances he is abusing as his friends – these "friends" end up killing him, though constant subjection is arguably the true cause of his death.

Neurosis, as various writings within this volume note, is often predicated on the social understanding that there is a normal state of mind or being, and that *normalcy* allows one to function in an approved manner within society – neurosis is a fracture with this normal state of mind. As a result of social norms, subjects learn what is expected of them in their social interactions. Based on this understanding, the neurotic is one who functions outside of this normalcy, and thus cannot function within social norms without changing, conceding, or bending to gain societal approval. But it seems a daunting task, perhaps even a fool's errand, to define what is normal and what is not – even the most fleeting glance at global history would show the answer is constantly changing. Heinz Ickstadt captures the discomfort in the historical malleability of the term in "The Creation of Normalcy":

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stories that are the hallucinations of a mental hospital worker who is suffering a mental breakdown.

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> Part of my problem of definition is that the *descriptive* and the *prescriptive* are hopelessly entangled here: the Greeks linked the concept of the "normal" with that of the "natural," thus denoting an ideal state in which the regular and average also merges with the "healthy" and the "good." This intermingling of the descriptive with the normative is a constant in the history of the term – everything else, however, is *not*. For, obviously, Nature is *not* regular – the irregular is *also* natural and therefore "normal." Already here we may get the dizzying sense of sliding on the slippery slope of a total relativism of terms: for even if we do not take the "irregular" but the abnormal, or the pathological, as being the opposite of what is considered "normal," we can well conceive of the pathological as creating its own order of normality. (7-8; emphasis in the original)

Ickstadt's abundant use of quotation marks further illustrates the shakiness of *normalcy* by linking it to value-laden concepts like "health" and "good," terms that are also wildly subjective. Nonetheless, normative constructions of neurosis persist in popular culture. To be neurotic is not just to be outside of normalcy, but to be unsettled and unstable, trying to find some stability in whatever the tacitly-derived normal happens to be. Following Ickstadt's analysis, the constant struggle to force a marginal identity to conform to the mainstream causes anxiety, fear, stress, depression, and other mental traumas.

As the default, 'normal,' dominant state of being in the United States is to be white, other racial identities are treated as either pathological, or always already neurotic; the latter must then find a way to reconcile their societally-imposed sense of abnormality.[9] Discussing the work of Donald B. Gibson, J. Bradford Campbell notes that Gibson illuminates some of the possible shortcomings and risks in psychological studies of race, including the danger of "reading African Americans as *necessarily* pathological and biologically destined to suffer"; he draws attention to the necessity of allowing Black neurotics "the possibility of agency" (446; emphasis in the original). Neurosis is not an inevitability of Blackness; rather, the use of race as a *master category*,[10] a primary organizing force in the United States

9 Many ethnicities that are now considered 'white' in the United States were not initially afforded all of the privileges of Anglo-Saxon whiteness upon emigration to the United States. David Roediger's monograph *Working Toward Whiteness* (2005) chronicles the discrimination faced by white-skinned immigrant groups in the US, noting the pieces of their ethnic identities that had to be shed, and the common resentment towards Black people that had to be adopted, in order to gradually become white Americans. Those with non-white skin have not had this opportunity, yet are still expected to live their lives according to the rule of whiteness.

10 This is asserted by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986 [2015]), who write "*race is a master category* – a fundamental concept

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which constantly reinvents and reasserts the normalcy and centrality of whiteness, facilitates the imposition of neuroses onto marginal identities. Though race is often taken as a logical means of organization, and a historically unchanged fact (see McCoskey 3), it is a fairly modern construction; 'white' as a unified category is a complicated construction in and of itself in the United States. As recently as the late nineteenth century in the US, 'white' was a category reserved for the Anglo-Saxon descended, and did not automatically extend to European immigrants who happened to have light skin (see Omi and Winant 25). Blackness was (and continues to be) used as whiteness' foil, as the neurotic outlier to the normalcy of whiteness.[11] It is primarily these lenses of voyeurism, the neurotic/normal binary, and Blackness as neurosis that inform my analysis of the music video for "Ain't It Funny."

Throughout the video, Danny Brown is presented in stark contrast to his surroundings – he is moving when others are still, he is intoxicated when others are sober. Most importantly, he is Black, in pain, and seeking help. Every other character or audience member seen on-screen is white, the family members overwhelmingly ignore him; the all-white studio audience subjects him to their voyeuristic gaze, actively reveling in his suffering. His family is complicit in his suffering, and they essentially encourage the audience's voyeuristic gaze by doing nothing to help Danny. The stark racial difference present in the music video also lends credence to the positing of Blackness as neurosis; Brown's character is forced to carry his psychological distress and substance abuse problems with no hope for relief from the white world he inhabits – in fact, he learns that this world finds pleasure in his suffering.

The methodology I employ for reading and interpreting music videos is heavily indebted to the work of Carol Vernallis. Pertaining to "Ain't It Funny," Vernallis' method is particularly productive because of the separation between lyrics and storyline present in the music video. Vernallis' questions of what draws us into a music video and what constitutes craft and artistry within the genre

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that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture of the United States" (106; emphasis in the original). They do not see race as a "transcendent category" (ibid), one that is somehow outside of other categories like class, gender, etc. In fact, they carefully notate the intersectionality of race with other forms of social stratification, noting that it cannot be understood as working completely separate from each other. However, the unique role that race has played and continues to plays in the construction of the United States leads to the assertion that race is a master category of organization.

11 This is certainly true for other non-white identities; I have chosen to focus on the black/white contrast due to the primary subject of my writing.

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formed the basis for her inquiry into new modes of analyzing music video as a form *separate* from film (see "The Aesthetics" 153). Vernallis' work examines the relationality of music, image, and lyrics, focusing on the connections that music video directors can establish through a variety of devices, including shaping images to mimic their experiential source while maintaining a syncretic link, and the matching of images with sound through symbolic, indexical, or iconic resemblance (see *Experiencing Music Videos* 175). On the latter device, she writes:

> The semiotic categories of icon, symbol, and index can be useful for understanding the relations among sound, image, and lyrics. To appreciate this approach to video aesthetics, the reader is asked to anticipate that a visual gesture will be mirrored by an aural one. Many music/image correspondences in commercials and films bear this out; for example, in the Roadrunner cartoons, Wile E. Coyote falls from the precipice to the bottom of a canyon, and the pitch drops. (*Experiencing Music Videos* 183)

Providing a meticulous analysis of the music video for Madonna's "Cherish," Vernallis seeks to reconcile musical codes such as melodic contour, lyrics, timbre, and texture, and the ways in which they shape perception of the visual. Her description of musical and visual codes along with her analysis reveal a particular temporal flow that exists in music videos and marks them as a distinct medium from film. In fact, she states that relying on film theory to analyze music videos tends to result in music videos coming off as failed narratives (see "The Aesthetics" 153).

For a multitude of reasons, this method does not work so smoothly for analyzing hip-hop music videos; hip-hop does not always follow the prioritized Western European parameters of musical construction that are present in other forms of popular music, like melodic contour or harmony.[12] In the case of Danny Brown's "Ain't It Funny," the disorientation created by the speedy delivery of lyrics that are *separate* from the storyline presented in the music video – often with subtitles – make it a further challenge to view. Though much of the narrative

12 Music theorists like Kyle Adams in "Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap" (2008) and "Flow in Rap Music" (2009) along with other music scholars like Adam Krims in *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (2000) have worked to devise new methods of musical analysis for hip-hop, generally focused on rhythm. The typical lyrical delivery in rap music, while containing pitches like speech, is not sung, so it cannot be said to have melodic contour. The accompanying music behind rap lyrics, or beat, can often be analyzed for harmony, but the lyrical delivery generally does not factor into that harmonic analysis (see Adams and Krims).

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of the sitcom within the music video does cohere with the song's thematic material, it is nearly impossible to digest both simultaneously. This lends weight to the argument that "Ain't It Funny" can be interpreted as an audiovisual representation of neurosis. The sitcom presents notions of white normalcy that are constantly frustrated and interrupted by Danny Brown as he attempts to find stability. Both the sitcom and the song lyrics present a performance of neurosis within which the simultaneity and collision of focuses force the viewer-listener to decide what is center and what is margin.

AIN'T IT FUNNY?

As the recorded track "Ain't It Funny" begins, the opening credits for the sitcom roll in, introducing the audience to each character as they enter the main doorway one-by-one.[13] Dad walks in holding a briefcase, wearing a cardigan over business attire; he tilts his head to the side, puts his hands on his hips, and offers a knowing smile. Mom follows, wearing a bright windbreaker suit, carrying a large purse; she – much like Dad – smiles, arms akimbo. Daughter enters, wearing a patterned sweater, distressed denim skirt, and tights. She is holding a large telephone to her ear with one hand, her other arm folded across her stomach, while she smacks on a piece of gum, mouth agape, and refuses to look at the camera. Kid appears, in a denim jacket and everyday slacks, wearing headphones. He catches a football tossed to him from off-camera and exclaims "Kids Rock!" as the words animate from his mouth. Lastly, Uncle Danny steps aggressively through the door, in black pants, a white t-shirt, and a leather jacket. Holding a 40oz bottle of malt liquor, he scowls at the camera, performs a couple of hip thrusts, then holds a defiant pose. Next, the video cuts to the whole family sitting on the living room couch, with Uncle Danny in the middle, as they all laugh heartily. The sitcom title appears over their heads: *Ain't It Funny*. Uncle Danny is Black; the rest of the family is white.

13 The cast of characters includes Dad, played by Gus Van Sant, the critically-acclaimed director of *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), and many other films; Mom, played by Joanna Kerns, the celebrated actress most known for her portrayal of Maggie Seaver, the mother in the classic American sitcom, *Growing Pains* (ABC 1985-1992); Daughter, played by Lauren Avery, an heiress and native of Los Angeles who acts and models, but is most well-known for her social media presence; Kid, played by "This Fucking Kid" as noted in the video; Uncle Danny, played by Danny Brown.

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From the onset of the video, Uncle Danny (played by Danny Brown) is presented as an outsider, that which does not fit. His Blackness serves as an obvious example of his difference, as it is the most instantly visible sign within a US context. But beyond this phenotypical contrast, Uncle Danny's difference is registered in his transgressive behavior – recall that before the music has started and the characters are introduced, the video began with a prelude of sorts: Uncle Danny in bed with Daughter. As his character is formally introduced, he holds symbols of addiction, and he gestures menacingly and sexually to the camera. These transgressions are exaggerated by the fact that his family is not only white but personifications of archetypical white Americana – a working, breadwinning father, a mother who might work, but primarily exists to support the husband, a teenage daughter, detached and approaching adulthood (and being sexualized in the process), and the young, sporty, inquisitive son, papa's pride and joy.[14] Uncle Danny is absolutely none of that.[15] As Frantz Fanon might argue, Uncle Danny's Blackness in contact with this white sitcom world is likely the source for his behavior. If not the source, it is certainly the catalyst.

But this is also where a massive fracture occurs in the video. The musical track to which this music video is set has only just begun, only partially pulling viewers from the developing sitcom. The music sounds tense, dissonant, and uncomfortable, there is no voice. As the music video features an internal sitcom as its primary narrative, it is clear that "Ain't It Funny" is not merely a set of images meant to showcase a mood, nor is it what is more typical of music videos – performers lip syncing and pantomiming their songs; it is presented as if it could stand alone as a television show. The addition of lyrics that are not represented on

14 Mediated representations of the white, suburban, middle-class family skyrocketed to popularity in the 1950s, primarily via television programs like *Father Knows Best* (CBS 1954-1960) and *Leave It to Beaver* (CBS 1958-1959; ABC 1958-1963). However, the trope finds its origin in 1930s American radio programs (see Hayes 97). These formulations of familial whiteness persist on American television to this day. Though contemporary sitcoms appear to have diversified, they are often still rooted in these recycled conventions of television whiteness; when they are not, they generally still participate in the logics of white/nonwhite as an organizing theme (see Khanna and Harris 39).

15 In "Ain't It Funny," director Jonah Hill plays on the trope of the rebel or outsider character that has been deployed for comic relief in a number of US sitcoms, from Fonzie of *Happy Days* (ABC 1974-1984) to Uncle Jesse of *Full House* (ABC 1987-1995) and (Uncle) Gob of *Arrested Development* (Fox 2003-2006; Netflix 2013). The reimagining of this archetype within "Ain't It Funny" is undoubtedly more sinister, but still used for comedy – as evidenced by the laughter of the studio audience.

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screen creates a split focus, and viewers must constantly shift between watching the sitcom – which has its own dialogue and subtitles separate from the song's lyrics – and listening to Danny Brown rap.[16] The video returns to the opening scene in the bedroom, with Uncle Danny and Daughter sitting in bed, talking. Because the song to which the music video is set is now audible, their conversations become represented by subtitles.

Daughter*:* [I'm really worried about you, Danny.]
Uncle Danny*:* [I'm fucked up and everyone thinks it's a joke.]

The studio audience is shown for the first time, applauding and laughing hysterically; they are all white. Because of the whiteness of both the audience and the family in the sitcom, the video produces a chilling scene of subjection as a confused and suffering Uncle Danny functions merely as spectacle, and the audience revels in their voyeurism. The audience's enjoyment suggests that they have learned to view and appreciate Black suffering as theater. Writing about Frederick Douglass's recollection of his Aunt Hester's savage beating at the hands of her slave master (and about other reiterated scenes of Black suffering), Sadiya Hartman writes:

> Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity – the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances – and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. (see 4)

The voyeuristic audience sees Black suffering, represented by Uncle Danny's on-screen anguish, not only as spectacle, but as completely familiar. They find joy not only through gazing upon suffering, but through having their expectations fulfilled. In their view, it is Danny's place to suffer.

As the music video proceeds to the next scene, the cameras return to the living room, where Uncle Danny sits nervously on the edge of the couch, leaning forward tensely while the rest of the family (minus Kid) relaxes and reclines back. Though Danny is on the same couch, it is obvious through body language and position that he is apart from the rest of the family; he is crouched forward and closed off, not interacting with anyone. Dad has his arm around Mom, and the video cuts to a close-up of them.

16 In the following, I present the subtitles in brackets to give a sense of the general disorientation created by this video.

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Dad, to Mom: [I love this show.]
Daughter: [Stop watching TV and pay attention to Danny's illness.]

At this point in the sitcom, Uncle Danny has overtly addressed his mental distress and substance abuse multiple times, and Daughter is the only character interested in acknowledging this at all, though she does nothing beyond telling others to pay attention. The other characters have ignored him, and the studio audience has laughed at him. The video quickly cuts between the coffee table in front of the couch – with a crack pipe resting atop the pages of a small book – Uncle Danny's distraught face, and the smiling faces of an oblivious – or indifferent – Mom and Dad. Uncle Danny picks up the pipe and begins to smoke as Mom and Dad remain unfazed, Kid stands behind, laughing from the staircase, and Daughter sits sulking. It would be simple to label Uncle Danny's behavior as purely self-destructive, but the complete lack of attention and intervention from the family (despite Uncle Danny's requests for assistance), coupled with the laughter of the white audience, paints a picture far more sinister. He is being subjected to the abject gaze of both the studio audience and his family; these white voyeurs are both directly responsible for and complicit in his suffering. Within this environment, there is no way for Uncle Danny to escape his psychological distress.

Uncle Danny: [I have a serious problem.]
Dad and Mom laugh at their television program,
Uncle Danny: [Please stop laughing.]

As the camera turns to the studio audience, an illuminated "APPLAUSE" sign instructs the crowd to cheer and clap, both furthering the intensity of their exploitative voyeuristic gaze and suggesting there is a large, societal structure responsible for engineering and perpetuating the voyeurism.

Afterwards, the video returns to the bedroom, where Uncle Danny is now seated in the middle of the bed, in between Daughter *and* Mom. The very beginning of the sitcom showed Danny in bed with Daughter, heavily implying a sexual relationship between the two. The addition of Mom implies an even more taboo encounter, as she is both married and in bed with her own daughter. She has yet to verbally acknowledge Danny but, presumably, has acknowledged him physically, for her own enjoyment. The women sit completely still, blank-faced, holding cigarettes, while Danny grabs his head in his hands, motions wildly with his arms and performs the song's chorus looking into the camera – this is the first instance when "Ain't It Funny" uses typical music video elements, such as the performer lip syncing the lyrics for the camera. The juxtaposition of still, lifeless

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characters against a wildly-animated Danny Brown showcases the intense contrast between him and his environment, echoing the video's recurring placement of Danny as separate, outside, and different.

The video then cuts erratically between three scenes. The first shows Uncle Danny in bed between Daughter and Mom. The second one sees Uncle Danny alone in the living room, aggressively screaming into the camera. The last of these three scenes is a grotesque version of Uncle Danny in bed with Daughter and Mom (who are now unconscious), where they are all wounded, and covered in blood as giant, mascot-like versions of a prescription cough syrup bottle and a Xanax tab – indicators of Uncle Danny's self-medication – dance on either side of the bed. The jarring, blood-filled scene represents both the violence of self-harm through addiction, and the potential of physical violence that an addict may inflict on others. Uncle Danny is at the center of every scene, maniacally performing the song's chorus: "Ain't it? Ain't it funny how it happens?" As the video continues to cut between the three scenes and nothing about the scenario has been funny, the question gains a sarcastic tone. Uncle Danny has begged the family and the studio audience for help as he slides further into substance abuse as a means to counter his affliction. With blood-soaked arms, and an unsettling grin, he grabs the camera, shaking it as he gazes through the lens. Through the act of 'breaking the fourth wall,' Danny is directly addressing the video's viewers, forcing them to take part in the scene as witnesses to his suffering and inability to escape the horrific situation.

Suddenly, however, the musical track stops, and as the video returns to the sitcom, viewers are greeted with the sound of a laughing, joyous studio audience as Uncle Danny stands on the couch alone in the living room, his back turned to the camera, urinating on a floral arrangement and some family pictures. Dad enters through the front door. Startled by what he sees, he quickly puts down his coat and briefcase and approaches Uncle Danny.

Dad: "Danny, get down from there."

Dad: "Why are you doing this, Danny?"

Uncle Danny: "I've been destroyed, and if I destroy, maybe I'll feel okay."

Dad: "None of us feel okay."

The audience offers a sympathetic "aww." Kid walks into the room, puts his hands on his hips, tilts his head to the side, and smiles.

Kid: "Oh, Uncle Danny..."

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The audience cheers and laughs hysterically while the camera remains on Kid. His eyes suddenly glow red and a disarming low frequency plays underneath the applause. Uncle Danny sighs as the musical playback continues.

In this scene, for the first time in the music video, someone seems concerned enough with Uncle Danny's behavior to have a conversation with him about it. However, the concern is only shown after Uncle Danny is doing damage to family property. By allowing Uncle Danny to harm himself constantly without so much as batting an eye, but choosing to intervene because possessions are being destroyed, Dad is effectively showing Uncle Danny just how little he is valued as a member of the family. The possessions mean more. When asked to justify his actions, Uncle Danny explains that he is attempting to make himself feel better. This can be interpreted as Uncle Danny simply lashing out as a result of the family's inattentiveness; however, when viewed as a neurotic subject, his actions are an attempt to control his environment, a way to find balance. If he destroys the things around him, he will fit into his environment, as a subject also destroyed. While Dad does seem to offer some encouraging words, given the context, this attempt at empathy does nothing for Uncle Danny.

Most startling in this scene is the audience, offering their sympathy and empathy to Dad, a character whose whiteness affords him recognition – the audience identifies with Dad, he's a peer. They have been unwilling or unable to confront Uncle Danny's pain with any kind of sympathy or empathy; in fact, he has been met with derision. Yet Dad's utterance of pain is instantly met with care and concern. His humanity is recognized by the audience in a way that Uncle Danny will never be privileged to know.

The video continues in a fractured manner between Uncle Danny performing the lyrics, linking the rapper Danny Brown and the character Uncle Danny together, and the music taking on a background role while the sitcom dialogue comes into focus via text on screen. Mom and Uncle Danny sit in bed smoking, and the camera cuts briefly to zoom in on the night table, stacked with a lamp, some porcelain, a 40oz bottle of "Danny Brown" malt liquor, a pack of cigarettes, and opened packages of "Danny Brown" branded condoms – a clear indication that a sexual relationship exists between the two of them. The techniques of self-medication to which Uncle Danny frequently turns have become such an integral part of his life that they literally bear his name.

In the final scene of "Ain't It Funny," the video turns to the dining room table, where Danny is standing with the large, anthropomorphic prescription cough syrup bottle and Xanax tab who were dancing in the bedroom; the trio is playing a game of dominoes.

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Uncle Danny: [You guys are my only friends. I need you.]
Xanax Tab: [We'll kill you and everyone you love.]

The Xanax tab reveals a knife and stabs Uncle Danny in the abdomen as the cough syrup bottle offers its encouragement and support for the act of violence. As Danny falls to the floor wounded, the audience cheers and laughs. Kid appears closely in the frame and glares directly into the camera.

Kid: [He's DYING and you people are LAUGHING. You DISGUST me.]
Uncle Danny: [I'm glad you found my pain entertaining. Goodbye.]

As Uncle Danny lies in anguish and dies, the studio audience offers a standing ovation.

This scene is a continuation of the theme of Uncle Danny's tendency toward addictive behavior and substance abuse as a means of controlling his psychological distress. The bottle and pill have taken on lives of their own and they are literally playing games with Uncle Danny. He declares his loyalty to them, and even his dependency. He is met with a stark, honest response to his congenial statement, and beyond hypothetical honesty, the Xanax tab has made a pledge to kill Danny. But through his neuroses, Uncle Danny does not view these characters as dangerous. He is willing to do what it takes to find balance, and his desperation and dependency are met with the promise of death. It is surprising that Kid suddenly chastises the audience, as he spends the entirety of the video to that point passing off Uncle Danny's pleas as non-serious and comedic. The scene of subjection has finished unfolding and comes to its logical end, to the delight of the voyeuristic white studio audience. Their reaction suggests that they were purposely ignoring Uncle Danny's pleas because they are actively invested in his death.

Many of the lyrics to Danny Brown's "Ain't It Funny" provide a parallel narrative to the music video. In particular, the third verse echoes many of the scenes depicted in the sitcom:

Ain't it funny how it happen, upcoming heavy traffic
Say you need to slow down, 'cause you feel yourself crashing
Staring in the devil's face, but you can't stop laughing
Staring in the devil's face, but you can't stop laughing
It's a living nightmare that most of us might share
Inherited in our blood, it's why we stuck in the mud
Can't quit the drug use or the alcohol abuse

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Even if I wanted to, tell you what I'm gonna do
I'ma wash away my problems with this bottle of Henny[17]
Anxiety got the best of me, so I'm poppin' them Xannies[18]
Might need rehab, but to me that shit pussy[19]
Pray for me, y'all 'cause I don't know what's coming to me
Bought a 8-ball of coke, and my nigga on the way
Got three hoes with him, and they all tryna play
Ain't it funny how it happens, whoever would imagine?
That joke's on you, but Satan the one laughing

Every utterance of the title serves to dig a deeper, more sarcastic hole – it is not at all funny how the descent into self-destruction through substance abuse happens, yet Brown raps about "staring in the devil's face" and being unable to take the encounter seriously. This is due to his addictions becoming so overwhelming that he feels compelled to push his habits to the limit, and to chemically force himself into happiness. Congruent to the interpretation of subjugated Blackness as a conduit for anxiety and depression that J. Bradford Campbell finds in his reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* ("The Schizophrenic Solution"), Danny raps about a shared living nightmare that is inherited, a metaphorical neurosis carried by Black Americans from birth. Uncle Danny's turn to self-medication after multiple unanswered pleas for help is reflective of Danny's lyrics, claiming that he cannot drop his vices, despite his desire and effort. Rather than continuing to seek help, he decides to accept the path that he is on, a life of neuroses with no permanent relief.

From a narrative standpoint, the music video for "Ain't It Funny" provides a grim look at a man struggling with addictions that he turns to in an attempt to address the mental health issues that seemingly no one will help him with. He is subjected to a voyeuristic white gaze, fascinated with his suffering and not at all interested in helping to alleviate it. Although subjugated, Uncle Danny is entirely self-aware of his neuroses, and he is aware of the sources of his subjugation. He implores both the audience and the family to stop laughing, a request that goes

17 Slang for Hennessy Cognac

18 Slang for Xanax

19 This is a moment in the song that is somewhat, though not completely, contrary to the music video, and it is indicative of typical notions of Black hyper-masculinity. Throughout the video, Uncle Danny is telling people that he has a problem, and asking for their attention. The lyric implies that to seek help would be antithetical to his performance of masculinity. This is another site of neurosis: the imagined conflict between Black masculinity and mental health issues.

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ignored. No one actively helps him – Daughter tells others to help him, and Kid admonishes the audience for reveling in his demise, but neither actually help Uncle Danny. In the context of the sitcom, he is practically invisible. The family almost never recognizes him; he is only acknowledged by Dad when destroying property, only acknowledged by Mom in a sexual setting, misinterpreted by Kid, and half-heartedly engaged by Daughter, who expresses her worry, yet is uninterested in emotional or physical labor. The family is responsible for much of his mental health decline. The studio audience almost always recognizes him through the fetishization of his neurosis, and they climax at the sight of his death. "Ain't It Funny" with its chilling depiction of the voyeurism of Black suffering, is an apt metaphor for the subjugation, doubleness, and neurosis with which Black people live.

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