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Horse-People and White Voices: Neoliberalism and Race in *Sorry to Bother You*

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The comedy drama *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), written and directed by Boots Riley, follows the trials and tribulations of Cassius, aka “Cash”, Green (played by Lakeith Stanfield), a new employee at RegalView, a fictional telemarketing firm based in “an alternate reality” version of Oakland, California.: a party promoter and a weed dealer.” He was also M.C. / lead singer and producer of hip-hop group The Coup for many years. (Riley in “Beautiful Clutter”, a featurette on the *Sorry to Bother You* DVD.) Here I consider two of the many sonic and visual devices through which the film develops its social commentary and political critique of contemporary America.

Thirteen minutes into the film, Cassius is cold-calling from his cubicle on RegalView’s open plan sales floor, where he has repeatedly failed to make a sale to several white potential customers, when he is approached by Langston, an older colleague who is also Black (played by Danny Glover). “Let me give you a tip” says Langston, “use your white voice.” When Cassius protests “Man I ain’t got no white voice,” Langston persists, “Oh, come on, you know what I mean, youngblood. You have a white voice in there. You can use it. It’s like when you’re pulled over by the police.” He continues: “You wanna make some money here? Then read your script with a white voice. […] I’m not talking ’bout Will Smith white. […]
I’m talking about the real deal.” Cassius responds by pinching his own nose and adopting a nasal whine, but Langston counters:

"I’m not talking about sounding all nasal. It’s like sounding like you don’t have a care. Got your bills paid. You’re happy about your future. You about ready to jump in your Ferrari out there after you get off this call. Put some real breath in there. Breezy, like “I don’t really need this money.” [...] It’s not really a white voice. It’s what they wish they sounded like."

As elaborated here by Langston, the white voice is the performance of an ideal for whites as well as Blacks, a passport that promises its bearer the ability to navigate both raced and classed hierarchies, and to overcome associated and intersectional exclusions. Sure enough, the hitherto struggling Cassius has soon secured so many sales that he is promoted and ascends, literally and figuratively, in a golden elevator from RegalView’s basement offices to join the ranks of the ‘power-callers’ upstairs. Once there, it becomes apparent that he is not the only Black character to seek success by speaking with a white voice in a white-controlled workplace. Mr _____ (Omari Hardwick), who welcomes him to the power-caller suite with the words “white voice at all times here” talks almost entirely in an adopted voice. Less obviously, Cassius’ girlfriend the artist Detroit (Tessa Thompson), who is a secret member of the “left-eye” protest movement, also uses a white voice in a later scene when she opens her one-woman gallery show, “selling art to rich people” as Cassius puts it. In each instance, the Black actor is dubbed by a white one. David Cross provides Cassius’ white voice; Patton Oswalt is Mr _____’s white voice; and Lily James is Detroit’s white voice.

The particular voice deployed by Cassius is relatively high-pitched and so marked as affectation or artifice. In its incongruity it functions as a comically exaggerated instance of code-switching and “speaking white-while-Black” in order to negotiate white space, as well as a concise denaturalization of a relatively under-examined source of white power. In this way the film’s employment of the device accords with Jennifer Lynn Stoever’s assertion that “in a culture driven by an ‘overdetermined politics of looking,’ sound has served as a repository of apprehension, oppression, and confrontation, rendered secondary – invisible – by visually driven epistemologies [...] [It is] unacknowledged but ever present in the construction of race and the performance of racial oppression.” But the white voice also operates as a vehicle for the film’s interrogation of the precarity of multi-ethnic labour under neoliberalism, and of what opportunities exist to build alliances across racial difference in order to resist social division and economic immiseration. It is supplemented in this inquiry by a second metaphorical conceit that appears in the last third of the film, that of enslaved horse-people, known as “equisapiens.” I consider the politics of this work-horse trope in more detail below.

RegalView’s CEO is the white entrepreneur Steve Lift (Armie Hammer), but the lowly telemarketers working in the basement appear ethnically diverse. In immediate charge of this mix of Black, white, Asian and Latinx employees, are a team manager and two assistants who are all white. (The film’s Oakland setting is significant, not only because it is Riley’s home city, but also because it was the site of the multi-ethnic Occupy Oakland protests in 2011-12, during which Riley emerged as a key spokesperson.) Once promoted to power-caller, Cassius’s first deal, worth $10m, is to provide workers to assemble smart phones for a Japanese entrepreneur. Cassius undercuts even cheap Chinese labour by offering “no wage” slave labour provided by WorryFree, the main company run by his boss Lift. Not long afterwards, Cassius wakes up in the stylish and airy new apartment that is financed by his earnings. He watches the television news, which shows footage of him and other power callers crossing a RegalView picket line while escorted by baton-wielding security guards.
Then he turns off the TV, looks over at Detroit, smiles and says “Hey baby, good morning.” But instead of his usual voice, the words are inadvertently expressed in his high-pitched white voice. Annoyed, Detroit replies, “Stop with that stupid voice Cassius.” He clears his throat and, in his normal, huskier voice, admits, “Didn’t even realise I was doing it.” Now that it has become an anomaly, an accidental dissonance rather than a deliberate vocal performance, the mismatch between Cassius / Stanfield’s body and the white voice poses a question: is Cassius speaking the white voice, or is the white voice speaking him? His loss of control presents a distant echo of the uncanny moment when a ventriloquist’s dummy speaks back unbidden, to the shock of its owner. Steven Connor notes that “Nothing else about me defines me so intimately as my voice, precisely because there is no other feature of myself whose nature it is [..] to move from me to the world, and to move me into the world.” However, “The fascination and menace of ventriloquism derived from a belief that it represented the power of sound to countermand the evidence of sight. […] we hear something which our eyes assure us is not possible.” Cassius’ accidental white voice disrupts the assumed feedback loop “between sight and sound, voice and the body” to borrow Stoever’s phrase. But this vocal slippage is freighted with an additional connotation. The meaning of the white voice here shifts from a work tool that is taken up or put down at will to a partial loss of self, and an incursion into the private sphere that signifies the distortion of interpersonal relations by the relentless expansionist logics of capitalism. As Bryant William Sculos writes, “Capitalism as a whole dehumanizes even those who benefit from it. [...] the heinous psycho-social incentives of the system [also impact on] middle class people, and even workers fortunate enough to escape the dregs of poverty wages.”

This process of dehumanisation begins with the precarious conditions endured by telemarketers working for commission only in RegalView’s call centre (conditions which are ultimately challenged by their collective organisation and successful strike action). It is also evident in the satirical television adverts and billboards that aim to lure impoverished workers like Cassius’ uncle Sergio into WorryFree’s system of modern slavery. (As Francesco Sticchi notes, at WorryFree workers “live within the factory walls without salary in exchange [for]
food and housing for life [thus] … demolishing the separation between work and life."
Cassius' more individualistic career trajectory results from a Faustian bargain struck with the forces of capital, one that requires him to speak in a false voice. In this Marxist fable, the very means of his success is a manifestation of his growing alienation from the products of his labour, from himself, and from his fellow workers. Dehumanisation is intensified and literalised in the final act of the film, with the revelation of the equisapiens, enslaved human-horse workers whose ranks Cassius is tricked into joining by Lift.

Several other important voices are heard in the film, most notably the critical insights and terms of endearment of Detroit, the jokes and complaints of Cassius’ friend Salvador (Jermaine Fowler), the exhortations of the union organiser Squeeze (played by the Asian-American actor Steven Yeun), and the collective chants of striking RegalView workers on the picket line. Furthermore, over and above these representations of voice as a site of socio-political agency, Riley’s script itself, as delivered by the voices of Stanfield, Thomson and other Black actors, exemplifies a crucial assertion and celebration of African-American English. As James Baldwin writes:

Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other but from different tribes: neither could speak the other's language. [...] A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of that language are dictated by what the language must convey. [...] Now, if this passion, this skill, this (to quote Toni Morrison) “sheer intelligence,” this incredible music, this mighty achievement of having brought a people utterly unknown to, or despised by “history” – to have brought this people to their present, troubled, troubling, and unassailable and unanswerable place – if this absolutely unprecedented journey does not indicate that black English is a language, I am curious to know what definition of language is to be trusted.

The wit, creativity and friendship expressed through the linguistic interactions of Cassius, Detroit and Salvador (and to a lesser extent, Squeeze and Langston) is travestied by Lift’s excruciating attempts to “speak Black” at the party in his mansion, where he tells Cassius, “I wanna hear about some of that Oakland gangster shit, man. Oaktown!” When Cassius demurs, Lift insists, “You’re different, man. Make an impression. At least take off the white voice. And I know you can bust a rap right?” Cassius reluctantly complies and in the following scene once again becomes alienated from his own vocal performance, this time as a consequence of the racialising language he uses. Here his natural Black voice is tolerated by Lift, but only when relaying empty clichés in a kind of caricature of gangsta rap. Cassius’ self-exoticisation conforms to the racist stereotypes assumed by Lift and the other party-goers as he raps in his own voice to an enthusiastic white crowd: “N….r shit, N….r shit, N….r, N….r, N….r shit!”

Not long afterwards, Cassius first encounters the shocking hybrid equisapiens when looking for the toilet following the party. A green light casts an oniric hue over the shadowy scene as Cassius walks into a large changing room. A voice from inside the only toilet stall calls out “Can you help me?” Cassius opens the door. As the discordant score ramps up, a naked and muscular horse/humanoid, perhaps eight feet tall and chained at the wrists, falls to the floor screaming “Help me! Help me!” to have them with tattoos and things like that that made you think of people.” He adds that no equivalent female suits were made due to budget restraints. But the horse penis also reworks the racist stereotype of black male hypersexuality. Trying to persuade Cassius to join the horse-people, Steve Lift says with a smile, “You’re gonna have a horse cock.” Fleeing in panic, Cassius pulls open two curtains, revealing two more such creatures who also implore him to help as he runs away. Back in Lift’s sitting room, an
anxious and suspicious Cassius is shown a short stop-motion animated video about horse-people by his boss, entitled “The New Miracle.” The female narrator explains “our scientists have discovered a way, a chemical change, to make humans stronger, more obedient, more durable and therefore more efficient and profitable. […] a new day in human productivity is dawning. Our workforce of equisapiens will make WorryFree the most profitable company in human history.” The enslaved horse-people, pictured working on an assembly line wearing vests and trousers, remain notably mute.

It is not easy to determine the race of the equisapiens. But Demarius, who appears to be their leader, has mid-brown skin and a Black voice spoken by Forest Whitaker. At one point he says to Cassius (who is speaking overly slowly, as if Demarius finds it hard to understand) “Dude I’m from East Oakland, talk regular.” The equisapiens recall the long and violent history of white thought and practice that has equated people of colour with animals, of which slavery is the most obvious, but by no means the only, instance. In his first autobiography, Frederick Douglass writes:

> we were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination.

However, much like enslaved Black people, the equisapiens are never simply victims, but are crucially engaged in acts of defiance and resistance. Lift asks Cassius to go undercover among the horse-people as a fake leader and spy for WorryFree management (“the equisapien Martin Luther King Jr. […] that we create, that we control”). But Cassius refuses and leaks the story to the media. However, far from collapsing, WorryFree’s reputation and share price see a stratospheric increase. Exasperated, Cassius makes up with Detroit, Squeeze and Salvador and joins the RegalView picket line. When security guards attack the picket, they are defeated by the horse-people who Cassius had earlier freed from their prison. Squeeze pledges solidarity with Demarius and the other equisapiens: “same struggle, same fight.”
The film then offers three endings in quick succession. First, the happy ending. Cassius and Detroit have returned to their garage-bedsit, now redecorated with expensive-looking art. Cassius has given his Maserati sports car to his friend Salvador, the strike has been won, and he plans to return to the basement call centre at RegalView. The second ending is one of despair. Inside the garage-bedsit Cassius suddenly falls to his knees, then a frontal medium closeup shows him now with the enlarged nostrils of a horse. He shakes his head but doesn’t speak, and the image cuts to the start of the end credits, in black and white. This is the final scene in the original script. But the credits are interrupted by a shift to colour images again, showing Lift answering the video phone in his mansion. The third and final ending has begun, and it is one of resistance. On the phone screen the equisapiens Cassius appears, standing with other horse-people. He tells Lift “I’m Cassius Green, calling on behalf of stomp-a-mud-hole-in-your-ass dotcom, sorry to bother you but…” In the final shot of the film, he breaks down the door into Lift’s living room and utters a roar. Leshu Torchin comments: “Here the figure of abjection, whose human rights have been viscerally and visibly compromised for the sake of capitalism, is now an agent of collective action.”

Ultimately, Sorry to Bother You reiterates the urgency (and unavoidable difficulty) of forging alliances, of building “intersectional solidarity” which is, as Sculos notes, a “cross-racial, cross-gender, and even cross- (fictional) species solidarity”. In doing so, it avoids the pitfalls of simplistic identity politics, which Asad Haider has called “a cooptation of the antiracist legacy” of the 1950s and 1960s that “allowed politics to be reduced to the policing of our language […] while the institutional structures of racial and economic oppression persisted.” Instead the film grounds its critique of contemporary capitalism in an understanding of how it shapes and distorts the intertwined material and psychological conditions of workers of all ethnicities. And it does all this while making you laugh.

**Endnotes**

1. Riley has called the film “an absurdist dark comedy with magical realism and science fiction inspired by the world of telemarketing.” By his own account,

   Riley’s previous career included being “not only a youth organiser [but also]

2. The first time Mr ______ breaks from his white voice is when he tries to console Cassius after the latter has been forced to rap in front of a baying white crowd in Steve Lift’s mansion: “We don’t cry about the shit that should be, we just thrive on what is, and what is opportunity.”

3. It is notably higher than the four significant white characters in the film, Steve Lift, and the three RegalView floor managers, one of whom is a woman.

4. Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown, *Race and the Senses: The Felt Politics of Racial Embodiment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 101. James Baldwin points out that the language a voice speaks is also a source of belonging (or otherwise) and hence of power (or a lack of it): “Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. (…) It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and
are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one’s antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden.” James Baldwin, “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?,” The New York Times, 29 July 1979.


6. Asad Haider offers a useful reminder: “what make a movement anticapitalist is not always the issue it mobilizes around. What is more important is whether it is able to draw in a wide spectrum of the masses and enable their self-organization, seeking to build a society in which people govern themselves and control their own lives, a possibility that is fundamentally blocked by capitalism.” Asad Haider, Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump (London: Verso, 2018), p. 16.

7. See Mark Binelli, “‘Doing What’s Right, Not What’s Legal’: Boots Riley on Occupy Oakland,” Rolling Stone, 30 January 2012. Oakland is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the USA: “The 2020 United States Census reported that the racial makeup of Oakland was 156,429 (35.5%) White, 104,873 (23.8%) Black or African American, 68,300 (15.5%) Asian, 2,643 (0.6%) Pacific Islander, 3,965 (0.9%) Native American, and 30,404 (6.9%) multiracial (two or more races). There were 118,974 (27.0%) of Hispanic or Latino ancestry, of any race.”

8. A television news bulletin playing in the bar frequented by Cassius and Detroit reports that “protestors say WorryFree’s method of lifetime labour contracts is a new form of slavery.”

9. For an analysis of horror and musical tropes deployed when Cassius uses his white voice to toast his friends and colleagues in the local bar, see Alice Maurice, “‘Use Your White Voice’: Race, Sound, and Genre in Sorry to Bother You,” New Review of Film and Television Studies, Volume 20, Issue 1 (Winter 2022), pp. 88-100.


12. Stoever, p. 113. Stoever examines how the public performances of Black singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield challenged dominant racist assumptions about contrasting white and Black vocal qualities in the mid-19th century. In this instance, the sight of Greenfield’s body could not “accurately anticipate its sound,” p. 104.


15. One of Squeeze’s most important tools is a megaphone, much like those which Riley himself has used in the Occupy Oakland protests and beyond.

16. Baldwin, emphasis in original.

17. Hanif Abdurraqib captures a similar dynamic when he writes of his time as a Black student in a predominantly white college: “I could tell which ones had never been around any Black people before by how they tried to imitate what they thought was cool & it is funny how easily the fake can jump out once you’ve seen the real & I mean the slang too & the swagger too & the way one nods their head to the music”. Hanif Abdurraqib, *A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021), p. 47.

18. The creature’s large penis is visible at this point. In his director’s comment on the DVD, Boots Riley states that the equisapiens’ penises “for me, it made it way more real, to not have them covered up (…) it made it feel much more human to show genitals [and]

19. Riley has said of the equispaiens: “The idea of it being workhorses – I was looking for something that also had to do with the way that I feel capitalism is making us right now, which is to be more efficient monsters, right? If you take a shit without doing emails at the same time, you’re meant to feel unproductive. So why horses? We think of a horse as something that’s for work. It’s in our language – horsepower.” Riley cited in Jordan Crucchiola, “Boots Riley Tells Us the Story Behind Sorry to Bother You’s Horse People,” *Vulture*, 4 February 2019.


21. Interviewed on *Democracy Now!* , Riley stresses the need for the organisation of labour in the US: “We don’t have the movements that are (…) big enough yet, (…) movements that are actually confronting capital by withholding labour.” Amy Goodman and Juan González, “Boots Riley on How His Hit Movie “Sorry to Bother You” Slams Capitalism & Offers Solutions,” *Democracy Now!* , 17 July 2018.

