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(White) Power Callers: *Sorry to Bother You's* Race-Based Capitalist Structure

Boots Riley's recent film, *Sorry to Bother You*, utilizes afrosurrealism to portray racial inequality, symbolized by the "Power Caller" hierarchy structure, where employees must exploit their "white voice" in order to be successful. The protagonist, Cassius Green, is a poor and underachieving African American, who loses his connection with his identity's roots as he rises higher on the capitalist ladder at his telemarketing job, Regal View. This connection with his African identity is represented through his relationship with his girlfriend, Detroit, which is disrupted by Cassius selling out his friends and his principles with the continued use of his white voice to earn more money. The surrealism of the white voice ability works almost as an inverse of the magic related to the "Magical Negro" role, where the magical properties become equated to whiteness. The film also uses afrosurrealism to depict the effects of capitalism on impoverished victims outside of the structure through the "Worry Free" company, an indentured servitude program that targets lower class citizens with controlling imagery, and preys on the disenfranchised working class.

The reversal of the magic involved with the Magical Negro is one of the more interesting afrosurreal techniques in the film. The Magical Negro is commonly presented at first as a lower class citizen, who then amazes and assists the white protagonist by possessing some superhuman quality, that is usually not all that fantastic. Matthew Hughey regards the Magical Negro's position as a laborer, stating,

"Such placement of MN [Magical Negro] characters as members of the extreme lower class, commits in the words of Stuart Hall (1997), a certain "labor of representation" for the white populist imagination. For instance, the assumption that most black people are poor, uneducated, and occupy the lower rungs of society lends "authenticity" to the

placement of MNs in these films. By making MNs resemble welfare queens, uneducated voodoo priestesses, the mentally challenged, impoverished janitors, prisoners, and the homeless, the films both produce and solidify a marginalizing discourse.” (556)

Both Cassius and Langston, another telemarketer who teaches Cassius how to use his white voice, are both on very low levels of the capitalist hierarchy of Regal View. Their position as menial laborers at the bottom of the hierarchy, along with their possession of a supernatural ability, is what qualifies them as potential MN roles. It’s the nature of that ability that makes me consider their portrayals to represent an *inverse* of the traditional magic ability of the MN, however. Hughey also writes that, “The magic is what gives the black character knowledge of the white ways of the world and enables him to teach, guide, and instruct the white man on how to reclaim his social positioning, mental keenness, and material success,” (561). Being that their power stems from their sort of “latent whiteness,” instead of their ability to assimilate white cultural knowledge, it is represented as more of an inverse power. However, Cassius and Langston are still assisting the white figures in power by making them more profit through sales, despite the goals being to get themselves paid and rise through the ranks of the Power Caller structure.

The Power Caller structure of capitalism at Regal View is symbolic of the way that racial inequality manifests in the workplace. When Cassius attempts to sell products over the phone with his normal, black voice, he never sells a thing. Langston then tells him that if he wants to succeed at Regal View, he needs to use his white voice, indicating that his blackness is what is hindering him from making sales. All at once, the introduction of the surrealist tool of the white voice both devalues Cassius’s inherent African American identity, while glorifying the abstract trait of whiteness. I use the term “abstract trait” because of how Langston instructs Cassius on how to use the white voice. He says, “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, like you don't really need this money. It's not really a white voice. It's like what they *think* they should sound like," (*Sorry to Bother You* 14:00-15:00). The concept of whiteness has superseded physical whiteness, and become a desired characteristic, necessary to advance financially. The real power in being a Power Caller is well described by a short passage in Kodwo Eshun's essay, *Further Considerations on Afrofuturism*, where he states, "It is clear that power now operates predictively as much as retrospectively. Capital continues to function through the dissimulation of the imperial archive, as it has done throughout the last century. Today, however, power also functions through the envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures," (289). Providing financial stability is the true power that being at the top of the capitalist hierarchy offers, as it keeps people within the system at a higher class level than, say, those who can't afford shelter, because in the alternate setting of Riley's film, many of the impoverished sign their lives away to Worry Free for a familiar sense of comfort.

The Worry Free company represents the consequences of a capitalist economy run rampant. They offer a lifetime guarantee of shelter and other necessities, at the cost of a lifetime of labor. They prey on the financially desperate, like Cassius's uncle, Sergio, by contacting him about signing up for Worry Free once it is clear that he will not be able to pay for his house any longer. Since Sergio is not established as successful within the capital structure that Cassius has embedded himself in, he is an easy target for Worry Free; a victim of the effects of racial inequality that pervades capitalism. Given that the quality of life among the Worry Free communities, as well as their recruitment process, is less than admirable, society begins to liken the conscription to slavery, or, at the least, indentured servitude. Now, a company that is employing lifetime workers and providing them with poor

environments should raise several red flags from the start, but the company's method of advertising through controlling imagery has allowed them to retain a bit of ambiguity surrounding their slavery allegations. The theoretical framework of a study of television ads in conjunction with racial controlling images, states, "Visual masking implies that neutral appeals can conceal the often subliminal manner in which people perceive messages. It follows that if the masking appeal was removed, then increased conscious processing would reveal the problematic content (Smith and Rogers 1994)," (Hyman, Palihawadana, Reast, Shabbir 427). The Worry Free company is masking the truth of their slavery by depicting the lifetime contract as a great deal for the impoverished with controlling imagery.

Many opposing protest groups (that Cassius's artist girlfriend, Detroit, appears to belong to), have chosen to protest by reimagining and defacing the Worry Free ads to be more realistic of their practices. One Worry Free advertisement that Cassius passes on his first day of work purports that, "If you lived here, you'd be at work already." When Cassius returns home that day, the sign has been changed to read, "Slavery at work." Another, more obviously targeted advertisement depicts an African American man sitting on a couch absentmindedly, with the text "Show the world you're a responsible baby daddy," next to him. The protesters change the sign to read, "Show the world your response, baby!" The implication of the original ad is that black men are inherently lazy, and that signing their lives away to Worry Free's slavery is a positive and responsible life choice. The protesters' interpretation (that Detroit is implied to have had a hand in) depicts the man as a strong figure of power, holding a spear like an African warrior. This connects to a claim made in an essay about graffiti in *Caribbean Quarterly*, which states, "Power over space is intimately connected to knowledge and to its dissemination and entrenchment through discourses: the circulation of dominant texts or narratives that shape our ways of knowing. Graffiti as a body

of texts or narratives, including artistic or gang graffiti as well as textual graffiti, has often been a communicative tool of those who feel excluded from formal structures of social, economic, and political power,” (Francis, Jaffe, Rhiney 3). The graffiti vandalization of the Worry Free ad also connects Detroit to the traditional African identity that Cassius begins abandoning when he becomes a Power Caller, as well as providing an example of Worry Free using stereotypes in conjunction with controlling images to convince lower class citizens (a.k.a. almost entirely the racial minority) that their only value is in their laborious abilities. Riley also makes this accusation with the application of surrealism, establishing a very direct “workhorse” allegory through the depiction of actual half-horse, half-human hybrids. These hybrids are unnaturally birthed through a process created by Worry Free. This surrealism not only works to establish a workhorse symbol, but serves to depict how greed and capitalism devolve the controlling class into exhibiting radical moral depravity.

This depravity corrupts the figures in power, who in this instance are all white (except Mr. Blank, who is another black man that Cassius meets on the Power Caller floor, but he’ll be more important when defining Cassius’s identity). These figures, like the Senate who declares that Worry Free’s operation is not synonymous with slavery, or the management of Regal View, are constantly manipulating the working class so that even when they organize and are within sight of progressive change, they are actually protesting in circles. They’re too occupied with earning equal pay, and are oblivious to the way that the controlling class is altering the system internally to always keep the workers oppressed. The Regal View management sews dissent among the unionizers by offering Cassius a promotion, removing one of the protestors strongest bargaining points by “othering” Cassius, and turning him against them with the promise of more power and capital. Cassius, fueled by the greed instilled in him by the capitalist structure he has been excelling in, abandons his friends and

his identity in favor of the money and success. This splintering of his identity is what creates Mr. Blank, who is the personification of his white voice.

Mr. Blank, who's name is spoken as a censored *bleep*, appears when Cassius becomes a Power Caller, and tells him to "use white voice at all times." This character is representative of Cassius whiteness, just like Detroit symbolizes his African identity. This duality is similar to something observed in biracial college students in a study by Rhea Perkins. Perkins states, "an option [of biracial identity] suggested to 'identify as white if the individual physical features allow.' One could be considered White socially if the features allow," (215). This is referred to as "passing." Perkins explains that "passing describes individuals with enough European features to 'pass' for being White. This creates division among the Black community," (215). Mr. Blank is a physical manifestation of Cassius "passing" as white with his white voice. He is only ever around when Cassius is working, and only ever using his white voice. The only time he uses his normal voice is before he laments to Cassius that the structure of capitalism is too far ingrained into society to tear down, and must be navigated, saying, "Look here, youngblood. We don't cry about the shit that should be. We just thrive on what is, and what is... Opportunity," (*Sorry to Bother You 1:12:00-1:12:45*). Mr. Blank's last appearance is in line with Cassius's redemption and subsequent reunion with Detroit and his African identity, as he is seen charging the picket line after Cassius reveals Worry Free's genetic experimentation, (which figures in power manipulate to increase Worry Free's stock and declare the CEO a genius, essentially backfiring his whistleblowing). When Mr. Blank realizes that Cassius is not going to cave and go back to work for the Worry Free people, he turns around and leaves, never to be seen again. Cassius is also seen getting back together with Detroit at this point, signaling his redemption from selling out his identity and "creating" Mr. Blank.

The conclusion of the film, while a big plot twist, is symbolic of the eventual course of action for the disenfranchised if they are ever to topple the capitalist hierarchy. Everything appears to have gone back to relative normality, and the protestors have formed a new union to make changes within the structure. However, Cassius suddenly begins morphing into a horse person, and, along with a mob of other Equisapiens, storms Worry Free's CEO's mansion. This ending is a metaphor for how the lower class will never be able to thrive within the capitalist structure because it will always be structured for them to fail. Violent revolt becomes the only option for a turnover of class systems. The oppression from the Worry Free company and the capitalist structure they represent affect the entire system, and always sacrifice those at the bottom of the hierarchy. In this way, *Sorry to Bother You* depicts the rise of a minority employee, and the sacrifice of his values in the pursuit of success through afrosurrealism and interpretations of the Magical Negro trope, and as a personal note: it's a really good movie.

For the creative portion of my paper, I've decided to write six poems from the perspectives of Cassius, Mr. Blank, Detroit, Worry Free CEO Steven Lift, Langston, and one of the Equisapiens. Each covers the basics of the analysis that pertain to the character. For example, the Steve Lift perspective depicts moral depravity through overindulgence of capitalism, while the Mr. Blank poem looks at the dual identity of Cassius and how he interacts with the racial inequality among capitalism.

Cash

It's hard being broke. It hurts like a can to the skull, and I can't even pour one out because I'm too poor to afford living in the garage off my uncle's house.

Serg said that the bank ain't messing around, and I haven't paid rent in about four months now, so I went and got a gig selling books, but really I was just selling out.

You ever wanted to be super powered? Just to break the rules because the rules don't apply to those in power? Or maybe so you're strong enough to throw em all down off their Ivory tower?

That's what it's like to have money. Because everyone knows that those without get devoured.

When they offered me the opportunity to become a Power Caller,

I knew money wouldn't be tight, cause it was tight that I was making top dollars.

But Detroit, she hated the sport of selling people like cannon fodder, and I was blinded by the White light till Mr. Green had no honor.

They played me like a dumb ass, and turned workers into horses.

I wish that shit was a joke. The donkey pun was funny, but y'all need to open those eyes the fuck up and stay woke,

Because one day, when you're a month behind on your mortgage or your car loan, and the Worry Free legal team calls you up on the phone, you're going to wish you hadn't laughed when I was slamming the truth down your throats until you choked.

The Power Callers run the world, you'd be lucky if they offer you a handful of oats to sow.

[bleep]

This is the top of the food chain, Cassius. No prey among the greats.

White voice only, son. Put that gruff talk away.

We sell success. We're *Power Callers* for a reason.

Let me tell you, power comes at a cost, and you hardly ever break even.

I gave up my sight to make a deal with the White Demons. What'd you give up? A love, a

leg, an eye? Or did you agree to split yourself into two halves? The you, and the I.

I'm the side that makes sure that we survive, while you coast and get by for the rest of your life.

I am success. I'm the one in *power* for a reason. I'll tell you something, Cassius: the workers get the scraps only after the King has eaten.

I'm gonna make this plain, so don't take it the wrong way. If you want to achieve, you stake your claim. Don't go soft and decide you don't have what it takes.

Don't do that thing.

That thing where you fuck it up. We don't get another swing.

Be success, Cassius. White people have the power for a reason. Better make up your mind and tell em' the truth;

You want money, or freedom?

Yeah, Like the City

It's an expression of ancestry, not that people understand. Yeah, they're dick earrings, but they help me make a stand.

If the people in power can bastardize art to sell their poison, we can change it up, tear it down, and reform it

Wear our families and our causes on our clothes like uniforms and if the institution tries to snuff us out, we'll just come back twice as strong.

People make the connections, that's why interaction is key to the piece.

Life is a performance and I'm killing it as the lead,

But if the message is gone, what's the point of it all? Why protest if nobody believes?

I think the answer to that is just too abstract to grasp, and if I have to explain it, the point isn't worth the act.

I know we all scratch and save, and work shit jobs for shit pay, but at the end of the day, the sun still hasn't exploded and I still need to have my say.

I can't forgo my principles for the promise of a raise that they only offer me once I agree to sell out my name.

You do you if you want, I'll be here in the paint, making a mark on the world, while you make the world a worse place.

The Boss

I mean, I'm doing these people a favor.

They had nowhere to live, no one wanted them. They were failures.

I offer them a chance to become something.... Greater.

Sign their lives over to a higher power, and make me their creator.

Can you imagine?

HORSE. PEOPLE.

It's like the best of both worlds, because I get workers that work for hay, and are just begging to be killed.

What could be better? They actually work until they die, and since that's the only thing they never seem to shut up about, day and night, I'm creating the demand *and* the supply.

I think I'm honestly running out of stupid things to buy, and when you get bored enough, you start to play with people's lives.

I think I got too high the other night and watched Cronenberg's *The Fly*; but capitalism has afforded me the tools to do whatever I desire, and since I run the ones who ultimately decide what the laws abide and what they won't let slide,

I'm going to end up owning everything, and making a deal with myself on the sly, then sell myself out to my business partner (another version of this handsome guy), to turn a profit on my own hide, and sell it back for twice the price I paid myself, and hang me out to dry.

Capitalism is dog eat dog, and I'm on the top of the pile. I'm starving, might order the dog, with a horse steak on the side.

Seniority

Everyone struggles, kid, so don't think you're special.

I've been breaking my back with white folks chewing my ear off since the world was molten metals.

But I understand all about em', and what they think the status quo is,

I turn up the white voice, and watch the dough flow in.

It's not all nasal, you gotta put some breath into it,

It's not what white people sound like, it's what they think is accepted.

It's not about not being black, it's about not being stressed, like "I don't really need this money," like you're just in it for the respect.

I've seen my fair share of young bucks, such as yourself, sell out and lose color faster than stuffy wives let their hair down,

But make no mistake, there's not a single person who cares enough about getting the rest of us what we deserve, because we're all too busy trying to get out.

Those Power Callers, and their gold elevator, as if the symbolism is lost on the "uneducated,"

Rule the system from within, changing stipulations to fit

Their crooked frames and cheap ways. They couldn't care less if we quit,

Because the jobs can be filled when the position is vacant.

Seems the only way up is to reach out and take it.

Equisapien Rights

Nay, we disagree with these egregious violations

Of the equal rights that we deserve, despite being Equisapiens.

We got bullied into lifetime contracts, undersold and shouldered into corners, where we were trapped,

And every day we break our backs until they snap under the pressure of being forcibly transformed into a bet at a race track.

Track the way that race interacts with the hordes of the poor, impoverished and ignored, and you'd be floored to find that folks in power don't mind sacrificing lives to the great gears of war,

So long as they get paid the same, or in the best of cases, more.

Hey, it's not for horses, this is a statement to your homestead:

We came to imitate the scene in The Godfather, where he leaves the horses head,

Only instead of the prize winning stallion, we're gonna hang you up by the covers of your bed and lop your dome right off your neck.

Who cares what we do with the rest? Maybe find a way to make it run forever on a never ending tread, or carry carriages through the park so we can enjoy a rest,

While you do the work for which your scientists had us engineered and bred.

The time calls for revolt, the system won't fall if we try to forgive and break bread.

No, the only way to kill the snake is to cut off its head.

To bring the downfall of capitalism, the Kings must all meet death.