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RACISM AND RESISTANCE: CONTEXTUALIZING *SORRY TO BOTHER YOU* IN THE NEOLIBERAL MOMENT

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to discuss the historical and theoretical framework of neoliberalism through three films that place the Black body at the center of neoliberal economic and ideological systems: *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973), and *Black Panther* (2018). These films engage questions of race and neoliberalism by placing the Black body at the center of traditionally white structures. Cassius Green and Dan Freeman work their way up the corporate and CIA hierarchy, respectively; however, both men become token symbols of "colorblind" integrationist rhetoric. Further, *Sorry to Bother You*, as opposed to *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, theorizes the disastrous effects of neoliberalization on the Black body through the transformation of Cassius into an equisapien, a neoslavery machine. By adding *Black Panther* to the discussion, I analyze the ideological struggle between T'Challa and Killmonger. While T'Challa advocates for the maintenance of the Wakandan economic and spiritual lifestyle, Killmonger seeks to upend not only neocolonial systems of oppression but Wakanda itself. Ultimately, Killmonger's death represents the suppression of radical Black revolutionary activism in favor of a neoliberal economic solution to racism. These films together demonstrate the progression of neoliberal values. *Sorry to Bother You* concludes with the physical and spiritual transformation of Cassius as he progresses further and further into white spaces. Colorblind ideology fails to recognize and effectively tackle white assumptions of Blackness.

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Racism and Resistance: Contextualizing *Sorry to Bother You* in the Neoliberal Moment

I. Introduction: Defining Neoliberalism and Contextualizing Post-Civil Rights Racial Discourse

Sorry to Bother You builds on a tradition of Black speculative fiction that theorizes solutions to W.E.B. Du Bois's famous declaration that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (9). Through its mixing of conventional tropes and themes of the genre, *Sorry to Bother You* places itself within the discourse of other African American films which probe the relationship between race and class and oppression and revolt in the United States, such as *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973). More specifically, these films place the Black male body in the center of traditionally white spaces, forcing the protagonists to navigate alien spaces that consistently police their behaviors towards what Abd-L Ibn Alkalimat (also known as Gerald McWorter) calls "anglo-conformity" ("The Ideology of Black Social Science" 32). Contextualizing *Spook* will allow us to track the progression of neoliberal ideology from its beginnings in the 1970s to the neoliberal world order in which *Sorry to Bother You* exists approximately fifty years later. Released in 1973, the film responds to a post-Civil Rights Nixon era cooptation of Black radicalism, which ushered in the era of neoliberal "colorblind" racial discourse in the U.S. I argue that neoliberal "colorblind" ideology, from its Nixonian origins, has never represented a genuine articulation of a post-racial society; rather, both films work to demonstrate that colorblindness is a counter-insurgent narrative aimed at coopting and

undermining radical Black freedom movements.

Spook and *Sorry to Bother You* raise questions of the revolutionary potential of their protagonists. The recent blockbuster, Marvel's *Black Panther,* fits into my discussion of race and resistance signified by the conflict between the African American character Killmonger and his African nemesis/cousin T'Challa. The film can also contextualize neoliberal Black revolutionary potential in comparison to the post-Civil Rights era. While T'Challa and the Wakandan establishment advocate a conservative, insular foreign policy, Killmonger attempts to arm Black people throughout the world in hopes they will use Wakandan technology to uproot the neocolonial systems which oppress them. Killmonger's rhetoric echoes the Black Panther Party rhetoric of the late 1960's, advocating for a complete upheaval of American and other colonial/neocolonial institutions. Like Freeman, Killmonger uses American institutions—the CIA specifically—for the purpose of Black liberation. But unlike *Spook, Black Panther* concludes with the death of Killmonger and the reinstitution of T'Challa as king of Wakanda. I argue that *Black Panther* epitomizes the neoliberal moment in its individualization of revolution. While Killmonger attempts to disseminate power to impoverished and powerless neocolonized people, T'Challa's victory secures his power as king but also over Wakandan resources and wealth. While *Spook* demonstrates the power of group solidarity in Black liberation struggles, *Black Panther* neoliberalizes social change by valuing individual power and wealth. Significantly, the film ends with T'Challa injecting Wakandan wealth into Oakland, a neoliberal gentrification of an historically impoverished city.

Sorry to Bother You, Boots Riley's directorial debut, was first released at the Sundance Film Festival in January of 2018 and was released in the U.S. to all audiences in July of 2018. Coming in the dead of summer perhaps came with the intention of a small audience considering

the controversial nature of the film. To summarize the plot briefly: Cassius Green (Lakeith Stanfield), a down-on-his-luck Oakland native, finds success and financial stability through his job as a telemarketer at Regalview. But there's a catch to his success: Cassius must employ a "white voice," a concept first introduced to him by his fellow Black co-worker Langston. After being promoted to "Power Caller," a significant promotion from the low wage telemarketing position, Cassius leaves his co-workers Salvador and Squeeze just as they begin to unionize for better working conditions. His promotion lead to a significant rift as Cassius alienates himself spatially and emotionally from the movement. A semi-dystopic and poignantly situated Oakland backgrounds the film; Worryfree, a mega corporation, develops a new business model in which corporate workers sign lifelong contracts to eat, sleep, and live in their workplace. Cassius learns that his Power Caller position places him in charge of selling slave labor to Worryfree. His moral predicament doesn't come to a head until he meets Steve Lift, CEO of Worryfree, who reveals his terrifying plan to transform his workers into equisapiens: half-horse, half-human entities capable of out-producing human labor. After a horrifying face-to-face encounter with these hybrid beings, who are confined in Lift's home to horrific slave-quarters like conditions, Cassius leaks Lift's secret via an appearance on the gameshow *I Got the Shit Kicked Out of Me*. The world sees Cassius's video, but rather than the moral outrage Cassius expects, Lift becomes an instant celebrity of innovation. Cassius transforms into an equisapien against his will and, in turn, leads a group of equisapiens in a desperate protest by storming Lift's mansion.

Sorry to Bother You exists in a specific cultural context, one marked by the perpetuating influence of neoliberal ideology throughout the political, economic, and social structures of American society. Riley asks us to consider the ways in which neoliberalization has shaped our understandings and constructions of race and, more specifically, Blackness in 21st century

America. Because neoliberalism evolved over the 1970s, it can be contextualized as a counter-insurgent response to the Civil Rights movements in the U.S. Questions to ask and answers to explore: How has American society evolved in its attitudes towards race over the course of the 21st century? How is neoliberalism enacted through interpersonal relationships, community ties, and, on a larger scale, political actions? Because neoliberalism has a range of definitions and conceptualizations, a cursory introduction is necessary to contextualize the film. However, my goal is not to historicize neoliberalism, a task done well by many scholars already. We should understand neoliberalism in a broad sense because of its pervasive influence across not only the political realm but through its daily and lived social consequences, the central focus of my argument. As *Sorry to Bother You* demonstrates, neoliberalism affects discourses and understandings of race as well as individual subjectivities, as seen through Cassius's character. This paper seeks to examine the neoliberalization of the Black body. Despite the rhetoric of a "colorblind" racial understanding, through Cassius we see that assumptions of Blackness continue to play a significant role in the corporate workplace.

Neoliberalism takes individualism as its basis for transforming American society along market lines. As Raewynn Connell notes in her essay "Understanding Neoliberalism," neoliberalism should be viewed as "a large-scale historical *project*" (33). "Project" represents a critical juncture here in that it suggests a clearly devised, purposefully constructed implementation of ideology. Kim England and Kevin Ward, authors of "Theorizing Neoliberalization," add to Connell's conception of neoliberalism, developing the idea of "neoliberalization": "We use the term 'neoliberalization,' emphasizing the processual, relational and variegated nature of regulatory restructuring and subject-making" (51). In his book *Critique and Resistance in a Neoliberal Age: Towards a Narrative of Emancipation*, Charles Masquelier

examines Foucault's conception of the "entrepreneurial self." Further, "these conducts mark a historically specific 'subjectivity' emanating from the contingent configuration of a range of economic and extra-economic practices. It marks, more specifically, the rise of the entrepreneurial subjectivity, whereby the individual turns into an 'entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (49). Viewing Cassius through this lens, *Sorry to Bother You* examines the consequences of this subject formation. Specifically, I argue that while Cassius embodies and enacts the neoliberal values and subjectivity of the entrepreneurial self, the film theorizes neoliberal ideology through the Black body, which then becomes disintegrated, bruised, and ultimately transformed into a working machine/animal, a neo-slave.

I recognize that neoliberalism as a concept remains a site of contestation among scholars. For my purposes, I want to focus on neoliberalism as an economic agenda shaped by particular values that affect the individual and the body within that ideological framework. While neoliberalism views racism through an *economic* lens, it fails to account for the real, lived *social* consequences of racism: the microaggressions and assumptions of race that permeate the spaces Cassius and Freeman navigate. The films analyze the role of tokenism as a response to and substitution for integrationist policies. In other words, Cassius and Freeman are consistently coopted as symbols of supposed racial progress. The films show that when these Black men enter traditionally white spaces, the white people within these spaces force either invisibility or an implicit standard of anglo-conformity, more colloquially known as "acting white." It's important to note the difference in how "acting white" is discussed by the Black and white characters. The white characters don't characterize themselves as "acting white." However, for both Cassius and Freeman, the conformity to these standards within the traditionally white masculine spaces is

required for them to achieve their respective goals and maintain their status within these spaces. Cassius *must* use white voice as a power caller unless told otherwise by a white authority (Steve Lift), and Freeman *must* continue his Uncle Tom charade to stay undercover in the CIA.

Matthew Eagleton-Pierce's article "Historicizing the Neoliberal Spirit" outlines three key values in the liberal tradition: individualism, universalism, and meliorism. Individualism refers to the shift from, "Obligation to family, religion, empire, or king," to the idea that "sought to promote the abstract individual as a normative baseline" (20). The increasingly individualistic world doesn't mean that connections to traditional structures have been cut entirely; rather, the connection between individual and family, church, and community has become more tenuous, in a general sense. This certainly depends on the individual (as well as specific ethnic/cultural communities) in question and his/her/their relationship to these traditional structures, but the film emphasizes Cassius's lacking these connections, as we see in the opening scenes. Rather, he searches for meaning in and of himself rather than the social structures around them, most notably in his distant attitude toward his longtime girlfriend Detroit. In turn, many scholars question the implications of integration efforts in the U.S., examining the relationship between neoliberal ideology and the African American community specifically. In her essay "Integration and the Collapse of Black Social Capital," Michelle R. Boyd details the viewpoint that "whatever the problems with racial segregation, it had the benefit of forcing its victims to depend on one another and that this social connection has been lost with integration" (92). These comments suggest not only a collapse in racial solidarity but in class solidarity: "The narrative of lost social capital argues that the problems besetting Blacks…are a function…of the distortion of collective social values and networks that followed from racial integration" (92).

Universalism, as Eagleton-Pierce characterizes it, refers to capitalism's "unceasing effort

to bypass or transcend limits—which may take physical, political, or cultural forms" (21). In racial discourse in the context of the U.S., this often takes the form of colorblindness, or the idea that one's skin color has no social repercussions. But skin color can be expanded under universalism to include gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexuality… i.e. any number of factors that contribute to social difference. Cassius's identification as a Black man complicates his position as a telemarketer for Regalview. He fails to even maintain phone calls with clients early in the film, until he learns to use white voice. The film demonstrates the contradictions of universalism, namely that a seemingly diverse workplace *requires* white voice to succeed. Cassius lacks the social connection of a specific community, so when he recognizes the injustices done toward the equisapiens, he takes individual action. "Anglo-conformity" will be helpful here in understanding the ways in which universalism remains coded as whiteness. Freeman stands in opposition to the universalist push in that he recognizes the necessity of an all-Black revolutionary coalition.

Meliorism refers to the assumption of the steady socio-political progress. The key word here is "steady," because it stands in direct opposition to revolutionary change, which calls for immediate and drastic change. Eagleton-Pierce notes meliorism as a "'reformist' mindset, one which is often not bound to a sentimental faith or excessive optimism but a pragmatic adaptability in the face of change" (23). The U.S. has always maintained this attitude towards progress, most notably in its cooptation of radical Black activist movements in the Civil Rights Era. While Cassius doesn't have a political agenda, he's heavily influenced by the *idea* of a Power Caller, which, for him, represents the pinnacle of success: "It is this potential to hold up tangible illustrations of 'success', along with cultivating the hope that others may enhance themselves in ways that achieve similar success" (Eagleton-Pierce 24). It's important to note the

individualized aspect here; meliorism acts at both a societal and individual level. Cassius sees himself as capable of incrementally achieving success just as equally as his co-workers, helping to explain his nonchalant attitude toward the workers' coalition. Freeman opposes this type of progress, opting instead for a revolutionary change. He joins the CIA with no intention of being an agent. He uses CIA war tactics to develop gang members into a revolutionary Black liberation movement. In no way does Freeman intend to help the CIA solve their racist hiring patterns form the inside; he means to completely upend them and the entirety of the U.S. socio-political landscape in the process.

Cassius finds himself trapped between two competing narratives. First, he yearns to achieve the classic American Dream of self-sufficiency, meaningful work and financial independence. On the other hand, he's confronted by clear obstacles facing African American men in the 21st century: disproportionate levels of incarceration, unemployment, and poverty. The simple fact of the matter is that the American Dream is simply unavailable to the vast majority of African Americans (men and women alike). But the *idea* that African Americans can succeed through capitalism has historical roots in the Nixon era. During the 1968 election, Americans, both Black and white, were reeling from the political upheavals of recent years that would continue into the 70s. In her book *Conservative Intellectuals and Richard Nixon: Rethinking the Rise of the Right*, Sarah Katherine Mergel discusses Nixon's *rhetorical* endorsement of Black capitalism: "Policy suggestions derived not from Nixon's conviction about an issue, but on the need to appeal to political constituencies…" (113). Black capitalism attempts to bridge the gap between the white moderate and the Civil Rights activist. Black capitalism suggests that the social ills of racism can be solved through the economic framework of the free market. In other words, American society could integrate African Americans into its capitalistic

structures without the revolutionary change to that system promoted by Black leaders over the course of the 1960s. It's essential to contextualize Black capitalism as a counter-insurgent response to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the 1960's. Black capitalism represented not just a strategy to appease white anxiety over Black radical movements and integration. According to Robert E. Weems Jr. and Lewis A. Randolph in their article "The National Response to Richard M. Nixon's Black Capitalism Initiative: The Success of Domestic Détente," "Because Nixon, during the campaign, had promoted Black capitalism as a major remedy for America's racial ills, expectations regarding this initiative were extremely high" (67). The ideology of Black capitalism attempted to negotiate the tenuous balance Nixon had to manage as a presidential candidate, but ultimately undermined radical activist movements because these initiatives were rarely taken seriously or implemented through legislation.

At the time of the 1968 election, Black and white voters had dramatically different perspectives on the current historical moment and what sort of platform a presidential candidate should run on. In his article "Nixon Rides the Backlash to Victory: Racial Politics in the 1968 Presidential Campaign," Jeremy D. Mayer discusses this tension between white and Black voters, saying, "While black America was honoring King, much of white America was aghast at the greatest civil unrest since 1865. The days of blood and fire in April reverberated all the way to the November election, making law and order uppermost in many voters' minds" (354). With the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, as Mayer notes, Black voters witnessed the death of a candidate who seemingly addressed their political concerns: "There were no figures of comparable stature to replace them [Kennedy and King]" (Mayer 355). Candidates then, namely Nixon, saw an opportunity to coopt and undermine the Black community's call for more radical change. Hugh Davis Grant analyzes Nixon's racialized campaign strategy in "Richard Nixon and

Civil Rights: Explaining and Enigma": "This ['southern strategy'] was part of a large, nationwide appeal to the "Silent Majority" of working-class and 'middle' Americans, many of them southern whites and ethnic Democrats in the northern and western cities who resented the urban rioting, anti-war protest, and countercultural youth style of the late 1960s" (93-4). Black capitalism attempted to strike a middle ground, a way in which both Black and white voters could be appeased. Nixon appealed to conservative blacks and a wide range of white voters seeking an end to the civil disobediences of the moment. However, considering the disparate needs of the black and white communities in conjunction with Nixon's indifferent attitude towards the Black capitalism initiatives he proposed, it's clear that Black capitalism served much more as a means of maintaining (albeit, slightly tweaking) a racist economic system and ensuring, in coded terms, that "radical" Black activist movements would be subsumed.

Black capitalism championed the idea of an equal playing ground through the logic of the market, meaning the possibilities for African Americans to find success through capitalistic endeavors would stymie, if not entirely erase, the social consequences of racist structures. In his book *Running on Race: Racial Politics in Presidential Campaigns, 1960-2000,* Jeremy D. Mayer notes Nixon's mixed record on race related issues: "The Nixon that appeared before America in 1972 was at best a racial moderate who had done little to improve his image in the black community that had rejected him so decisively in 1968" (99-100). In the context of the Moynihan Report, Nixon made other racially charged comments that demonstrated his bad faith in Black capitalism legislation: "Nixon stated that federal programs to aid Blacks were of marginal use because of the genetic inferiority of Blacks." The idea that racism in the U.S. can be solved through economic self-sufficiency remains a key concept in discourses on race. In fact, Nixon's comment suggests a far more sinister plan, despite his mixed record on civil rights

legislation and initiatives. Nixon advocated for a naturalization of race and class, meaning that these structures of inequality had some genetic basis, which, like the Black capitalism initiative, works to maintain inequality along racial lines.

Nixon's comments followed the Moynihan Report, which pathologized the female-headed Black family structure. According to Gerald Naughton in his article "The Moynihan Report, the Watts Riots, and the Tropes of Reconstruction," then President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered a speech that referenced the findings of the Moynihan Report, placing it in the American consciousness: "Johnson's speech is now seen as a watershed moment in the history of federal involvement in African American civil rights, placing, for the first time, emphasis on the fabric and structures of African American social life that inhibit Black progress, rather than on the mere removal of Jim Crow laws that systematically and deliberately made black progress impossible" (41). Rather than promoting an internal investigation into the racist structures that pervade American social, political, and economic life, the Moynihan Report developed a line of argumentation that allowed Nixon's notion of Black capitalism to become a consistent presence in discourses of race in the U.S because it suggested a biological connection between class and race, justifying Black poverty. What, then, would be the point of revolutionizing American society? Again, the conjunction of the Moynihan Report and Nixon's Black capitalism initiative reveal a consistent trend of undermining the black Civil Rights activism and its critiques of American institutions.

The critiques of Black capitalism are not few and far between. As early as 1972, in light of Nixon's first term as president, James Baldwin, in *No Name in the Street*, writes scathingly while reflecting on his time in France on different manifestations of racism compared to the U.S. He finds commonalities between Faulkner and Camus that he uses to critique the notion of Black

capitalism: these cultural elites, Black capitalists included, have nothing but their own interests (namely, their investments) in mind. "The 'evolved,' or civilized one is almost always someone educated by, and for France, and some of 'our' niggers, proving how well they have been educated, become spokesman for 'Black' capitalism—a concept demanding yet more faith and infinitely more in schizophrenia than the concept of the Virgin Birth" (48). Baldwin goes on to say, "Later, of course, one may welcome them back, but on one's own terms, and, absolutely, on one's own land" (48). At the heart of Black capitalism, Baldwin ultimately argues, lies the desire by white capitalists to maintain their profits. In Steve Lift, we see the white capitalist not open his arms to Cassius out of genuine appreciation for his talents, but for the need to subjugate the workforce at his control to capitalize on the scientific breakthrough: the new "machine" of the equisapien. Historically speaking, Baldwin notes the co-optation of Black activism by Black capitalism initiatives and the underlying ideological motivation: Black capitalism isn't a genuine means of solving U.S. racism, but rather a way to maintain those structures by supporting token participation and integration in those systems.

The ultimate result of Black capitalism initiatives was an advocation for a form of racial tokenism. The success of individual African Americans and their integration into American economic structures worked to undermine criticisms of structural racism that Black radical movements like the Black Panther Party emphasized. In the Introduction to her work *Post Black: How a New Generation Is Redefining African American Identity*, Ytasha L. Womack analyzes how the idea of Black capitalism has maintained and evolved even into the 21st century: "A cadre of African Americans was adamant that it was a shout-out away from being a filthy rich juggernaut whose work would forever change the lot of Blacks in America…. If P. Diddy, then Puff Daddy, could become a household name, so could we. Or at least that's the way it seemed"

(4). Womack notes not only how the concept of Black capitalism has maintained itself in the African American community, but also alludes to the role of tokenism in the perpetuation of this idea. Successful Black individuals, no matter the field of work, demonstrate to the Black community its possibilities for individual success; however, these successful individuals, just as Riley demonstrates throughout the film, offer little in the way of alleviating the consequences of structural inequalities plaguing African Americans in the current moment. In his article "Why even hardened racists will vote for Barack Obama," Bob Garfield argues that the "acceptance" of Black individuals within particular spheres of influence (whether that be national politics or a corporate hierarchy) relies on a number of implicit requirements: "It means standard English, clean-cut appearance… Halle Berry and Denzel Washington are acceptably Black. Your local news anchors are acceptably Black. Tupac was not." According to critics of Black capitalism, whites remain, metaphorically speaking, the guardians of the gate, and rather than lowering the gates fully, they stand guard and police behaviors, actions, and ways of being that limit Blackness.

II. *Sorry to Bother You*: White Voice and White Spaces

When Cassius first begins working for Regalview, he struggles to make any headway with his clients; in fact, the film demonstrates the construction of Black and white spaces quite literally. When Cassius makes his first call as a Regalview employee, his desk suddenly begins to shake, and he falls right into the home of Mr. Davidson and his wife as they eat dinner. When Cassius stutters out a nervous greeting, Mr. Davidson hangs up almost immediately, staring Cassius down before the scene cuts back to the office. This continues to happen… until Cassius discovers the white voice. Several scenes later, we see Cassius leaned back in his office chair, having a casual conversation with a client. Rather than falling suddenly into the client's space,

the scene cuts to Cassius comfortably stationed in the client's apartment. Cassius banters back and forth gleefully with the client, even going so far as to share a blunt. What's different between Cassius's initial experience and the latter scenes? Cassius grasps the power of white voice, which shifts the relationship between him and the white clients. Cassius's presence in their space no longer becomes an intrusion because of his ability to utilize white voice. Cassius doesn't *literally* fall into these spaces; he only communicates with clients over the phone. In his work *Acting White: The Ironic Legacy of Desegregation,* Stuart Buck historicizes the acting white (i.e. anglo-conformity) phenomenon. While his work looks closely at acting white in schools, his analyses strike clear parallels to Cassius's encounters with his telemarketing clients. Buck says, "Still the 'acting white' criticism in school is intimately associated with desegregation. Pioneering Blacks were often ridiculed for 'acting white' in their newly integrated surroundings" (131). The acting white criticism typically bears a negative connotation within the black community; but for Cassius and other black characters in the film, acting white proves to be the vehicle for corporate success. In *Sorry to Bother You,* the white voice, simultaneously hilarious and disturbing, literally and figuratively allows Cassius entry into the (historically white) upper echelons of the corporate hierarchy. Cornel West notes that "Only certain kinds of Black people deserve high positions, that is, those who accept the rules of the game played by white America" (42). Speaking from the context of the early 1990s, it's clear that West's words maintain their relevance well into the 21st century.

Later in the film, as Cassius becomes more immersed in the corporate environment in which he works, he gains access to an exclusive party held by Steve Lift, CEO of Worryfree. After wandering aimlessly for a while, Cassius meets Steve Lift as he's conveying a story of his recent trophy: a rhinoceros head. Lift turns to Cash and says, "What about you, Cash? You ever

had to bust a cap in anybody's ass?" He forces Cash to move to the center of the room and then says, "I want to hear about some of that Oakland gangster shit, man." Lift projects his assumptions, based on stereotypes of a gangster, onto Cassius. After Cassius expresses that he doesn't have much of a story to tell, Lift replies, "At least take off the white voice. And I know you can bust a rap, right?" Again, Lift uses Cassius as a token and demonstrates his racist assumptions of Cassius's background. The black individual in a corporate environment doesn't have the ability to tell his own story but rather has the stereotype image of the black male projected onto him by racist white superiors.

The "white voice" is clearly the key entering these spaces, but what does white voice—and acting white—actually mean? After Cassius struggles in his first days on the job, Langston (Danny Glover), Cassius's elder co-worker, turns to Cassius and laughs at yet another client who hangs up without so much as a greeting. Langston says, "Use your white voice," to which Cassius replies by plugging his nose and speaking in a nasally tone. "Nah, man," says Langston, "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… Put some real breath in there. Breezy like… 'I don't really need this money.'" When Cassius sees white voice as simply a change in tone, Langston corrects him by redefining and broadening that conception. White voice is a *way of being*. When we witness Cassius suddenly falling into the white spaces, we can sense his discomfort simply from his voice. White voice shifts that discomfort to a weightless, carefree attitude; there's a certain level of comfort in one's skin and space that the black body does not (and, in many cases cannot) possess because of the white spaces in which Cassius is forced to navigate. This is why white voice becomes such an effective tool for Cassius: he learns that navigating white spaces is far more complicated than a simple change in tone. Rather, to shift

between white and black spaces requires a near complete transformation of the self. By dubbing Cassius's voice for an artificially imposed voice, played by David Cross, the film establishes the impossibility of full assimilation. As the film progresses, Cassius experiences a *physical* transformation even before he turns into an Equisapien. As he becomes more battered, bruised, and bloody over the course of his career, the physical toll of anglo-confromity becomes more and more apparent.

When Cassius meets Mr. ___ (Omari Hardwick), a black man who has worked in the upstairs suite for some time, he's greeted with Mr. ___'s white voice stating directly, "Welcome to the Power Calling Suite, Mr. Green. White voice at all times here." The self-policing function is very apparent in this scene. As Cassius steps off the elevator, he speaks to Diana DeBauchery in his normal voice but is abruptly cut off by Mr. ___ well before he physically enters the corporate space. Symbolically, Mr. ___ represents the fully integrated black individual within the corporate structure. He uses his normal voice only once in the film, and this comes much later in a one-on-one conversation with Cassius. While a party of debauchery (pun intended) ensues, Cassius slowly slips into drunkenness alone. Mr. ___ joins Cassius and tells him to go to Lift's office. Then, he says, in his normal voice, "Look here, young blood. We don't cry about the shit that should be. We just thrive on what is and what is… opportunity." While Cassius certainly earns his position as a Power Caller, it's also very apparent that the white upper-management views him as a tool, a token Black man to disempower the collective. However, the political implications go much deeper when comparing Cassius's position as a power caller to Dan Freeman's position as a token Black CIA agent. While both manage to enter traditionally white spaces through their talent and hard work, they become tools and window-dressing for the integrationist rhetoric of their superiors. However, Freeman uses his position to set in motion a

Black liberation movement. Cassius's embodiment of the neoliberal subject alienates him from the group solidarity exemplified by Freeman, demonstrating the complications of revolution in a neoliberal world order.

III. *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*: Radical Black Resistance

The Spook Who Sat by the Door features the character of Dan Freeman, the first African American accepted into the CIA; however, this opportunity only arises because of an accusation by Senator Hennington (Joseph Mascolo) that the CIA's lack of African American agents demonstrates a racist hiring pattern—a detriment to his voting base. As Freeman learns warfare techniques through his time with the CIA, he covertly leads and develops an underground militant guerilla group of young African Americans later called The Cobras in hopes of leading a revolutionary liberation effort. The conclusion of the film shows Freeman murdering his childhood friend Dawson (J.A. Preston), a Chicago police officer, after Dawson confronts Freeman about his connection to The Cobras. Released amidst a contentious political moment in 1973, the film provided a strong voice to Black radicalism despite its disappearance for close to thirty years from the public arena. Freeman's infiltration into the CIA demonstrates the delicate balance between black and white spaces and the dominance of tokenism in the self-serving integrationist rhetoric. While Cassius and Freeman both navigate traditionally white spaces through their individual talents, they do so with drastically different outcomes and for drastically different purposes. Cassius finds himself thrown into the corporate hierarchy as a pawn in Steve Lift's attempt to suppress a burgeoning working-class uprising (without knowing until it's too late), but Freeman purposefully manipulates token integration to further his revolutionary movement.

Freeman is consistently referred to as an "Uncle Tom," or a black man who essentially

becomes white, by his peers. Early in the film, several of Freeman's Black competitors confront him and ask if he would like to go out for the evening, to which he responds that he would like to stay in and study. One of the men says, "Maybe you oughta cool it… If you weren't so eager to please the white man and send that grading curve up, there'd be three times as many of us here now. What kinda Tom are you anyway?" Stuart Buck comments on community dynamics at play: "Just as groups tend to be wary of other groups, they dislike group members who flout group norms and signal that they would rather resemble another group" (151). Freeman's status as an Uncle Tom, as someone who seeks to be a part of white institutions like the CIA, represents a serious threat to the group hegemony of African American men. Freeman represents (in their minds, because they don't know about his underground work) a threat to the group strength because by integrating himself into the CIA, he undermines and, to the men, shuns his racial community; however, it is Freeman's outstanding performance that threatens his peers because ultimately Freeman becomes the only one of the group to make it as an agent—the logic of tokenism in general that functions by competition and elimination. The film shows Freeman constantly toeing this line between the Black community and the white spaces he frequents, but this scene in particular demonstrates that these spaces are far from being integrated. In the Prologue to his book *Acting White: The Curious History of a Racial Slur,* Ron Christie analyzes the consequences of the acting white phenomenon: "The notion that a Black man who works hard, receives an education, and seeks to depart from the conventional social and political norms is one who is acting white has been a slur rooted in American history… This isn't a theoretical exercise; this is a reality faced by many Blacks who refused to accept the conventional wisdom of how they were supposed to think, act, and dress" (2).

But what does a Black man risk when integrating himself into the white systems he

works so hard to become part of? *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* undermines any conception of the white institutions as well-intentioned systems; in fact, the very premise of the CIA's integration plan quickly points audiences to the fact that if not for a political opportunist in Senator Hennington, the CIA may very well have never even established this program Freeman works so hard to succeed in. If we place the film within the social/political climate of the early 1970s, the film mocks the idea that integration initiatives are done with any genuine notion of equality. During the opening credits, one of the trainees, in front of a panel of apprehensive white agents, says, "If I were undercover as a political or economic officer in an embassy and I was questioned about racism in the United States, I'd point out that they have racial and religious troubles and a thing like that isn't resolved overnight, and that our country is firmly behind racial progress and great strides are being made here." In order to become part of the CIA, the black trainee is essentially forced to silence any criticisms of socio-political strife in the U.S. Further, the Black trainee here is forced to disavow his own experience as a black man in the U.S. The functioning of tokenism demonstrated through the film is one purely of political necessity; the CIA must shield itself from the criticisms levied by Senator Hennington. However, this political expediency sets in motion Freeman's ultimate revolutionary plan.

Further, by positioning the Black trainee across from the board of white agents, the statement seems even more disingenuous. Like Cassius's experience with Steve Lift, the Black trainee's experience as an African American man is erased and reconfigured through a white lens for the purpose of token integration. Freeman's body becomes the site of several racist assumptions. When discussing Freeman's excellent performance over the course of the training, two white agents express anxiety that he may pass both the physical and academic portions of the training, an outcome unexpected by the white CIA superiors. A white agent says, "Yes, they do

make good athletes." This may seem like an outdated racist assumption, but these assumptions play a central role in both *Spook* and *Sorry to Bother You*. Neither Freeman nor Cassius enter the traditionally white spaces as human beings full of possibilities; rather, they become the culmination of a set of assumptions on the part of their white counterparts. However, each protagonist navigates these spaces in distinct ways. Freeman purposefully places himself within the white space by utilizing tokenism as a weapon against itself; however, Cassius must navigate the corporate hierarchy on the fly with little to no guidance and only promotion on his mind. What does Freeman want and what does Cassius want? Freeman seeks just what his name signifies: freedom. Yet, as Cassius sinks deeper and deeper into the corporate structure, he struggles to find the meaning he so desperately seeks early in the film and continues to distance himself from the tenuous class and racial bonds he maintains. Rather than freedom, Cassius finds and cherishes just what his name signifies: cash money. This isn't to criticize Cassius for his desires; rather, by comparing the contexts of each film, we can compare the revolutionary potential of both protagonists. Because Cassius lacks the direction and connections that Freeman establishes and maintains throughout the film in the Cobras, the revolutionary potential of the neoliberal subject (Cassius) becomes far more complicated.

IV. *Black Panther*: T'Challa vs. Killmonger

Black Panther represented a significant force in the film industry and popular culture upon its release in 2018. The film received attention from critics and fans alike, but how does it add to the critical discourse of *Sorry to Bother You* and *Spook*? The central conflict of the film lies in the opening lines, spoken from the space of early 1990's Oakland, which provide a brief history of Wakanda: "But as Wakanda thrived, the world around it descended into chaos," says N'Jobu (Sterling K. Brown). Young Erik Killmonger (voiced by Seth Carr) says, "And we still

hide, Baba?" N'Jobu says "Yes," and the scene closes with Young Erik asking simply, "Why?" We learn that Wakanda, witnessing the rise of colonial conquests and world wars, took an isolationist approach to protect their precious resource of vibranium from the outside world. But there is a deeper ideological struggle this scene alludes to that plays out over the course of the film. If vibranium can uplift those in poverty and need (either as a form of wealth or weaponry), why isn't it being distributed throughout the wider world? More specifically, why isn't it being used to help those of the broader African diaspora in fighting neocolonialism and structural racism? T'Challa and Killmonger differ in their response to these questions because they come from distinct backgrounds and contexts that influence their approaches. T'Challa, son of the now deceased king and primed to take the throne, is firmly established within the Wakandan royal structure; however, after the death of his father at the hands of T'Challa's father, Killmonger remains in the U.S. with his African American mother, distanced from his ancestral roots in Wakanda.

T'Challa maintains the traditional isolationist approach championed by his father and those before him who reacted to the political strife of the 20th century. When Nakia pressures him on his stance, T'Challa says, "We are not like these other countries… If the world found out what we truly are, what we possess, we could lose our way of life." The isolationist stance stems from a concern for the wellbeing of Wakanda's internal affairs, namely the safety and lifestyle of their people. T'Challa worries that vibranium could fall into the hands of neocolonizing nations and contribute to further suffering around the world. The elders of the tribes echo T'Challa's concerns when Killmonger takes the throne and begins the process of distributing Wakandan weaponry and resources. This conflict of resistance has historical roots in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Killmonger's rhetoric and actions represent a radical approach

to the question of Black liberation; change must come in a revolutionary fashion and through violence and empowerment of a broad coalition of poor and working-class people of color. Further, T'Challa's approach more closely aligns with integrationist rhetoric, one in which change can be found in and through traditional institutions like Wakanda's royal lineage and technological infrastructure. Ultimately, Killmonger's perspective leads to significant change in Wakandan international policy, but the question is to what extent does a Wakandan International Outreach Program change and resist the structures of neocolonialism that continue to oppress people of color throughout the world? The Wakandan International Outreach Program and T'Challa's injection of wealth into the Oakland community represents a classic neoliberal solution to impoverished areas: gentrification.

Killmonger's criticism of Wakanda and, specifically, T'Challa's father T'Chaka stems specifically from his experience as an African American man. Further, the neglect he experienced from Wakanda both before *and* after the revelation that he is half-Wakandan demonstrates the conflict of identity that fuels Killmonger's rage. Because Killmonger is essentially abandoned by his Wakandan family, he's left with his African American mother to grow up and live in Oakland, California. But even when the truth of N'Jobu's death comes to light, Killmonger is *still* characterized as an outsider; the African diaspora is othered and alienated from the African homeland. When Killmonger first arrives in Wakanda, he's brought in cuffs and the first thing T'Challa says to him is, "I don't care that you brought Klaue. Only reason I don't kill you where you stand is because I know who you are." T'Challa recognizes Killmonger as both a physical threat and a metaphorical contradiction. On the one hand, he represents a genuine threat of violence, as witnessed later by the ritual fight. On the other, Killmonger *should* have every right to the throne, but his mixed status, as African and diaspora,

marks him as truly a new phenomenon for Wakanda; Killmonger is the only African American character (aside from extras in the Oakland scenes). This scene brings to Wakanda the violence produced by its own hypocrisy and delegitimizes the Wakandan royal structure. Killmonger can never fully be Wakandan (which ultimately leads to his demise) because he is the contradiction produced by Wakanda's isolationist policy.

Killmonger's characterization may seem clearly one-dimensional, as comic book movies have a tendency to do, but his actions aren't without significant meaning. In fact, his actions and rhetoric align closely with the Black Panther Party's rhetoric and motivations as they organized in the 1960s. The Black Panther Party focused on two central issues: community outreach and structural change in American society. Despite his seemingly villainous nature, these are the central motivations for Killmonger's actions. Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, in their seminal work *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, discuss these objectives, saying, "'Political modernization' includes many things, but we mean by it three major concepts: (1) questioning of old values and institutions of the society; (2) searching for new and different forms of political structure to solve political and economic problems; and (3) broadening the base of political participation to include more people in the decision-making process" (39). From the very beginning of the film, the young Erik Killmonger questions the values of Wakandan isolation. As he matures, he seeks new means of overcoming oppression faced by people of color through neocolonial regimes. Most importantly, Killmonger seeks to distribute Wakandan weaponry and resources to expand political power to those traditionally marginalized. His violence, therefore, isn't without a clear direction; in fact, his violence, while seemingly similar to the neocolonial systems he wishes to uproot (as T'Challa criticizes him for), is meant to not only upend the political and social condition of the oppressed but also the Wakandan way of life

because, in Killmonger's mind, Wakanda contributed to the worsening of those conditions in the broader world through its negligence. The distinction between Killmonger and T'Challa runs deeper though; there are clear class distinctions between the two that highlight their conflicting worldviews. T'Challa comes from royal blood, has always experienced the luxuries of the Wakandan lifestyle, and maintains his position with relatively little conflict from the tribes he governs. T'Challa has led a privileged life, which Killmonger criticizes when he first arrives in Wakanda: "Y'all sittin' up here comfortable. Must feel good. It's about two billion people all over the world that looks like us. But their lives are a lot harder."

Killmonger isn't a senseless villain, but rather a representation and voice of a more radical perspective on Black liberation. When he calls for the destruction of the heart-shaped herb, it could be viewed as a demonstration of his desire to consolidate power as the last Black Panther; however, this destruction should be contextualized in relation to his distrust of centralized power and authority. The destruction of the herb ensures Killmonger is the last Black Panther, but simultaneously ensures that the redistribution of Wakandan weaponry and technology doesn't come under the control of a centralized authority when he passes. In his book *Race Matters*, Cornel West analyzes the effectiveness of affirmative action programs in the post-Civil Rights Era, saying, "A redistributive measure in principle with no power and pressure behind it means no redistributive measure at all" (95). The measures championed by T'Challa in the conclusion of the film feel hollow compared to Killmonger's redistributive actions because, as an audience, we are left to wonder to what extent have the structures which allowed the negligence of Killmonger and people of color around the globe really changed.

The question then is how does the film reconcile these two conflicting ideologies and worldviews in relation to global Black liberation. While Killmonger's presence brings significant

change, at least for T'Challa personally, audiences are left to wonder what change will ultimately happen. With the creation of the Wakandan International Outreach Center in Oakland and T'Challa's remarks at the United Nations, it's clear that he plans to distribute not Wakandan weaponry, but Wakandan scientific breakthroughs, technology, and wealth. However, unlike Killmonger, T'Challa's redistributive measures aren't targeted at the world's impoverished and oppressed; rather, his rhetoric focuses on a universal audience. He says, "We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this Earth should treat each other… The illusions of division threaten our very existence… More connects us than separates us." While Killmonger's rhetoric is clearly divisive in that it distinguishes between Africa and its diaspora, T'Challa's pan-Black rhetoric comes from a place of economic power that demonstrates an appeasement strategy aimed at distributive measures without significant structural change; he maintains the throne and access to Wakandan resources but we as viewers are left to wonder how these measures will solve the problems it aims to solve.

I certainly do not aim to undermine the cultural significance of *Black Panther* as a popular film. However, I do question the representations and theoretical implications of its conclusion in relation to Black liberation discourses. Killmonger's death demonstrates the neutralization of the radical discourses. When it's found that he is in fact Wakandan, the people of Wakanda are unable to reconcile that he is the product of their own actions. Further, if we look at the conclusion of the film through the lens of neoliberal ideology, T'Challa's statements represent a neoliberal solution: gentrification that is only a partial and localized solution to a globalized problem. With his economic power, T'Challa will build new and improved infrastructure throughout Oakland and, presumably, other parts of the world. But economic solutions cannot solve the social problem of racism. Neoliberal ideology champions economic

success as the ultimate determinate of one's position in American society. However, this is where we can return to *Sorry to Bother You* as a theorization of this critical question. Cassius finds success in and through capitalistic endeavors, but the cost is the destruction of his physical body and a nightmarish dystopia for the future.

V. Conclusion: The Neoliberalization of the Black Body

In her presentation at the Provost Lecture Series, held by Brown University where she is Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America, Tricia Rose introduced the "How Structural Racism Works Project," wherein she aims not only to inform the world on structural racism but seeks advocates willing to work to end structural racism. She says, "There's been a pretty explicit ideological war over the past 40 years between the story of structural racism and the emergent and now dominant story of colorblindness" ("How Structural Racism Works: Tricia Rose"). Colorblind ideology emerged out of the post-Civil Rights era as an ideological response to Black radical movements, rather than as a solution to the social problem of racism in the U.S. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw analyzes this emergence and its subsequent historical repercussions in her article "Race to the Bottom: How the post-racial revolution became a whitewash," saying, "The prevailing understanding of racial justice that had come to a head in the early 1980s premised racial liberation on the enlightened terms of rationality. Accordingly, racial power was seen as 'discrimination,' a deviation from reason that was remediable through the operation of legal principles" (44). The encroachment of neoliberal ideology also meant an intensification of the melioristic attitude of liberal society, one in which progress is always happening, even if everything points to the contrary. When looking closely at the historical context of colorblind ideology and the emergence of the neoliberal world order, there's demonstrative evidence to support the notion that colorblindness, the prevailing model of

public discourses of race in the U.S., is rhetorical a tool working to undermine the rhetoric Black radical groups. It's clear that the Civil Rights Movement had a tremendous effect on the discourse of race in America, but colorblind ideology suggests a post-racial world, which *Sorry to Bother You* demonstrates is far from reality.

However progressive the emergence of colorblind ideology may have seemed, the reactionary nature of traditionally white supremacist institutions in relation to colorblind rhetoric demonstrates its function as an ideological response to a rupture in hegemony presented by radical Civil Rights activists. In his work *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State*, Jordan T. Camp tracks the hegemonic rhetoric of the media and state institutions as they respond to freedom (racial and class) movements in the U.S. over the course of late 1900s and, more specifically, post-Civil Rights. He argues that counterinsurgent narratives (produced by the media and state institutions) consistently categorize these freedom movements as "disorderly" and "disruptive," and appeal to a particular upper-middle class suburban white consciousness: "The prose of counterinsurgency depicted the event as an instance of crime, violence, and chaos. In fact, it purported that the revolt was not about civil rights violations or motivated by working-class grievances, but rather as an outburst of criminality" (53). Hence Killmonger's criminality makes him irredeemable; his resistance falls outside of the bounds of acceptable resistance. Ultimately, Killmonger's questioning of the normative ideology of Wakanda ("And we still hide, Baba?" "Why?") leads to a punishment of death by the institutions, represented by T'Challa, in question. How, then, does the counterinsurgent hegemonic order relate to colorblind ideology? The latter relies on the former. Without a counterinsurgent narrative, one that utilizes criminality as its central vehicle of ideological control, colorblind rhetoric wouldn't be possible. Violent insurgency, represented by

Killmonger, forces the counterinsurgent regimes to face the product of their own making, a recognition that undermines the function and purpose of the institution itself. Killmonger *must* die.

Black Panther ends with the creation of Wakandan International Outreach Center, essentially an injection of wealth into the Oakland community. The film ends, leaving the viewer to assume that all is well. But what happens when an injection of wealth enters the black community? That's exactly where *Sorry to Bother You* picks up. Cassius becomes rich and successful, while simultaneously entering a nightmarish world in which his success only further demonstrates the functions of race and fails to alleviate the struggles of the multi-racial working class he distances himself from. This isn't meant to undermine T'Challa's actions: money can play a central role in uplifting communities from impoverished conditions and can significantly change the course of hundreds, thousands, potentially millions of lives. But what does it say when the radical voice, that of Killmonger, who questions the established systems which inject this wealth in the conclusion of the film, must die? *Black Panther* functions within the neoliberal world order in that it fails to address the racism as the construction of assumptions about particular racial groups. If we consider *Black* Panther as the precursor to *Sorry to Bother You* (which takes place in a near future Oakland), Riley tackles the issues of addressing racism as a neoliberal subject in Cassius. Killmonger's radical voice gains credibility when we witness the assumptions of race play a significant role in Cassius's success and experience as a Power Caller. This must, then, raise the critical question of whether *real* change is possible in and through the institutions historically responsible for repression.

Further, entry into these repressive institutions still, as emphasized by *Sorry to Bother You*, relies not only on a physical integration into traditionally white spaces, but a near full

psycho-spiritual transformation. The white voice may seem comical in its artificial transposition over Cassius's natural voice, but he must *become* what the white voice represents to maintain his position as a Power Caller. The consistent policing of his Blackness exemplified (ironically) through Mr. ___ and (unironically) through Steve Lift, demonstrates that Cassius fits quite precariously into the corporate workplace. As a black body, he exemplifies the success of integrationist rhetoric; he becomes the token example of a successful Black man within the American capitalist system. But this requires several concessions on his part. He must first disown the workers' coalition he initially identifies with, distancing himself from a class identification; he must then, always maintain his white voice, which distances himself from a racial identification. In order to traverse the corporate workplace and succeed *financially*, Cassius renounces every discernible quality he possesses at the beginning of the film. Cassius's transformation doesn't take him on a journey of discovery, but rather takes him on a journey of disembodiment and renouncement of the self. As he gains material wealth and financial success, his body disintegrates; he suffers injury after injury, culminating in his ultimate transformation into the nightmarish equisapien he so desperately feared becoming.

Rose conceptualizes structural racism through the image of several gears, each representing a segment of society, from the criminal justice system, education, and wealth. *Sorry to Bother You* focuses on this idea of wealth, and, more specifically, the idea that racism can be eradicated through wealth accumulation. Within this wealth gear, then, would be the means by which wealth can be accumulated, whether through work, entrepreneurship, investments, etc. Because all these axes are, statistically speaking, plagued by racial inequalities, the path to wealth accumulation remains daunting, if not impossible, for the majority of African Americans. *Sorry to Bother You* theorizes Cassius as an overcoming of these obstacles; rather than becoming

the victim of structural racism, Cassius works his way through the ranks and finds immense success as a Power Caller. But the film isn't the success story it may seem to be. In fact, by the end of the film, Cassius has completely—and literally—transformed, and the narrative arc of the film moves from success story to nightmare. The black body becomes a space inscribed and created by the white imagination of the African American experience. Racism is the sight of a set of assumptions and fictional representations of people who look a certain way, and through *Sorry to Bother You*, we see that neoliberal values have yet to address this core aspect of racism.

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