

## Monstrous Proletariat: The Racial Chimera in *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You*

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Our current political atmosphere demands that cultural critics articulate the interactions between distinct but entangled structures of oppression; nowhere is this more apparent and complicated than the combination of late capitalist exploitation and white supremacist dehumanization of racial and ethnic Others through invisibility in terms of social and political recognition and hypervisibility in terms of militaristic policing and surveillance. Further, critics of these structures must convey the severity of the violent operations of what Cedric Robinson calls "racial capitalism" – the interdigitation of capitalism and racism – such that audiences may feel compelled to challenge the violent structures in question. Many of these critics double as artists of popular culture, positioning mainstream media (television, music, and film) as a venue for political critique. This article attends to two recent films, Neil Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) and Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), that engage in such critique, deploying spectacular renditions of bodily transformation as allegories of the violence of racial capitalism.

Mainstream popular cinema has frequently sought to ground its plot in a form of social commentary on issues of contemporary concern. A common strategy for social commentary, consonant with classic narrative structure, is to portray a bad actor within the cultural imaginary as the antagonist for a film's story. For at least the past two or three decades, the neoliberal corporatization of late capitalism has served this function in many genres, especially science fiction films. Examples include Weyland-Yutani from the *Alien* series of films, Tyrell Corporation from the *Blade Runner* films, Cyberdyne from the *Terminator* series of films, Ingen from the *Jurassic Park* series of films, and Umbrella Corporation from *The Resident Evil* series of films. Even in combination with other genres – including action, horror, and comedy – science fiction films frequently derive the substance of their plot from a corporate scheme. In extreme cases, this corporate scheme may entail a plan to turn human beings into raw capital. Examples of such science fiction films include *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973), in which human bodies are recycled into food, and *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), in which the corpse of a police officer is revived as a law enforcement cyborg.

The narrative device of human beings turned into profitable property evokes the ideas of the worker (and sometimes, the consumer) as a pawn for capitalist manipulation and the enslaved persons of the transatlantic trade, arguably the two central iterations of oppression within schemes of racial capitalism. Contemporary science fiction films often add a literal dimension to the trope: through advances in biological technology, corporations in these films frequently acquire the power to unmake human beings, and in doing so, remove them from any protection granted by human dignity. In this article, we introduce the concept of the *racial chimera*, which is a device that draws upon the affects of horror and the conventions of science fiction, as an example of this extractive and exploitative process that depicts the dangers of late racial capitalism in the twenty-first century. The films under analysis here, *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You*, portray malevolent corporations with plans to transform human beings into non-human creatures in the pursuit of wealth. Moreover, both films demonstrate the interlocking mechanisms of capitalism and racism, gesturing towards comparisons between the

corporate dehumanization of the status quo and histories of violent dehumanization, including chattel slavery, the Holocaust, and Apartheid.

### **The Horrors of Racial Capitalism**

*District 9* appeared in U.S. theatres on August 14, 2009. Its box office revenue reached \$115,646,235 in the United States, and another \$95,173,376 internationally. It was nominated for four Oscars but won none. The film is largely based upon an earlier short film by the same director, Neil Blomkamp, with a handful of differences between the two, and was produced by Peter Jackson. *Sorry To Bother You* had a world premiere in January 2018 with limited release to select venues throughout the spring of that year. On July 6, the film was again limitedly released to select theaters, before being released widely on July 13, 2018. Its box office revenue in the U.S. reached \$17,493,096. While it was not nominated for any Academy Awards, the film received 39 assorted award nominations, winning 16 of them. Both films offer social and political commentary on enduring structural issues of late racial capitalism, and both films feature corporations and corporate officials as antagonists that transform human beings into monstrous commodities and/or deny human rights to those within the liminal space between human and non-human.

The films have markedly different tones, reflecting the respective contexts from which each film emerged. *District 9*'s severity, indexed in part from the sensibilities of documentary through the film's use of mockumentary style, suggests an ominous reading of the so-called "post-racial" late 2000's as in fact still filled with the turbulence of apartheid. *Sorry to Bother You* takes a far more satirical, even humorous tone through its use of exaggeration; among other things, this choice of tone serves to highlight a radical cynicism, refusing any display of shock or surprise that capitalism can perpetuate such immense atrocities.

*District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* both employ a common narrative climax: the revelation that a white-collar employee, privileged by virtue of their acquiescence and obedience to a malevolently profit-driven corporation, has involuntarily undergone a transformation from human being into non-human or liminally human for the purposes of increased profit. *District 9*'s plot follows the plight of Wikus van der Merwe, a white South African official for Multi-National United (MNU) as the company stands in charge of housing (in internment camps) and controlling stranded alien refugees known as prawns, who resemble insects with humanoid features. Wikus is a dutiful employee of MNU and performs acts of cruelty against the prawns, including merciless evictions and violence that amounts to infanticide. Through a careless incident with a piece of prawn technology, Wikus triggers his physiological transformation from human to prawn. When MNU discovers this phenomenon, the company is uninterested in reversing the process. Rather, in a scene with imagery reminiscent of the Jewish Holocaust, MNU performs cruel experiments upon a liminally human-prawn Wikus, using his part-prawn physiology to operate the prawn weaponry, which is protected by a "biological safety" only a prawn can engage.

*Sorry to Bother You* follows its African American protagonist, Cassius "Cash" Green, as he struggles to stay afloat in a capitalist society. Eventually, Cash lands a job as a telemarketer with the company RegalView. The job proves initially difficult until a co-worker encourages him to use a "white voice" when speaking to customers. It is made clear in this exchange that a white voice does not reflect how white people actually sound but, rather, imitates a composure to which white people aspire. By producing an inviting persona of privilege and status, Cash becomes successful at his job and joins the inner circle of one of RegalView's top clients, Worryfree. Worryfree

appears throughout the early parts of the film in advertisements for "live-in," no expense, "worry-free" jobs. The working conditions of that job include living quarters, meals, covered expenses, and a prepared daily schedule and life plan that requires a binding, lifetime contract, making an obvious allusion to slavery. Against the audience's presumed expectations, the plot does not follow Cash towards a crisis of conscience about the ramifications of his occupation. The crisis and climax of the film occur when Cash stumbles upon the more egregious violence of Worryfree: the transformation of a number of their employees into "equisapiens," half-human, half-horse creatures. Aiming to create a stronger, more efficient, and more subservient source of labour, Worryfree imprisons the transformed workers – literally in shackles and chains – under the mansion of its CEO, Steve Lift. Additionally, after secretly giving Cash the chemical agent that will transform him into an equisapien, Lift tries to convince Cash to transform into equisapien in order to use his ability to appeal to the disaffected consumers, becoming the "Martin Luther King" of the equisapiens and quelling dissent from those who have been biologically and metaphysically transformed. The discovery of this plan serves as the central conflict of the movie and leads Cash towards an eventual rebellion against Worryfree with the help of the equisapiens. Upon becoming an equisapien, Cash leads a riotous invasion of Lift's home to exact retribution for the harm done by his corporation.

Though largely classified as science-fiction films, both *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* deploy affects associated with what Linda Williams dubs the "body genre." Williams defines this generic assemblage of films in relation to pornography, melodrama, and horror, which strive to engender mimetic spectatorial responses. Such films, argues Williams, are "works that produce in the spectator extreme emotions similar to those depicted on the screen" (5). Williams argues that a body genre's success is "often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen" (4). At the same time, Williams argues, these films' success at inviting such responses also contributes to cultural disdain toward them, as these genres are often marked as exploitative and disposable.

Whether this mimicry is exact, e.g., whether the spectator at the porn film actually orgasms, whether the spectator at the horror film actually shudders in fear, whether the spectator of the melodrama actually dissolves in tears, the success of these genres seems a self-evident matter of measuring bodily response. We feel manipulated by these texts – an impression that the very colloquialisms of "tear jerker" and "fear jerker" express – and to which we could add pornography's even cruder sense as texts to which some people might be inclined to "jerk off." The rhetoric of violence of the jerk suggests the extent to which viewers feel too directly, too viscerally manipulated by the text. . . . (4-5)

The term "jerk" implies an uneven or unbalanced emotion registered affectively in a body, highlighting what Williams calls "ecstatic excess." For Williams, ecstasy implies both the contemporary suggestion of "direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture" and the more ambivalent Greek origin concerning "insanity or bewilderment" (5). The excessive feeling provoked through body genres threatens to undo codified forms of human subjectivity. *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* specifically deploy the sensibility of horror through graphic and grotesque depictions of Wikus's and Cash's bodily transformation – or, more precisely, deformation – which strive to elicit mimetic reactions of horror from audience members.

As we argue more fully below, while Williams locates the complexity of body genres in relation to the politics of gender, *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* also frame their figurations of horror iconography in relation to the horrors of racial capitalism. Scholarship on racial capitalism typically derives from and responds to Cedric Robinson's argument that "the historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism" (9). The conditions of "accumulation" on which capitalism depends, explains Jodi Melamed, "require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires" (77). As a result, the "procedures of racialization and capitalism are ultimately never separable from each other" (Melamed 77). The nonconsensual and racialized transmogrifications of Wikus's and Cash's bodies forcefully illustrate the violence of such exploitation and dispossession.

### Racial Chimeras

In her essay, "A Gendered Shell Game," Claire Sisco King offers a reading of gender in *District 9*, arguing that the film investigates the distance between ideals of masculinity and men as they actually exist. King describes *District 9*'s use of "anxiety, terror, and even disgust" through science fiction and horror conventions to speak to concerns about normative masculine embodiment (83). Drawing from Williams' work on body genres, King maintains that "*District 9* encourages spectatorial instability in its audiences" as the film transmits the character's shock towards the human body-made-monster to the viewers (King 85). In both *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You*, the protagonists are not only subject to transformation, but both Wikus and Cash, not unlike the film's imagine audiences, are also witnesses to the horrific spectacle of their transformation.

Their cries in horror as they discover their undoing mimic and encourage the anticipated reactions of the audience. The affective circuitry of anxiety, terror, and disgust between the spectacle and the characters-as-spectators run parallel to the same circuitry between the spectacle and the audience-as-spectators. King agrees with Williams that the lack of "proper esthetic distance" and space for viewer reflection in *District 9* further demonstrates the film's interest in gendered performativity (Williams 5). The overlap of the affective experience of the film's characters and that of the viewer suggests that a normative orientation towards embodiment (gendered, raced, classed, etc.) exists prior to the shock of the film's plot. Both *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* in particular, and the racial chimera trope in general, utilize this shock with the hope of undoing that normative disposition. Both King and Williams discuss the gendered implications of body genres, wherein excessive displays of emotionality and embodiment by both onscreen characters and imagined audiences are associated with the feminine and imagining as feminizing. That is, to be "jerked" around by these films is, according to Williams, to be feminized.

We turn from this focus on gender to explore how *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* attend specifically to embodied dynamics of racial capitalism. The result of Wikus's and Cash's transmogrifications is, we argue, the production of a *racial chimera*. In Greek mythology, Chimera is a female monster that is part lion, goat, and serpent. In that mythological context, the term was also used to describe various animal hybrids (the Griffin as half-eagle, half-lion; the sphinx as half human, half-lion; etc.). The trope appears in a variety of fictional contexts, with fantastical representations directly alluding to Greek myth of creatures of various kinds that are composed of incongruous or incompatible parts (Konoldt). Examples include adaptations of Franz

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, both the 1958 and 1968 versions of *The Fly* (the former directed by Kurt Neumann and the latter by David Cronenberg), and some of the mutant characters in *X-Men* comics and film series. The field of genetics has appropriated the term *chimera* to name a single organism that contains cells with two or more distinct DNA compositions. A simple example of a chimera would be a human being after an organ transplant; after a kidney transplant, the patient would possess organs with the genetic makeup unique to the patient from birth as well as a kidney (from a compatible donor) with a different genetic makeup. Recent research has entertained and explored other possible genetic chimeras through technologies involving stem cells and CRISPR/Cas9 developments.

Our use of the term *racial chimera* contends that *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* depict Wikus's and Cash's genetic amalgamations in racialized terms. While Wikus, a white South African, becomes coded as non-white in his transformation into a prawn, Cash's transformation reveals the dehumanization of Black bodies central to racial capitalism. As Wikus and Cash become monstrous, composite bodies, they signal the extent to which racial capitalism has historically marked nonwhite bodies as excess/ive. Our use of the term "chimera" also signals the extent to which debates about race and racism have been central to both scientific and popular discourse about genetics. As Celeste Condit et al. argue, "Since the beginning of scientific research about it in the twentieth century, genetics has been one of the most controversial concepts associated with . . . race" (249).

For example, in 2018, the year in which *Sorry to Bother You* was released, *The New York Times* published an opinion piece by geneticist David Reich countering what he describes as academic "orthodoxy": that there exists no genetic basis for race. Although he acknowledges that "race is a social construct" and concedes he has "deep sympathy for the concern that genetic discoveries could be misused to justify racism," Reich argues that "advances in DNA sequencing technology" have made it impossible "to ignore average genetic differences among 'races.'" Likewise, the increased popularity of direct-to-consumer genetic testing, such as 23andMe and AncestryDNA is often linked to interests in racial and/or ethnic identity. Research published in the 2020 proceedings for the Association for Advancement of Artificial Intelligence's Conference on Web and Social Media found that discussions of genetic testing on social media platforms such as Reddit and 4chan are often misused and coupled with "toxic language" and hate speech that perpetuate racism and misogyny (Mittos et. al 452).

In their depictions of genetic experimentation and transformation, *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* obliquely reference these debates as part of their allegorical consideration of the exploitation and dispossession of non-white bodies under racial capitalism. Through depictions of the liminal spaces that Wikus and Cash occupy between human and non-human, the films argue that the precarity and vulnerability of one's position in a human versus non-human divide is analogous to the precarity and vulnerability of one's position in white versus non-white and non-Black versus Black binaries.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, these films articulate the trope of the racial chimera to depict the abuses of neoliberal corporations in terms of racism and the integrity of the human. Both *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* depict human corporate functionaries becoming the targets of monstrous torture experiments. The implication within both films is that even those who serve the maintenance of the human/non-human, white/non-white boundary could become the target of the most egregious forms of violence within these hierarchies, suggesting that any person within racial capitalism can slide into the vulnerable underclass and become subject to being turned into non-human matter. The films diverge, however, in the representations of racialized subjectivity and the

exploitative practices with which institutions, figured in both films as corporations, might manipulate racial life for profit. Illustrating distinct concepts from theories of racial violence, *District 9* emphasizes gratuitous violence as a tactic of racial capitalism, while *Sorry to Bother You* also attends to the logics of fungible subjection.

*District 9*'s visceral display of grotesque indignities illustrates what theories of racial violence (specifically, Afropessimism) describe as gratuitous violence. The theory of gratuitous violence, illustrated most explicitly by Frank Wilderson, elaborates a distinction between the violence produced through hegemony – rationalized and normalized through ideology – and racial violence, which often does not depend on a shared understanding between victim and perpetrator. As a corporate functionary (who works for his father-in-law at MNU), Wikus enjoys immense privilege at the same time that he submits to a degree of subjugation under capitalism. The white-collar corporate official – no matter how affluent or comfortable – works under conditions established by the CEO or the board of investors in a more or less traditional instance of alienated labour that nonetheless signals his consent.

This subjugation is of an entirely different kind from the subjugation of the prawns within *District 9*. As a corporate official, Wikus is interpellated such that he does not even experience this alienated labour as subjugation. In fact, one might even read his labour for MNU as a kind of performance of whiteness by demonstrating the purported virtue of obedient servility through labour: his capacity to direct mundane organizations and commit himself to productivity at the expense of pleasure is juxtaposed against the various images of the prawns' barbarism and hedonism circulated by the media within the world of the film. In *District 9*, the production of consent – of a shared logic and life-world – between Wikus and MNU has no parallel in the dynamic of cruelty and gratuitousness between humanity and the alien/racial Other (represented in the film as the prawns). Wilderson elaborates:

. . . marxism can only come to grips with America's structuring rationality – what it calls capitalism, or political economy; but cannot come to grips with America's structuring irrationality: the libidinal economy of white supremacy, and its hyper-discursive violence that kills the black subject so that the concept, civil society, may live. In other words, from the incoherence of black death, America generates the coherence of white life. (231-231)

Anti-Black police brutality, which is also dramatized in *District 9*, illustrates Wilderson's distinction between the political and libidinal economy succinctly. For example, police officers may consent to the exploitation of the wage, attending to their assigned patrols as expected. The countless Black Americans subjected to searches without warrants, various forms of harassment, physical harm, and/or death are never expected to demonstrate consent for such abuses, nor is there any effort to produce such consent, or reward for acquiescence in these instances of excessive violence. Furthermore, it is difficult to gauge, within the frame of an event of police brutality, how the brutalization of Black subjects produces quantifiable or tangible wealth for the police officer or the police department.

In one scene, for example, Wikus visits the internment camps to serve eviction notices, accompanied by security forces armed with military-grade weapons sent to protect MNU's interests. Carrying a pen and clipboard, he attempts to maintain a bureaucratic style while around him bullets fly as the armed MNU security forces fight with the prawns. The shaky hand-held camera work manifests the sensibilities of chaos and terror as Wikus attempts what he considers polite conversation with the prawns and

tries to assuage them with cans of cat food, while security personnel point automatic weapons at them, killing several as they move through the camps. A mobile, overhead shot also reveals humans circled around and betting over a fight-to-the death ring, akin to cock-fighting, that pits smaller prawns against one another. The prawns are, like the waste-filled camp, treated as disposable, and it is the supposedly business-like transactions of Wikus and his MNU co-workers that provides cover, or legitimation, for the savage violence enacted against them.

While Wilderson and other Afropessimists insist on the complete incommensurability of political economy (economics, or profit) and libidinal economy (subjectivity, or "psychic coherence"), other theorists suggest that the registers of violence are likely neither entirely the same (as Marxists assume) nor completely separate (as Afropessimists maintain) but, rather, related, differentiable, and yet deeply intertwined. In the case of *District 9*, the film provides a depiction of late racial capitalism that illustrates the cumulative violence of these dual registers upon the most vulnerable within the compounded hierarchies of race and class. That is, while the subjugation Wikus experiences as a middling bureaucrat is not at all commensurate with the violent oppression of the prawns, the film signals that both forms of domination derive from and contribute to the inequalities of racial capitalism. The extreme spectacle of *District 9*'s use of Kafkaesque science fiction through Wikus's transformation into a non-white prawn – at which point he becomes the target of extreme violence by MNU and the state – both literalizes and allegorizes the arbitrariness and precarity of the so-called "racial safety nets" that protect those within the parameters of the human (white people) from the abuses endured by those marked as non-white.

*Sorry to Bother You* is no less spectacular in its use of the racial chimera than *District 9*, as illustrated by its depictions of humans forcibly transformed into equisapiens; but it also attends to softer – and therefore, perhaps, more insidious – modes of violence, speaking to the intersecting social and subjective implications of neoliberalism and anti-Blackness. In her book *Undoing the Demos*, political theorist Wendy Brown elucidates neoliberal subjectivity as a mode of conduct whereby an entity – whether an individual, business, or government – operates according to the demands of a competition-driven market. These demands include evaluating all choices according to tangible profit but also entails fashioning oneself to be a profitable entity.

In the context of the film, Cash's first transformation manifests in his code-switching and use of "white voice," which represents a decision to become a more valuable worker-commodity through racial adaptation. Cash learns about the possibility of white voice from Langston, an older African American co-worker (played by Danny Glover), who advises him, after seeing Cash struggle with his calls, to try the voice he uses when he's "pulled over by the police." Cash questions how this voice should sound, confessing that he is already accused of "talking with a white voice." Langston responds, "I'm not talking about Will Smith white," which he describes as merely a synonym for using "proper" grammar. Rather, he explains, white voice should connote that "you don't have a care," which Langston equates not only with confidence and optimism but also economic security.

As Cash perfects his white voice and experiences success as a telemarketer, moving his way up the corporate ladder to "power caller status," the white manager who had earlier been critical and disdainful toward Cash – admonishing him in racially coded terms not to be "lazy" – begins to celebrate him. A montage sequence depicts the manager cheering Cash's victories with increasingly physical and intimate displays of approval, ranging from high-fives and fist-bumps to hugs and "piggy back" rides. This

sequence thus depicts in rather literal terms the extent to which Cash must not only give himself over to the establishment but must relinquish signifiers of his Blackness to do so.

The indignity of this expectation is laid bare later in the film when the WorryFree CEO, at a party he's hosting at his mansion, compels Cash to turn off his white voice and perform a rap for the mostly white partygoers. At various phases of his ascent through the corporate structure at RegalView, Cash's friends, family, and co-workers admonish him for buying into the neoliberal logic of treating one's own personhood as a marketable commodity. As Cash's "success" at RegalView is what puts him in contact with Worryfree, *Sorry to Bother You* questions the distinctions and continuities between Cash's selling of himself as a code-switching subject and Worryfree's purchase of the entire livelihood of its workers, both human and equisapien, which will eventually include Cash.

The expectation that Cash transform himself and the eventuality of his nonconsensual transformation illustrate the centrality of fungibility to racial capitalism. As Saidiya Hartman argues, under the conditions of enslavement (and its afterlives) the human imagined as a commodity is treated as replaceable, interchangeable, and disposable. She writes, "[T]he fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (21). While the use of chains and bondage to constrain Black Americans is nowhere near as common or quotidian as it was during Chattel Slavery, white institutions and persons maintain the force of subjection by discursively positioning Black persons with respect to white subjects and ambitions. Fungibility thus describes the pernicious underside of seemingly benevolent gestures of inclusivity, such as multicultural initiatives that aim to increase the numbers of Black employees, customers, and patrons while also projecting a certain image of what Blackness and Black persons are and requiring obligatory scripts of performance and presence to which Black persons must adhere.

In the case of Cash and Worryfree, the CEO's valuation of Cash's Blackness as a performative force that greases the wheels of normative interpellation, both for the white consumers and the equisapiens as racial/species Other, renders Cash an object for fashioning and use according to the needs and ambitions of Worryfree. This reiterates the violence of slavery from the context of coerced labour to a context of coerced selfhood, as Hartman explains:

... by exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others, the humanity extended to the slave inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery. (19)

The fact that Worryfree aims to use Cash to quell the predictable dissent of the equisapiens illustrates Tiffany Lethabo King's insight that "fungibility . . . is a product of white anxiety and representation, an attempt to 'get in front of' or anticipate Black fugitive movement" (26). In this case, the fugitive movement in question describes both the potential rebellion on behalf of the equisapiens but also any possibility that potential customers might deny Regalview's client their business in order to pursue some activity or mode of life that does not contribute the profit of capital. In this way, Cash's fungibility not only serves to maintain a racial and class order through policing the bottom level of the race/species hierarchy (Blackness and equisapiens), but the mechanism of fungibility also serves to manufacture consent in participation in a larger



social order of consumption in adherence to "the good (white) life" produced both economically and socially by late capitalism, or neoliberalism.

### Revolting Feelings

*District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* both use the genetically engineered human chimera to illustrate the racialized violence of neoliberal corporations within late capitalism, implying an analogy between species and race. This analogy drives the political work of the films, which suggests that late racial capitalism is unethical on the grounds of its use of racial difference to distinguish expendable and abusable populations from "grievable" populations and subjects (Butler). Nonetheless, the films draw different conclusions about how audiences might (or even "should") respond to these tales of the horrors of racial capitalism, which suggest differing ideas about who their audiences might be.

*District 9*'s allegory implies that Wikus is losing access to his whiteness and white privilege as much as he is losing access to his humanity. The social commentary of the film is far more concerned with the implications of forcibly losing access to whiteness. If the human to prawn transformation is an analog for a transformation from white to non-white, then the latter racial metamorphosis implies both the lack of institutional and social support and the drastic trauma to one's bodily sense of self and both psychic and physical comportment. That is, this film seems primarily to address a presumptively white audience, asking them to imagine the horror of losing access to their whiteness. This proclivity is, perhaps, not surprising given that the film – directed by a white filmmaker and underwritten by a white producer – focuses on the experiences of a white protagonist. That the film is inclined, wittingly or not, toward the perspective of whiteness seems further confirmed by its racist treatment of the Black Nigerian characters within the diegesis, whom the film portrays as barbaric and hedonistic – much as the film's racial capitalists treat the prawns – which was a point of contention for a number of the film's reviewers, including Nigerian writer Nnedi Okorafor and NPR's Frank James.

Once Wikus's transformation is complete, the film suggests that Wikus's life has become, from the perspective of MNU and the state, ungrievable. The film counters this position with conspicuous evidence of his continued (or, perhaps, enhanced) humanity. After a group of rioting prawns saves Wikus from MNU, he begins living among them in the camp he once managed; the concluding shot of the film features Wikus fully transformed into a prawn, occupying himself by making crafted gifts for his (human) wife to demonstrate his lingering affection for her. This highly sentimentalized scene, which is perhaps the most sympathetic and human moments of the film, suggests a movement from the registers of one body genre to another: from horror to melodrama. This closing moment appears to urge the film's imagined audience towards an extension of empathy towards those outside the limits of immediate community, a commitment to the promise that liberalism might resolve all ills if we can capture everybody within its guarantees of rights, freedoms, and dignity. It is also fair to say, however, that *District 9* invites greater concern for Wikus-as-prawn than for those who were prawns at the outset of the film, which suggests that the film continues to maintain an attachment to the privileges of whiteness.

This invitation to empathize and identify with Wikus, who for most of the film was a largely despicable character (a "jerk," one might say), seems consonant with the mimetic impulses of body genre films. As Williams argues, pornography, melodrama, and horror should be considered body genres not only because of their onscreen attention to embodiment but also because of their aims of eliciting corresponding

responses from their imagined viewers. In this light, *District 9* seems to invite presumptively white audiences to imagine (and even feel) the horror of losing access to whiteness and of being figuratively jerked out of this space of privilege.

On the one hand, *District 9*'s ability to produce affective shocks tied to a presumptively white audience's awareness of its own vulnerability is an effective mode of cultural work on behalf of the film. This realization of human species vulnerability might serve to alert white audiences to forms of racial vulnerability against which they have typically been insulated. On the other hand, imagining a non-white viewer's experiences of this film's body spectacle suggests a number of problems with the film's racial allegory. First, the "imagine-if-this-happened-to-you" address to presumptively white audience members evokes the sentiments of pity and condescension associated with "poverty porn" and "voluntourism," wherein white participants are asked to imagine a temporary loss of their privilege in ways that reinforce the presumed naturalness of that privilege and reify metonymic associations between racial Otherness and suffering (Garland 83).

Second, in addition to its xenophobic treatment of Black Nigerians, *District 9* offers problematic figurations of its prawn characters. Aside from the transactional interactions with Christopher Johnson (the prawn whom the film codes as civilized and who, recognizing Wikus's condition, helps him find a way to reverse the process while finding a way off the planet), Wikus does not interact with the prawns in any substantive way. Beyond their disgust-inspiring physique and access to sought-after technology, the prawns are simply a metonym for the race-as-species allegory. In fact, the only demonstration of supposed humanity from a prawn is tarnished by the suggestion that the prawn Christopher Johnson is unique among prawns for his intellectual capacity and behavior. Similarly, the behavior of other prawns often suggests a kind of primitive existence and status, and given the suggestion of allegory, this issue has also been a focus of criticism from those troubled by *District 9*'s depiction of Africa and Africans.

There is, therefore, little ground to initiate a comparison between the sociality and interiority of human and prawn life and, thus, no means for thinking through the implications of the transformation beyond trauma. The prawns exist largely as stand-ins for abject suffering, once again reifying associations between Otherness and trauma. Relatedly, one might imagine that, within the logic of the film, a prawn might welcome the opportunity to become human, as it could only be an improvement from the cruel conditions of their current existence. But if one were to follow the racial-species allegory towards its culminating implication, it would be much harder to imagine a racial minority embracing a similar perspective. As texts such as *The Bluest Eye*, and countless narratives of racial passing demonstrate, there a number of reasons why – despite enormous discrimination – a racial Other would rather hold on to their racial identification rather than abandon it in exchange for privilege. In fact, this scenario is one that *Sorry to Bother You* depicts explicitly as part of Cash's traumatic experience as an employee of Regalview who must rely on "white voice" in order to achieve success.

Not unlike *District 9*, *Sorry to Bother You* features rioting non-humans, ultimately ending with Cash undergoing equisapien transformation himself and becoming the leader of a revolt against the CEO of Worryfree in his mansion. If *District 9* relies on a sentimental protest strategy that calls for empathy and identification above and beyond racial difference – a variation on rhetorics of colourblindness that suggests the prawns are "just like us" – *Sorry to Bother You* makes a zealous appeal to revolt. Although *District 9* holds on to the hope that liberalism might resolve the excesses of neoliberalism, *Sorry to Bother You* is ready to risk liberalism's fall. The film's ending

suggests that the equisapiens should take the monstrosity of their abuse and use it to deliver retribution, reminiscent of certain strains of Black "self-defense" rhetoric – as illustrated, for example, by Huey P. Newton's column in the Black Panther newsletter "In Defense of Black Self Defense."

It matters, then, that this sequence features two examples of rioting equisapiens speaking in a Black dialect with fairly contemporary Black vernacular and that the conversion of workers into beasts of burden recalls both longstanding rhetorics of dehumanization that link Blackness with bestiality (Byfield 71; Smiley and Fakunle 350) and histories of "medical apartheid" against Black bodies, including but not limited to the Tuskegee experiment (Washington 18). The film's setting in Oakland, notes Leshu Torchin, also matters given that this city is typically remembered as the "[b]irthplace of the Black Panthers and home to a majority population of people of color, the city is a site of ongoing displacement, uneven development, and disproportionate access to affordable housing and employment facilitated by gentrification and venture capitalism" (30). In this case, *Sorry to Bother You's* emphasis on the subjugation of Blackness might serve to highlight the various forms of Black agency and resistance, which is a dynamic largely missing from *District 9*.

At the same time, however, *Sorry to Bother You's* ending also raises questions about the viability of revolution. Before Cash learns he is transforming into an equisapien, he joins his friends and co-workers in a final protest against RegalView, which culminates from activist efforts that have taken place throughout the duration of the narrative. The protest meets a violent response from police, who knock Cash unconscious and lock him in a police van. Through a small slit in the side of the armored van, Cash watches as police beat and kill protesters, including a particularly horrifying shot in which a police van runs over protestors in the street. Then, suddenly, the police meet another form of resistance; offscreen something begins to push back, literally, against the police van. That something, the film reveals, are the equisapiens, whom Cash had earlier freed from their prison beneath their creator's mansion. After forcefully driving away the police, the equisapiens free Cash and share a moment of solidarity with Cash and his cohort of protestors about their shared struggle.

What follows next, however, may come as a surprise to some viewers. Rather than being galvanized by the experience of the protest and the brief formation of a coalition with the equispaiens, Cash's struggle against racial capitalism appears uncertain. He has returned to the garage in which he had been living prior to his success at RegalView and plans to return to work at the company as a tele-marketer – albeit with a newly formed union. While the success of the unionization efforts might signal some progress in the fight for workers' rights, the scene seems to undercut some of that optimism. Despite Cash's proclamation that he is "part of changing the world" and his declaration that he "couldn't come back to the exact same thing after all that," his new/old life in the garage suggests that perhaps things have not changed all that much. The old garage has now been outfitted with all of the home décor and technology that Cash bought as he climbed the ladder at RegalView, almost exactly replicating the apartment that his corporate gig had afforded him. Things may not be exactly the same, but they are not exactly different either. This moment in the film might therefore encourage viewers to wonder if, in fact, things will change at work. How long might it be before Cash finds himself enduring the same routine and subjugation at work? How long before he finds the need to use white voice again? And what of the protestors who were beaten and killed: will they simply be disposed of and replaced?

And yet, if the lack of change in Cash's life proves unexpected to some viewers, the film's narrative then offers its biggest surprise: the revelation that there is more –

seemingly irrevocable – change in store, as Cash is becoming an equisapien. Closing the garage door with his back to the camera, Cash groans and doubles over in pain. When he turns to face the camera, a medium close-up reveals that his nose has begun to change into a horse's muzzle. The film then cuts to black, followed by intertitle's featuring director Boots Riley's name and the film's title. Then, in one final "jerk," the film cuts back to the WorryFree CEO's mansion, seconds before a fully transformed Cash and a group of other equisapiens, still wearing shackles around their wrists, announce through the home's security cameras that they are about to invade. As an equisapien – presumably Cash – bursts through the front door, the film cuts to black for a final time. The film's irresolution refuses to answer questions about what will become of Cash and the other equisapiens. Even if their retribution against Lift is successful, what such supposed success would entail remains unseen; and even if Lift, as a singular bad actor within the film's diegesis is taken down by this revolt, the film's emphasis on fungibility seems to beg another question: how quickly will Lift and/or Worryfree be replaced by another evil CEO and/or corporation? This reading is, of course, rather cynical; but the film's reliance on "bait and switch" narrative tactics in its final two sequences seems to invite such cynicism—suggesting, retracting, and then suggesting again the possibility of revolution, while also resisting a tidy narrative about any easy ending for racial capitalism.

As such, the ending of *Sorry to Bother You* also raises questions about its mimetic possibilities. Certainly, the film's reliance on special (and sometimes gross-out) effects suggests an impulse to encourage audiences to feel horror and revulsion akin to that of the characters. What is less clear is whether the film's affects are enough to effect a desire to act on the part of audience members. In other words, it remains unclear whether the film invites viewers (successfully or otherwise) to follow Cash into revolution or if the film's horrors might simply prompt audience members to feel revolted but otherwise unable or unwilling to act. As one of the union organizers says, "If you get shown a problem, but have no idea how to control it, then you just decide to get used to the problem."

## Conclusions

Through indexing the racial dimension of corporate exploitation and violence, *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* provide an articulation of late racial capitalism as a threat to the very bodily integrity of their audiences. The racial chimera attempts to entertain the audience through the shock of body horror while persuading the audience that these horrors represent the dangers of racial capitalism. The use of the medium of film to provoke these political anxieties is, on a basic level, a creative use of an established set of genre conventions to generate both the appeal of spectacle and the insight of cultural and political critique. As promising as these achievements sound, both *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* invoke bodily anxieties to emphasize the violence and indignity of late racial capitalism but neither film seems to offer a clear or cogent set of answers for how to respond to the problems they've shown their audiences.

As much as *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* are about racial chimeras, the films can be understood as rather chimeric themselves. Such amalgamation can be seen, for instance, in the films' generic diffusion that manifests in multiple reviewers' and critics' contentions that the films are hard to classify (Keogh; Torchin). They are also rather incongruous in their roles as commercial films aimed at critiques of racial capitalism, blurring the already protean, if not arbitrary, boundaries between such categories as "commerce" and "art," "high brow," and "low brow." That is, they are capitalistic enterprises engaged in a critique of capitalism. These two films are certainly

not unique in facing this constraint, but it is worth noting that as films distributed by media conglomerates (*District 9*'s major distributor was TriStar Pictures, which is owned by the global Sony Corporation; and *Sorry to Bother You* was distributed by Mirror Releasing, which was owned at the time in part by MGM, and by Focus Features and Universal Pictures, both of which are owned by General Electric and the media giant Comcast) they are participant in – if not invested in – the very market structures they critique. The choice in *Sorry to Bother You* to name the company for which Cash works RegalView may even suggest a nod to this conundrum, as Regal Cinemas is the second-largest cinema exhibitor in the world.

Regardless of whether these films ultimately actualize or undercut their critiques of racial capitalism, they make clear that public understandings (or misunderstandings) about genetics remain central to ongoing debates about race and racial justice. They further demonstrate the affordances (and limitations) of the cinema – as a medium aimed at large audience with the capacity to animate both strong affective responses and critical thinking through not only narrative but also audio-visual spectacle – for addressing this complex relationship. And, while science fiction is often the generic home to these considerations, it is not the only cinematic site where these conversations take place.

Other recent examples of cinematic works broaching these topics include the Oprah Winfrey-helmed HBO adaptation of Rebecca Skloot's bestselling nonfiction book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2017), which addresses the history of exploitation of Black patients by medical science, as well as a series of educational films produced by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (2020) that address the intersections of science and racism, as part of their larger "Science: The Wide Angle" initiative. Such examples seem to demonstrate the unique capacity of moving images to move their audiences to feel and – perhaps, though not necessarily – to think or act differently. Of course, while commercial films like *District 9* and *Sorry to Bother You* are likelier to reach larger audiences than, say, nonfiction or educational films, they are also constrained by the conditions of the production context. It seems hard to imagine that a film distributed by a profit-driven corporation could, or would, offer a coherent schema for anti-racist and anti-capitalist revolution. In fact, perhaps it is unfair to expect that a work of art (commercial or otherwise) offers a solution to such a dilemma rather than inviting audiences – including critics – to tarry with the labour involved in even approaching that problem.

These films also demonstrate the power of the racial chimera as a trope that deserves further consideration. Insofar as this trope asks questions about transformation and what constitutes humanness, it also encourages consideration of the ethics of analogies between different forms of difference and oppression (e.g. between species and race) and challenges many of the binaries that govern so many conversations about genetics and race, including self/other, sameness/difference, human/nonhuman. And as a trope that relies on the affective spectacles of body genres while also inviting audiences to think about the politics and ethics of racial capitalism, the racial chimera offers useful resources for further complicating the supposed dualism between mind and body with all of its attendant racial baggage.

## Notes

1. Some of the scholars we draw from in reading the racial dynamics of these films – theorists within or in conversation with the area of Afropessimism – would take issue with the use of the phrase “white vs non-white,” instead of “non-black vs black,” and the similar/parallel equivocation between white supremacy and antiblackness. These thinkers frequently maintain that whiteness generates the terrain of the human only through the negation of blackness, and that other racial “identities” (Asian, Native American, and occasionally and ambiguously Latinx, as it is frequently positioned next to blackness through the maintenance of the black/white binary) can only articulate themselves as identities through participation in that anti-black terrain of the human, to the exclusion of blackness. In the formulation of Afropessimism, the subjugation of blackness is more central and important than the privilege, dominance, and universality of whiteness. This line of argument has a number of potential implications for our reading of these films, which we do not have the space to explore at length here. We would contend, however, that the theoretical difference between “white vs non-white” and “black versus non-black” likely speaks to a central political difference between the films and – as we gesture towards in the conclusion – the respective tendencies of *District 9* towards a mode of liberalism and presumptions of whiteness and *Sorry to Bother You* towards a radicalism and a centering of Blackness.

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