Animacy, Agency, and Animatedness: The Human-Animal Transformation in *Sorry to Bother You*

Maria Menzel

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the racialized affect of 'animatedness' (Ngai) as presented in the film *Sorry to Bother You* (2018). In this dark comedy, workers' subjectivities are constituted by their labor: Their subjectivity is presented as plastic, by formal techniques such as the use of Claymation or animatronics, but especially by the corporate plan to transform workers into human-horse hybrids dubbed Equisapiens, to improve workplace productivity. This paper outlines the connections between this visual plasticization and the continued dehumanization of Black people, to justify the exploitation of their labor. However, this paper argues that rather than using the Equisapiens as figures symbolizing the loss of the workers' agency, *Sorry to Bother You* presents both the workers and Equisapiens as excessively animated, ultimately allowing them to form a coalition based on this shared affect.

KEYWORDS: animatedness, animacy, plasticity, human-animal transformation, labor

A Horse Walks into a Call Center

In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx described the processes of labor within capitalism as leading to the alienation of workers from the products they produce. He describes the effects of alienation on the individual's psyche thus:

> man [the worker] no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc. And in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. *What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal* (Marx 30, emphasis added).

Here Marx draws on the metaphorical figure of the animal to describe the depleted affective states he sees as inherent to modern labor. For Marx, the alienation of the worker that begins with an alienation from the products produced and the working process leads to the alienation of the worker from their species-being, which ultimately leads to an alienation from other workers as relations between men are replaced by the commodity-form (32). The animal as a figure is used in the above quotation to describe the worker Marx sees as being affectively depleted, therefore having no hope of connecting with other workers. The inability to connect with other workers thus means the loss of any ability to express one's agency. A contemporary film that seemingly takes Marx's metaphor at face value and makes it a reality is *Sorry to Bother You*, directed by Boots Riley. The dark comedy from 2018 sees workers being forcefully transformed into human-horse hybrids dubbed Equisapiens. Set in a dystopian alternate reality in Oakland, where large corporations control all forms of capital, employees are driven

to sign restrictive contracts with these conglomerates, signing over their freedom and labor in exchange for the bare necessities. The transformation of workers into Equisapiens is the next step in this exploitation, as their genetic modification is meant to even further increase worker productivity.

The film follows the protagonist Cassius Green, a young Black man who works in telemarketing for RegalView, a company that is part of the global conglomerate WorryFree, that is responsible for thinking up the technology to create Equisapiens. At first, Cassius is eager to rise in the ranks of the company but becomes disillusioned when he learns that workers are being forcefully transformed into human-animal hybrids. Throughout this paper, I argue that the allegory of the Equisapiens not only critiques the alienation of workers from what Marx calls their "species-being" but also draws parallels to the exploitation and animalization of Black bodies during chattel slavery and connects this history with a critique of contemporary racial capitalism. The system of chattel slavery was based around the abjection of Black people, with Enlightenment discourses oftentimes conflating them with animals (Jackson 3). This discursive closeness was meant to cast Black bodies as less-than-human, consequently denying their agency.

In my analysis, I want to dive deeper into how alienation and the affective depletion Marx describes are visually represented in this film. My contention, however, is that the film does not cast the animalistic bodies of the Equisapiens as representing the ultimate form of affective depletion or without any agency. By turning to Sianne Ngai's concept of "animatedness" as "the most basic or minimal of all affective conditions: that of being, in one way or another, 'moved'" (Ngai 91), I argue that the Equisapiens and human workers are visually represented as sharing the affective stance of animatedness. This is what consequently allows them to form an alliance against WorryFree. To show this, I look at the specific ways the film uses different animated styles to represent the bodies of the workers to underline how they become animated (in the affective sense) by the work that they do. Different forms of visually animated bodies are present on screen: the most obvious examples of this being the Equisapiens, who are represented both through the medium of Claymation and as large mechatronic puppets. There are also instances of human workers being visually and sonically animated by external forces, most notably Cassius finds success as a telemarketer by using a "white voice," an effect that is achieved in the film by overdubbing, making him seem ventriloquized. He is also shown as being physically transported (or rather flung) into the homes of his customers, showing the intimacy of the affective connection he must form with them. The use of overdubbing to achieve the effect of the white voice further allows me to illustrate how animatedness is a racialized affect: in black(ened)[1] bodies, animatedness is cast as both an "exaggerated expressiveness" and as a form of passivity, a sign of a body "unusually susceptible to external control" (12). Racialized bodies' emotional responses are seen as corporeal qualities, rather than emerging from the mind. It is the

[1] Here, the term black(ened) indicates the processual nature of being constructed as a blackened body.

political and aesthetic ambiguity of the affect of animatedness when it comes to how the agency of the animated body is perceived that I examine and draw out to show how the boundaries between human and animal bodies become porous in the film.

Feminist affect scholar Sara Ahmed has written extensively on how affects "produce the effect of surfaces and boundaries of bodies" (Ahmed 194), referring to both individual and collective bodies. Her work highlights that affects are not just personal and pre-cognitive, but always political since they shape how bodies and objects are publicly perceived. The circulation of affects between different bodies and objects Ahmed describes has been further developed by posthuman scholar Mel Chen. Chen finds that as affects circulate, they engage and can affect many bodies at once (Chen 11). They argue that these bodies can also be non-human, like animals, or inanimate matter like stones or toxins (1-20). They draw a connection between matter's ability to affect and be affected and the agency given to matter. Chen argues for viewing matter on a continuum of animation, as affects move between matter and connect it. Chen's idea of animation and agency as moving on a spectrum allows me to move beyond the binary of the animal as the Other, being denied any form of agency, in contrast to the figure of the human. This moving beyond the binary is necessary when examining the role of the Equisapiens in the protest movement against WorryFree, as they become allies for the human workers. The film no longer limits the animal bodies by making them stand allegorically for the depletion and alienation of the worker. Rather by representing both the bodies of human and Equisapien workers through similar "animating" techniques, the film includes the perspective of the "natural world" in the fight against racial capitalism.

The first subchapter examines the white voice Cassius and his girlfriend Detroit use at their respective workplaces as a form of animatedness. I then move on to the aesthetic representation of the Equisapiens with a particular focus on how their bodies are animated in the film. In focusing on the basic affective condition of "being moved", I am able to draw out how moments of excess expressiveness can represent a slippage or moment of resistance, in which both human and human-animal hybrid workers can form alliances. The affect of animatedness forms the basis for this successful coalition, which does not create discursive divisions between animality and humanity.

Animatedness and the White Voice

I will begin my analysis by looking at how the human bodies in the film are represented as animated by the work that they do, the main instance of this being the "white voice" which is dubbed over Cassius and Detroit in several scenes of the film showing them at work, in Cassius' case at his job as a telemarketer and Detroit at the exhibition of her artistic work. The fact that the voice is specifically coded as "white" allows me to illustrate how the affect of animatedness is perceived differently in racialized bodies.

Cassius is both sonically and visually animated by the work he does as a telemarketer at RegalView. When Cassius makes a phone call to a customer at RegalView, he is shown being

forcefully flung out of the large open office along with his desk and phone and transported directly into the homes of his customers (*Sorry to Bother You* 10:53 - 11:51). This physical transportation illustrates the intimate relationship Cassius must form with his customers as soon as they pick up the phone. In their examination of the affective labor done by call center workers, sociologists Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta found that the intimate encounters that workers and customers entered affected the bodily postures of the workers, despite being mediated through the technology of the phone (Mankekar and Gupta 25). The film picks up on this immediate intimacy, as Cassius is offered insight into his customers' home lives and is brought into physical proximity with them. Cassius' body is presented as automated by his labor, as he is moved by a "mysterious and invisible force" (Ngai 91). Ngai argues that this type of animation through an invisible hand on film illustrates the minimal affective condition of being moved (91). The film presents the affective labor of being a telemarketer as moving Cassius; like a worker at an assembly line, his body becomes animated and automatized by the work he does. Therefore, his affective labor is also physical and affects his corporeality.

Cassius is further animated sonically when he uses his "white voice" to talk to customers on the phone. The effect of Cassius' white voice is achieved by overdubbing the voice of actor David Cross, who Boots Riley described in an interview as sounding "like the whitest guy in the world" (Zuckerman). The effect of this overdubbing is uncanny, as the movements of the actor's mouth do not quite match the disembodied voice. The system of work separates Cassius' body into isolated body parts, separating his vocal cords from the rest of his body and automatizing them (Ngai 110). Cassius is animated and ventriloquized, rendered plastic and mute, by the demands of his labor. The automatization of his body can be read as an effect of his subjection to power (99), which has clear racial tones, as a white way of speaking is cast as desirable in the workplace and guarantees him professional success. Ngai argues that an excess of emotional expressiveness or "animatedness seems to function as a marker of racial and ethnic otherness" (94), in that those who are excessively animated are seen as being unusually receptive to external control (91). She argues that animatedness can function as a racializing technique, as the emotional qualities of African American subjects are conflated to be corporeal qualities (95). Hence, animatedness is perceived differently according to the positionality of the subject, whereby in its racialized form, it is seen to resemble a kind of mechanization (32). The disjunctiveness or uncanniness of the white voice makes visible this racialization through work.

However, as Cassius' older co-worker Langston explains to him, the white voice is not really about sounding like a white person. Rather, it is about taking on an affective stance which is desirable:

> It's like, sounding like you don't have a care. Got your bills paid. You're happy about your future. You about ready to jump in your Ferrari out there after you get off this call. Put some real breath in there. Breezy, like, "I don't really need this money". You've never been fired. Only laid off. It's not really a white voice. It's what they wish they

> sounded like. So, it's like what they think they're supposed to sound like. (*Sorry to Bother You* 14:58 - 15:43)

The white voice presents a position of desire, which can never be achieved; it's a simulacrum of whiteness. The voice presents the customers with a vision of the "good life" (Berlant 2–3), holding the promise that they can achieve the idealized form of whiteness Langston describes. Whiteness becomes an affective structure that Cassius may inhabit. Through the white voice, Cassius is able to exploit his customers' attachment to good-life fantasies to sell them overpriced encyclopedias. When using the white voice, Cassius enters a position of affective surplus and excess, as it is his job to produce a desire and excess that can never attain closure (Lummerding 212). Cassius is at a point of excess animation, which is uncanny to the viewer and his friends; Sal calls it "some puppet master, voodoo shit" (*Sorry to Bother You* 23:40). Cassius inhabits a role of "whiteness" which is forced upon him by the workplace and the structures of capitalism but in overdoing or mimicking whiteness, the performance makes clear the artifice of whiteness and the false optimism of the good life: He distorts the boundaries of the social role which also confines him (Ngai 117). This point of excessive animatedness is a slippage, in which the elasticity of the subject is hyperbolized. Cassius copies an affective stance that has no original, the moment of slippage allows for his agency to remain visible within his own automation.

The uncanniness of the white voice and the slippage it presents becomes even more clear when Detroit uses her own white voice at her art show. Detroit's art is meant to criticize the systems of racial capitalism and the exploitation of the African continent. As opposed to Cassius, she is a much more political and principled person, as is shown by her being critical of Cassius' use of the white voice at the start of the film. Therefore, it comes as a surprise to both Cassius and the viewer when Detroit is shown speaking to potential buyers about her art in her "white voice", which even has a British accent. The highlight of Detroit's art show is a performance art piece, in which she stands on stage in an abstract bikini, and asks the audience to throw broken cell phones, used bullet casings, and water balloons filled with sheep's blood at her "if [they] feel so moved", all the while she recites lines from the Motown movie *The Last Dragon* (*Sorry to Bother You* 1:03:43). Detroit explains that the phones were built using the mineral coltan from the Democratic Republic of Congo and that the bullets and the blood represent the byproducts of violence the trade with this mineral has brought to the region (1:03:26 - 1:03:40). In her art piece, Detroit is offering up her body as a surface towards which negative affects can be let out, as the audience may pelt her with the artifacts laid out before them. Detroit makes her own racialized body highly visible to the audience, subjecting herself to the (white) gaze of the audience. Her performance piece exposes how racialized subjects are burdened with negative affects and how the dumping of affects along affective hierarchies reconstitute social identities (Whitney 648). She is purposefully placing herself in a position in which the audience may unload affective waste (here: the unwanted byproducts of global capitalism) on her. The audience participates in this cycle, growing more animated as she struggles to get through her lines and to endure the objects being thrown at her (*Sorry*

to Bother You 1:04:29 - 1:05:16). Her piece draws parallels between the exploitation of natural resources from Africa and the affective exploitation of racialized subjects in having to contain excessive negative emotions. Excessive animation can be seen as a byproduct of the affective labor racialized subjects are forced to do. As illustrated above, any excessive displays of animatedness and liveliness are then used to justify racialization. If we think of affects as circulatory economies (Ahmed, "Affective Economies" 120), it becomes clear that the origin of these excess affects does not lie within the racialized subject itself. Rather, there exists an economy of affects in which racialized and feminized subjects are tasked with containing and metabolizing a negative affective surplus.

In her performance piece, Detroit's automatization is doubly uncanny, in that she is reciting nonsense lines from the film *The Last Dragon* (1985) on top of putting on her white voice. Her ventriloquization is hyperbolic, and in this way, calls attention to the workings of power that animate all of us. Detroit is presented as being animated or moved by outside forces but by throwing the phones and bullet casings, the audience members reveal that they have become "so moved" as to participate in the spectacle she has created. As an affective laborer, Detroit's job entails both being moved by external forces and producing affects in her audience. She is taking on external, negative affects but also becoming a "puppet master" herself in producing affects in others. Through her performance, Detroit manages to "move" her audience into exposing the affective hierarchies at work in day-to-day life, as they feel it is alright to throw waste at her. By animating her audience, she reveals how the automated body can still have and express agency. Ngai has noted that animatedness as an affect conjoins both the emotive and the mechanistic, and antithetical notions of physical agency (100), one of being controlled by external agents and the other of reacting through an automatism, so freely and spontaneously. Detroit is able to endure the phones and other waste being thrown at her through her automatization. Her performance highlights the ambiguity of the agency of the animated subject, as she is ventriloquized by the "white voice" and her line-reading but also moves the audience through her performance.

The white voice is one stylistic choice through which the workers in the film become animated. This sonic animation is used to illustrate to the viewer how both Cassius and Detroit's affective agency is impaired at work. Further, both of their bodies become somehow instrumentalized by their work. With Cassius, this is shown through his being comically transported into the homes of his customers. Detroit also offers up her body for her artistic work, allowing her audience to throw things at her. However, her performance makes clear the ambiguity of being animated by external forces. She is also animating the audience and exerting power over them, through her own animation. Further, the stylistic choices used to represent their animation also contain slippages, where it becomes unclear who is exerting power. Through these slippages, the human workers' agency becomes visible to the viewer. How are the Equisapiens, the non-human workers in the film, animated? As their bodies have been transformed for the purposes of their labor, the ways in which they can exert their agency as hybrid creatures has changed. What can the stylistic and aesthetic choices used to represent

them tell us about their affective agency within the film? And what moments of slippage does their animation open up?

Plastic Bodies: The Equisapiens

Director Boots Riley has stated in interviews that the Equisapiens are a plot device to make Cassius "see himself" and "shake him to his mortal core" (Zuckerman). The appearance of the human-animal hybrids in the second half of the film causes Cassius to finally listen to the moral trepidations he has been having as he advanced up the career ladder at RegalView. When coming face to face with the results of RegalView's experiments on their workers, he can no longer deny his complicity in the dehumanization of other workers (and himself).

The director explains the choice of species by drawing on linguistic connections between the figure of the horse and the space of labor, so common phrases such as workhorse or horsepower. The origin of these phrases lies in the beginning of the Industrial Revolution when horses were essential for transportation along supply chains and in larger cities. While horses now represent the natural world, phrases such as "horsepower" reference the material work done by horses in the past (Greene 6). In her history of the horse in industrial America, historian Ann Norton Greene also notes that the horse can be seen as part of a network of technology, whereby humans modified horses through breeding and domestication and creating devices in order to harness the horses' physical powers, such as horseshoes or vehicles like carts (Greene 4). Riley's selection of the horse as a figure to make Cassius "see himself" can therefore be read as a commentary on the connections between the exploitation of the natural world (including animals) under capitalism and the spaces of labor, where human workers are exploited.

The horse as a figure is not abject per se, their hybridity is what makes the Equisapiens so terrifying: they possess both horse-like and human physical characteristics, for example, their five fingers and toes are human-like (see Fig. 1), their human voices add to their hybridity, underlining their human origins. In embodying both the Other (the animal) and the self (the human), the Equisapiens are monstrous, since they threaten the corporeal limits of the normatively embodied (human) subject (Shildrick 28). The Equisapiens threaten the concept of humanity by testing its boundaries and being undeniably part-human makes them more grotesque to the viewer. Their partial humanity is what allows Cassius to see himself in them, and to relate to them. However, what makes the Equisapiens monstrous is also what makes them powerful: As part humans, part horses, they are the ideal workers for WorryFree's factories.

Fig. 1. "Equisapiens in chains," Boots Riley, *Sorry to Bother You*, 2018. 1:16:38.

The Equisapien as an uncanny figure draws on a discursive history of black people being "animalized" to justify their enslavement and the exploitation of their labor. Posthumanist literary scholar Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has traced the discursive confluence between animality and racialization, highlighting how "black body's fleshiness was aligned with that of animals and set in opposition to European spirit and mind" (Jackson, *Becoming Human* 6) by liberal humanism and Enlightenment thinkers. Jackson argues that race and species are co-evolving terms, and that "antiblackness prefigures and colors nonhuman animal abjection" (14). Given the deep entwinement of the figure of the animal and antiblackness, Jackson argues that it is not enough to critique the bestialization of black(ened) people, since a "recognition of personhood and humanity does not annul the animalization of blackness" (18). That the recognition of humanity and personhood is no guaranteed protection against animalization and exploitation is illustrated in the film: in his conversation with Cassius, WorryFree's CEO Steve Lift maintains that the people who work in WorryFree's factories have made the free choice to work there (*Sorry to Bother You* 21:37).[2] Since the workers must sign contracts with WorryFree, they have been assigned legal personhood, but they are still literally animalized and their bodily integrity is maimed. Therefore, Jackson argues for the need to think outside the "binaristic frameworks such as 'humanization versus dehumanization'" (Jackson, *Becoming Human* 20), since black(ened) people "are cast as sub, supra, and human *simultaneously*" (35). This casting in multiple roles creates an ontological instability which Jackson describes as plasticity: "[T]he normative subject of liberal humanism is predicated on the abjection of blackness, which is not based on figurations of blackness as "animal-like" but

[2] Lift argues that all employees of WorryFree made the free choice to work there, since they are not forced to sign the contracts under threat of violence, however it is implied that most people begin working at WorryFree only as a last resort, to escape extreme financial stress. Furthermore, advertisements by WorryFree make the workers' situation look appealing.

rather casts black people as ontologically plastic." (18-19). Plasticity here means an instability of form, which allows the essence of "a black(ened) thing" to always be "infinitely mutable" (11). This mutability means a loss or a lack of agency. Jackson points out that the lack of agency assigned to both non-human animals and black(ened) people are co-evolving and cannot be thought of separately. Therefore, it would not be adequate to only think of the workers as having lost agency when they are transformed into Equisapiens or to think of the Equisapiens as actors without agency in the film.

The ontological plasticity of the Equisapiens is underlined by the Claymation video Steve Lift shows Cassius to introduce him to WorryFree's plan to transform their workers into human-horse hybrids. The video is meant as a sort of pitch of the idea, illustrating the process of transformation and stating the envisioned benefits. The video also presents a break in form: while the rest of the film is live-action, this video is entirely Claymation. The stylistic choice shows the plasticity of the Equisapiens bodies (see fig. 2), as Claymation films are produced through the incremental shaping of putty into shapes through a modeler, taking pictures of each of the shapes and then cutting these images together to create a moving image. The video's narrative presents the history of humanity as one of plasticity, whereby the images and figures on-screen are molded by the invisible hand of the animators. The film displays the violence of the first humans killing each other using the first tools, presenting the workspaces of WorryFree and the process of becoming Equisapiens in a cute and "Disneyfied" way, as pieces of putty are moved around the screen and disintegrated. The workers on screen are formed, shaped, and pushed to the edge of their humanity as they become Equisapiens. The audience and Cassius watch the Claymation representation of the "worker modification process" which is described as "simple and rather quick" (1:20:44 - 1:20:46). The process of transformation is shown at a high level of abstraction as singular body parts expand from human to horse-like: first the arms, then legs and feet becoming more muscular, then hair growing longer, finally the human face expanding and lengthening towards a snout (1:21:02 - 1:21:08). The bodily transformation is not shown as a whole, rather in transformation the body is separated into its working parts, which can be optimized and reorganized, like the parts of a machine. The separation of the Equisapiens body bears similarities to the effect of Cassius and Detroit's bodies becoming automated through the white voice. The result of the transformation process is a handsome human-horse hybrid, with a horse's snout but human hands, presented frozen in an athlete's pose standing on its hind legs. This clay figure is much less threatening and grotesque than the "actual" Equisapiens shown in the live-action sequences of the film. The Claymation video largely sanitizes the violence and grotesque elements of the Equisapiens and their creation and illustrates the assumed plasticity of the subjects who are employed at WorryFree that Lift wants to transform.

Fig. 2. "Claymation Natural History," Boots Riley, *Sorry to Bother You*, 2018. 1:18:07.

It is revealed that Lift has shown Cassius this video to recruit him to secretly infiltrate the ranks of the Equisapien workers while representing the interests of WorryFree in exchange for 100 million dollars (*Sorry to Bother You* 1:22:55 - 1:24:23). Lift attempts to flatter Cassius by maintaining that he is only recruiting Cassius for this task because he "is awesome" (1:23:19) and he is deeply impressed by his success at RegalView. However, the recruitment offer makes clear that to Lift, Cassius' subjectivity remains plastic. His body and life are a commodity to the CEO, which he can buy and shape as he chooses in exchange for (a large amount of) money. As Cassius is transformed into an Equisapien in the final scene of the film, the viewer learns that Lift was not waiting for his consent to this plan and had given him the fusing catalyst, disguised as cocaine, without his knowledge. Despite Cassius' economic and professional success and Lift's alleged admiration, he willfully disregards Cassius' right to bodily integrity for his business interests. The black subject's positionality remains plastic, no matter their position. Lift recognizes Cassius as a subject and a valuable worker, but this does not protect him from being animalized, like the WorryFree employees. Jackson argues that the plasticity of the black subject is the basis for the liberal humanist subject, therefore critics must find a way to go beyond the Human (Jackson, *Becoming Human* 18–19), which allows different ways of being-in-common with animals, and human-animal hybrids like the Equisapiens.

The Claymation sequence constructs a violent narrative, the bodies of the black(ened) workers are represented as plastic, moldable and mutable. However, there is a small moment of slippage, even in this highly automated sequence. In the final moments of the video, as the Equisapien is being slowly spun to showcase its new body, only its eyes keep moving, adjusting to continue gazing out directly at the viewer (*Sorry to Bother You* 1:21:16). Here, the eyes of the Claymation Equisapien present a certain slippage in the narrative the video attempts to construct, as the Equisapien continues to exert its agency by focusing its gaze on the viewer. This small gesture allows a certain resistance against the animation the Equisapien is subject

to. It is these small slippages and moments of disjunctiveness that allow the characters to resist their own animation. As I move on to the second way the Equisapiens are represented in the film, namely through mechatronic puppets, their excessive animation and its uses in resistance are made visible.

The Telemarketer and Equisapien Union

Both Cassius and Detroit become excessively animated by the use of their white voices, reaching an affective point of desire that can never be fulfilled. Their animation through the white voice is uncanny to the viewer, and so are the Equisapiens as human-horse hybrid figures, which toe the line between human and the Other. Like Cassius and Detroit, the live-action Equisapiens are represented as animated bodies: Riley chose to represent them as giant mechatronic puppets. These puppets were created using one prosthetic suit and four animatronic heads. The Equisapiens' bodies were controlled by an actor in a suit, while the animatronic head of the Equisapien was operated by four people in total (Zuckerman). So, the Equisapiens are brought to life on screen by human-machine hybrids, and arguably, since multiple invisible people had to work on animating their bodies, the Equisapiens are excessively animated creatures.

While WorryFree has designed the Equisapiens to make them more productive workers, they metabolize this state of excess liveliness into agitation against the police in the final showdown of the film. It is revealed that Cassius has freed the already transformed Equisapiens from Steve Lift's home as their help is essential in allowing the telemarketers' union to be successful in their final protest against WorryFree. Ngai argues that the animated subject can express resistance "not by transcending the principles of mechanization from above but […] by obeying them too well" (117). Lift wanted Cassius to become a false leader whom the Equisapiens should organize around; the film ends with him leading the Equisapiens in revolt, however, not in the way Lift intended. The Equisapiens were meant to be stronger and more durable than humans and during the strike, they use their excessive liveliness to their advantage. Thus, Cassius resists his own mechanization by doing the job he has been assigned too well. Despite his own transformation into an Equisapien at the end of the film, he retains or even gains agency. In the final scenes of *Sorry to Bother You*, the protagonists choose to escalate the negative affects which have been launched at them and they were tasked with containing. From this point of affective surplus or slippage, the Equisapiens, Cassius, and Detroit form a successful coalition. While Ngai classifies animatedness as a minor affect, in contrast to more discursively defined, cathartic emotions like anger or fear (Ngai 6), I find that here, a focus on the baseline affect of animatedness has huge potential for finding common ground between humans and animals.

As the telemarketer's union and the Equisapiens can form an alliance against the police based on the minor affect of animatedness, the film subverts the idea of animacy hierarchies. The protest only succeeds once the Equisapiens have joined the telemarketers' cause. Other non-

human actants are also involved in the final protest against WorryFree: Cassius asks his girlfriend Detroit to bring the stone statues from her gallery as backup (*Sorry to Bother You* 1:37:45). These statues are disguised as protestors and become a wall that the police run into and cannot go past when barreling towards the RegalView offices. Therefore, the stone statues are essential to the protest, just as the Equisapiens are. In this final protest scene, actants of varying levels of animation, locomotion, and sentience are crucial to the fight for better working and living conditions. Mel Chen has argued for thinking about levels of agency and animation of matter on a continuum, rather than rendering some forms of matter completely inanimate (5). They argue that animacy hierarchies (which are upheld linguistically) are also an ontology of affect: "animacy hierarchies are precisely about which things can or cannot affect - or be affected by - which other things within a specific scheme of possible action" (Chen 30). Chen finds that "affect engages many bodies at once" (11): the protest presents all forms of matter united in their agitation against the police. Inanimate matter, like the stone statues, are able to shape human subjectivity and alter perception, thereby subverting the ontological boundaries which divide humans, animals, and stones (Jackson, "Animal" 679–80). This subversion of animacy hierarchies is political, as it brings bodies rendered less-animate into the biopolitical fold (Chen 6). The telemarketers' protest is successful because they reject animacy hierarchies, allowing them to mobilize based on their shared solidarities against capitalist exploitation. The film expands the idea of agency beyond "the human" (Jackson, "Animal" 680 - 81), creating alliances with the nonhuman. This is exemplified when Cassius' friend Squeeze acknowledges the Equisapiens with the words: "Same struggle. Same fight" (*Sorry to Bother You* 1:42:27 - 1:42:29). All actants are able to affectively connect against WorryFree (and RegalView). *Sorry to Bother You*'s final triumph is achieved in collaboration with the abject animals Cassius encounters, and they can enact their own agency in getting revenge on WorryFree. Recognition of their shared animatedness helps the protestors to create an alliance between the animals, humans, and inanimate matter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Sorry to Bother You* subverts the idea of animacy hierarchies. The film comments on the entanglement of the categories of race and animality in the space of labor, by having workers' bodies first be automatized and then be rendered plastic by the capitalist power structures in the film. This is done through several stylistic choices: namely, the use of overdubbing to create the effect of the white voice, the use of Claymation for a portion of the film, and the use of mechatronic puppets to represent the Equisapiens in the live-action sequences of the film. By drawing on Sianne Ngai's conceptualization of the affect of animatedness, I have illustrated the ambiguities present in the bodily automatization of the workers. For example, Cassius and Detroit both create moments of slippage within their bodily automation through the white voice, by hyperbolizing their own animation and being able to animate others in turn. In these moments of slippage, the animated subject can reassert their agency. These slippages of animation are afforded to both the human and non-human workers

in the film: the Equisapiens are also able to escalate their animation into agitation, crucially to create an alliance with other workers in their fight against WorryFree.

I have shown how work, affect and corporeality intersect. Through the animal transformation and the presence of the Equisapiens, the film argues that it does not matter what bodily form the worker has taken on, or where on the animacy hierarchy they may find themselves: if the most basic of affective conditions remain, the worker's animation can be used as a point of connection, a way to resist.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Affective Economies." *Social Text*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 117–39.

---. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2014.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.

Chen, Mel. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke UP, 2012.

Greene, Ann Norton. *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America*. Harvard UP, 2009.

Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2013, pp. 669–85.

---. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*. New York UP, 2020.

Lummerding, Susanne. "Surplus Enjoyment: You Can Make Something out of Nothing. The Real, the Political, and the Conditions of Production—On the Productivity of an Impossibility." *Mehr(Wert) Queer - Queer Added (Value)*. Edited by Barbara Paul and Johanna Schaffer, transcript Verlag, 2009, pp. 211–22.

Mankekar, Purnima, and Akhil Gupta. "Intimate Encounters: Affective Labor in Call Centers." *Positions: Asia Critique*, vol. 24, no. 1, Feb. 2016, pp. 17–43.

Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Edited by Martin Milligan, Prometheus Books, 1988.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard UP, 2007.

Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002.

Sorry to Bother You. Directed by Boots Riley, Cinereach, Significant Productions, MACRO, MNM Creative, The Space Program, 2018.

Whitney, Shiloh. "Byproductive Labor: A Feminist Theory of Affective Labor beyond the Productive–Reproductive Distinction." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 44, no. 6, 2018, pp. 637–60.

Zuckerman, Esther. "Director Boots Riley Breaks Down The Craziest Part of 'Sorry To Bother You.'" *Thrillist*, 06 July 2018, https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/sorry-to-bother-you-ending-explained-boots-riley-interview. Accessed 21 May 2023.