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## Afrofuturism and Afro-surrealism in Film: *Sorry to Bother You* and *They Cloned Tyrone*

While Afro-surrealism and Afrofuturism can be found in different narrative media, these partially overlapping but distinct movements present a clear cinematic aspect (Spencer 209) and have recently been represented by different films. Mark Dery defines Afrofuturism as “speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture” (180). The aim of this paper is to analyze the Afrofuturistic elements of Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) and Juel Taylor’s *They Cloned Tyrone* (2023). Both these films use science-fiction motifs to grapple with issues related to race, class, and African American identity. These two works take place in unsettling, realistic though slightly altered US American environments. A further similarity can be found in the central elements of the plot: In both cases Black bodies undergo secret dehumanizing experiments that allude to racial and capitalist exploitation. Overall, *Sorry to Bother You* and *They Cloned Tyrone* borrow from the conventions of science-fiction, speculative fiction, and dystopia to create a biting portrayal of the African American condition.

Keywords: *Sorry to Bother You*, *They Cloned Tyrone*, Afrofuturism, Afro-surrealism, African American

### Introduction: Definitions of Afrofuturism and Afro-Surrealism

Two recent African American films, *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) by Raymond “Boots” Riley and *They Cloned Tyrone* (2023) by Juel Taylor use the lenses of science-fiction and speculative fiction in order to explore issues related to racial dynamics and hierarchies in the United States. The perspective of these two films fits in the contexts of Afrofuturism and Afro-surrealism.

In his 1994 essay “Black to the Future” Mark Dery defines Afrofuturism as “speculative fiction that treats African American themes and ad-

dresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (180). In the same piece, Dery wonders why more African American authors have not embraced science-fiction, considering their past of abduction and enslavement, and their current limitations that mirror the alienated and nightmarish atmosphere of much science-fiction. Moreover, the literary marginalization of science-fiction as a ‘pulp’ genre reflects that of Black people in US society. In broader terms, Afrofuturism can be placed in opposition to humanism, as suggested by Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembé. In Mbembé’s view, the Black experience illustrates a reification of the human condition, as experiences of enslavement and exploitation blur the boundaries between the human and non-human:

Afrofuturism does not simply denounce the illusions of the ‘properly human.’ In its eyes, it is the idea of the human species that is defeated by the Negro experience. As the product of a history of predation, the Negro is indeed this human who was forced to dress in the clothes of a thing and share the destiny of objects. (“Afrofuturisme et Devenir-Nègre du Monde” 125, my translation)<sup>1</sup>

While Afrofuturism might appear at first to be historically marginal, in recent years, it has developed significantly, not only in literature but also in cinema. Writing in 2013 Ytasha L. Womack observed that “whether through literature, visual arts, music or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of Blackness for today and the future [...]. Afrofuturism combines elements of science-fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (ch. 1). As such, Afrofuturism encompasses a variety of different genres, as shown by the suggested reading on the Emory University guide to Afrofuturism, which includes categories of historical fiction/alternate history, science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Afrofuturism is sometimes perceived as a relatively recent genre, which would have developed with the emergence of figures such as Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler in the 1960s and 1970s, but this genre actually has much

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<sup>1</sup> “L’afrofuturisme ne se contente pas de dénoncer les illusions du ‘proprement humain.’ À ses yeux, c’est l’idée d’espèce humaine qui est mise en échec par l’expérience nègre. Produit d’une histoire de la prédation, le Nègre est en effet cet humain qui aura été forcé de revêtir les habits de la chose et de partager le destin de l’objet.” (Mbembé, “Afrofuturisme et Devenir-Nègre du Monde” 125)

older roots within the landscape of American literature. In his 1998 essay “Racism and Science Fiction,” Delany rejects being identified as “the first African American science fiction author,” pointing to speculative writers of African descent, such as M.P. Shiel and Martin Delany, who were active as early as the mid-nineteenth century. He also highlights the importance of George Schuyler’s *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A. D. 1933–1940* (1931). This satirical text imagines a process through which Black characters’ skin is turned white. As we shall see, the idea of Black people being ‘whitened’ and what this entails for African Americans and US society at large is something that emerges in the films that will be discussed here.

Afrofuturism is partially connected to but distinct from Afro-surrealism. The term Afro-surrealism was first used by Amiri Baraka to describe the work of African American writer and poet Henry Dumas, suggesting the creation of

an entirely different world organically connected to this one. The stories are fables; a mythological presence pervades. They are morality tales, magical, resonating dream emotions and images; shifting ambiguous terror, mystery, implied revelation. But they are also stories of real life, now or whenever, constructed in weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential themes is clear. (164)

In his “Afro-surreal Manifesto” D. Scot Miller distinguishes Afro-surrealism both from European surrealism and Afrofuturism, pointing out that Afrofuturism is a diasporic movement that speculates on the future, whereas Afro-surrealism concentrates more on the twists of the present. Thus, Afrofuturism and Afro-surrealism are different but partially overlap and are characterized by a specifically cinematic dimension (Spencer 209–210).

While African American presence might at first be seen as limited in mainstream cinema, Black characters have appeared in American films since the early development of the medium, originally corresponding to reductive stereotypes such as those famously identified by Donald Bogle. In Bogle’s view, African American characters appearing in early cinema correspond to five basic types: the “Tom,” a docile and suffering man, the “coon,” a comical buffoon, the “tragic mulatto,” who is lacerated by their double heritage, the “mammy,” a comical female figure, and the violent and sexual “buck.” While film evolved, African American characters remained rooted in these clichés: “because the guises were always chan-



ging, audiences were sometimes tricked into believing the depictions of the American Negro were altered, too. But at the heart beneath the various guises, there lurked the familiar types” (Bogle 18). Adilufu Nama observes that “Black racial representation has had a long and dubious history in American popular cinema.” Grotesque racist caricatures have been replaced by apparently more positive representations, yet these representations amount to “laudatory fetishism,” as Nama points out (70). Ed Guerrero notes that, historically, Hollywood has attempted to “frame Blackness,” that is, restrict representations of African Americans, in ways that are constantly shifting. As a result, Black cinema can be seen as a form of resistance to these forms of cultural hegemony (Guerrero, *Framing Blackness* Introduction).

Afrofuturism in film can be seen as a rejection of the traditional limitations imposed on Black characters in mainstream science-fiction and horror films, where it is by now pointed out almost humorously that Black characters either have restricted roles or are killed off almost immediately. This started to change around the turn of the millennium when popular actor Will Smith starred as a heroic figure in speculative films like *Independence Day* (1996), *Enemy of the State* (1998), and *I Am Legend* (2002) which however were not produced by Black directors and did not focus specifically on African American issues (Womack). A general variety involves not only Afrofuturist literature but also Afrofuturism in film. Examples of films containing Afrofuturist elements include Nuotama Bomodo’s 2014 short film *Afronauts*, which imagines Zambian astronauts planning to beat Americans in the race to the moon, Ryan Coogler’s 2018 superhero movie *Black Panther*, Jordan Peele’s science-fiction/horror films, as well as Raymond “Boots” Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), and Juel Taylor’s *They Cloned Tyrone* (2023), the two films that are the main focus of this paper. It is interesting to observe that the genre of Afrofuturism is present beyond the American or even anglophone context, as shown by the recent Netflix series *Supacell* (2024) and *Zero* (2021), which interweave themes derived from superhero narratives with the lives of Black individuals in London and Milan respectively.

Both *Sorry to Bother You* and *They Cloned Tyrone* use science-fiction motifs to grapple with issues related to race, class, and African American identity. These two works take place in unsettling, realistic – though slightly altered – US environments, respectively Oakland, California, in *Sorry to Bother You* and an unnamed city in *They Cloned Tyrone*, which was filmed in Atlanta. A further similarity can be found in the central elements of the plot: In both cases Black bodies undergo secret dehuman-

izing experiments that allude to racial and capitalist exploitation. The science-fiction elements in the films serve as metaphors for Black alienation and lack of autonomy, according to the criteria established by Dery. The well-known concept of double consciousness as defined by W. E. B. Du Bois can be applied here:

the Negro is [...] born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others [...]. One always feels this twoness – an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it by being torn asunder. (3–4)

Double consciousness, in the context of these two films, is parallel to literal processes of dehumanization and erasure. It is significant here that Du Bois himself was a science-fiction author, most famously of the short story “The Comet” (1920). In this post-apocalyptic tale, a working-class young Black man and a wealthy white young woman appear at first to be the only survivors of a destructive comet that has swept over New York. This situation suggests the blurring, even the erasure, of racial and social boundaries – boundaries which are however rapidly re-established once it is revealed there are more survivors, including the girl's family. William S. Pretzer notes that

“The Comet” expertly incorporates three essential elements of Du Bois' philosophy of race relations: African Americans' double consciousness [...], the ‘color line’ as the inescapable challenge of race relations and the ‘veil’ as a metaphor for the inability of both Black and white Americans to acknowledge the reality of Black life in America. (81)

The Duboisian notions of the color line and the veil can also be found in *Sorry to Bother You* and *They Cloned Tyrone* in relation to their Afrofuturistic and science-fictional elements. Both films delve into how racial divisions between Black and white individuals operate in the United States, implying that processes of segregation are deeply embedded within the fabric of American society, preventing natural interaction between people of different races. As we shall see, in their films Riley and Taylor stage a blurring of the color line, in a way that is destructive towards African Americans.

The backgrounds of the directors are also significant in light of the films they created. Before turning to directing, Riley was involved in social activism, in particular in the Oakland area, since he was prominent in the “Occupy Oakland” movement in 2011, and indeed *Sorry to Bother You* stages representations of workers’ protests. Riley also worked in telemarketing, as does the protagonist of his film. Taylor grew up in Tuskegee, Alabama, a city notorious for the highly unethical Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which Black men were untreated for syphilis and sometimes not informed they even had the disease, for supposedly scientific purposes. Tuskegee serves not only as the inspiration for the setting of *They Cloned Tyrone* but the dark legacy of the study informs the sense of conspiracy that pervades the movie. Comparing these two films allows an exploration of how contemporary African American filmmakers are making use of Afrofuturist tropes.

### **Becoming Animal in *Sorry to Bother You***

Riley himself describes *Sorry to Bother You* as “an absurdist dark comedy with aspects of magical realism and science fiction inspired by the world of telemarketing” (Meraji), and indeed the film is marked by the juxtaposition of speculative and realistic elements. *Sorry to Bother You* follows a young Black man named Cassius Green (significantly and ironically known by the nickname “Cash,” making his name “Cash Green”), played by LaKeith Stanfield, who escapes a precarious existence living in his uncle’s garage with his girlfriend, aspiring artist Detroit, by getting a job as a telemarketer for a company called RegalView. He becomes very successful at his job once he takes the advice of an older colleague and starts using his “white voice,” which is actually provided by a white actor. While the background of Oakland is apparently realistic, fairly early on troubling unreal elements appear, such as ads for “WorryFree” facilities which are basically futurist poorhouses. When, under the instigation of Cash’s co-worker Squeeze, the telemarketers attempt to unionize and strike, Cash is promoted rather than being fired, thus engaging in a kind of Faustian bargain, having to work for WorryFree but significantly improving his material conditions. Significantly, once Cash and Detroit move away from the garage to a luxurious apartment, their new premises are characterized by glaringly white walls, suggesting that their apparent upward mobility comes at the cost of the loss of their Blackness. This is an idea that is reinforced more explicitly: Cash’s promotion entails access

to an exclusive space, where a mysterious Black man whose name is bleeped out reminds him to use his white voice exclusively in this space. At the same time, Cash's social ascent also means that he is forced to enact one of the traditional demeaning stereotypes identified by Bogle: When Cash encounters the WorryFree CEO, Steve Lift, the latter encourages him to "take off his white voice" and rap. Cash vainly protests that he does not know how but is awkwardly forced to, ending up chanting "nigga, shit....nigga, shit..." (01:10:52), to which the partygoers respond enthusiastically. Cash is coerced into the role of the "coon," a buffoon who performs for a white audience, as well as the criminally-inclined "buck."

As noted by Paul McGuinness and Alex Simmons, since the beginning of *Sorry to Bother You*, Cash undergoes a series of erasures, which manifest themselves most obviously in the appearance of the "white voice." Indeed, the character who uses his white voice almost exclusively, who is known only as "Mr. \_\_\_\_," as his name is consistently censored by a beeping noise, has reached a stage of assimilation where he has lost any sense of African American identity:

In each [character using a 'white voice'], but to different degrees, the *White Voice* stands as a vocal colonisation that begins to affect their moral core. They have given up their own voice, but they are now counted under capitalist realism. Hidden, however, is the violence of epistemic erasure: words buried alive and a history expunged. Mr. \_\_\_\_ remains a portentous vision of Cash's future and the near total eradication of self. (McGuinness and Simmons 187, italics in original)

While the idea of an African American man adapting his voice to different contexts and racial and social environments can be seen in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, whose protagonist plans to "have one way of speaking in the North and another in the South" (158), this dichotomy, of which Cash does not have full control, can be also connected to the alienation of double consciousness since Cash experiences a sense of disconnect from himself. The internal struggle between his African American identity and social and financial aspirations can be interpreted as the struggle between "two souls" identified by Du Bois. Furthermore, Cash's older coworker defines the white voice as "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" (00:15:07). This is a situation in which not many people in contemporary America are likely to find themselves, no matter their race, especially if they are working as telemarketers. *Sorry to Bother You* de-

constructs and rejects American Dream mythology, both in relation to the success of African American individuals and in a more general sense. Interestingly, while Detroit rejects Cash's actions and they initially break up, she also experiences the phenomenon of the "white voice" (provided in her case by the white British actress Lily James) during a performance. This implies that, even though Detroit might apparently reject her boyfriend's assimilationist compromises, and her art is supposed to draw attention to the exploitation of people of color, her ambitions in the world of contemporary art mean that she too can potentially enter Faustian bargains. Cash eventually discovers that Lift, the CEO of WorryFree, is secretly creating human-horse clones, "equisapiens," physically resembling inverted centaurs with horse heads and human bodies and intended to serve as docile but strong workers. He offers Cash a second, more extreme Faustian bargain, where he would have to infiltrate the equisapiens to serve as a planted Martin Luther King figure. This plot allows the film to explore themes related both to race and class.

The Afrofuturist sense of alienation, manifesting here as dehumanization, reaches its extreme with the appearance of the equisapiens. While their race is not specified (and Cash's coworkers and then fellow protesters are of a variety of different races), their leader, Demarius, is voiced by African American actor Forest Whitaker. Thomas Austin observes "[t]he equisapiens recall the long and violent history of white thought and practice that has equated people of color with animals, of which slavery is the most obvious, but by no means the only, instance" and associates this with passages from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, namely the appraisal of a plantation where

Men and women [...] were ranked with horses, sheep and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. (Douglass 55, qtd. in Austin)

Douglass is a highly significant figure in African American literature, being a former slave who became an abolitionist, orator, and autobiographer. Published in 1845, the first of Douglass's various autobiographical works, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* was highly impactful especially because of its great rhetorical sophistication, which suggested the potential agency of enslaved African Americans. Interestingly, the opening of Douglass's life narrative makes an explicit connection between the status of enslaved people and horses: "by far the larger part of the slaves know as little of

their ages as horses know of theirs” (17). The association of Black bodies with beasts of burden becomes literal in *Sorry to Bother You*. In this context, the loss of humanity endured by Black individuals, and potentially by individuals of other races in the long run as a result of capitalist exploitation, matches the definition of Afrofuturism given by Mbembé, as well as his idea of the “tendential universalization of the Negro condition” (*Critique de la Raison Nègre* 15). From this perspective, modern neoliberal and imperialist exploitation mirrors the practices of the slave trade. Ideas of dehumanization and powerlessness in connection to the predicament of Black communities in the United States are also explored by Juel Taylor in *They Cloned Tyrone* through the lens of speculative fiction, though in this case the tropes invoked pertain to cloning rather than to the creation of human-animal hybrids.

### **Blaxploitation and Mad Scientists in *They Cloned Tyrone***

*They Cloned Tyrone* presents some similarities with *Sorry to Bother You* (and indeed is often likened to the earlier film by reviewers) but is quite different in terms of plot and style. Reviewer Jess Flarity notes that “director Juel Taylor frames *They Cloned Tyrone* in a blend of science fiction, humor, and campy callbacks to the blaxploitation flicks of the late twentieth century, rather than relying on the horror elements favored by Jordan Peele or the bizarro Black absurdism of Boots Riley” (74). The film starts by following the morning routine of a drug dealer named Fontaine, played by John Boyega, against the drab, autumnal urban landscape of an African American neighborhood known as the Glen (as previously mentioned the movie was filmed in Atlanta but Taylor himself notes the setting is inspired by his hometown of Tuskegee). *They Cloned Tyrone* plays with stereotypes of African Americans, since its protagonists are a drug dealer, a pimp and a sex worker (thus alluding to the “buck” stereotype and its re-elaboration in Blaxploitation cinema). It shows different influences, most obviously from blaxploitation, especially in style, but also from different science-fiction films, such as *Hollow Man* (whose protagonist is a scientist who develops a serum that makes him invisible but who, like the scientists in *They Cloned Tyrone* consequently engages in reckless and unethical behavior). While the blaxploitation influences are most visible in visual elements, particularly in the costuming, Blaxploitation also plays a deeper role. Blaxploitation can be defined as the “production of the 60 or so Hollywood films that centered on Black narratives, featured Black

casts playing out various action-adventures in the ghetto, and were released roughly between 1969 and 1974” (Guerrero, “The Rise” 435). These films, according to Guerrero, developed as a result of the overlap of the increasing demand of more political-conscious Black audience and a deep crisis within the American film industry, which was pressured to seek new markets. While blaxploitation films can be considered formulaic and reductive, they draw from a pre-existing African American folklore “where the sly victories of the gangster or trickster persona were one of the few ways African Americans could turn the tables on a persistently unjust and racist society” (Guerrero, “The Rise” 456). The blaxploitation-derived themes in *They Cloned Tyrone* undergo a satirical, almost parodic post-modern treatment in parallel with the science-fiction motifs and comedy in the movie. Nevertheless, beyond the obvious aesthetic trappings, the blaxploitation aspects of *They Cloned Tyrone* can be associated with the African Americans protagonists’ attempts to outsmart the central racist conspiracy.

Another less obvious influence on *They Cloned Tyrone* may be the 1978 classic *The Boys from Brazil*, one of the first films to deal with the topic of cloning which also deals with highly unethical experiments, conspiracies and white supremacism, since it focuses on an elderly Jewish Nazi hunter’s attempt to foil a project to clone and raise a new Adolf Hitler. Furthermore, in *They Cloned Tyrone*, the narrative structure where the protagonists investigate mysterious events is inspired by the Nancy Drew book detective series targeted at young girls (the female protagonist of the film, Yo-Yo, is revealed to be an ardent fan of the series).

As in *Sorry to Bother You*, the setting is superficially realistic yet unsettling. This is enhanced by the ambiguity of the time period. Characters sport 1970s-style clothing with heavy blaxploitation influences (visible most obviously in the character of Charles), use flip cellphones suggesting the early 2000s, but refer to Obama as well as to bitcoin and blockchain suggesting the 2010s or later. Reviewers have pointed out that *They Cloned Tyrone* is shot in a grainy style reminiscent of older films and Taylor himself notes that the datedness reflects the neighborhood he grew up in:

A lot of it is based on just where I grew up... just seeing infrastructure that had so many signs of being kind of lost in time, in a lot of ways [...] Where some places aren’t modernized as fast as other places and there’s something nostalgic about it. [...] [I created] this world where it felt like it was in its own hermetically sealed bubble outside of time and space, and this idea that we wanted to lean into this disorientation, as it were. (Dean)



Nevertheless, the beginning of the film is played straight as a blaxploitation gangster drama, until Fontaine is fatally shot by a rival drug dealer but goes on with his life normally the next day. This mystery sets off Fontaine, pimp Slick Charles (Jamie Foxx) and sex worker Yo-Yo (Teyonna Parris) to investigate Fontaine's mysterious reappearance. At this point the film takes on a darkly comedic, more adventurous tone, possibly inspired by the Nancy Drew stories Yo-Yo is revealed to love.

In another similarity to *Sorry to Bother You*, the characters unearth a vast conspiracy that dehumanizes and exploits Black bodies, in this case not by transforming them into animals but cloning them and eventually erasing their existence by making them white. The notion of a conspiracy with scientific pretenses against African Americans is informed by the reminiscence of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which has notoriously rendered African Americans, especially men, wary of public health in the United States (Alsan and Wanamaker). In an interview, Taylor notes that he grew up surrounded by a variety of different conspiracy theories: "We tried to put all different levels of it in the movie, from obviously the super big crazy conspiracies to just your low-level on-the-ground stuff" (Haile). Indeed, in *They Cloned Tyrone*, fast food and hair products become the means to subtly control African Americans. As pointed out by Cortney and Daemon McLeod, this alludes to alleged governmental attempts to control and pacify marginalized populations, in particular African Americans (for instance by encouraging drug consumption), as well as to "harken[ing] to the pre-civil war malady claimed to be a scourge among the enslaved persons, the 'illness' known as drapetomania. Drapetomania was the supposed mental illness that caused an enslaved person to want freedom" (61). *They Cloned Tyrone* alludes in this way to another Afrofuturist film, Kevin Wilmott's *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* (2004), an alternate history mockumentary in which the Confederacy has won the Civil War: In this latter film drugs are given to enslaved Black people to keep them docile, content and less inclined to escape. The Glen is thus an environment where African Americans are deliberately rendered unable to evolve and break free from a marginalized and possibly criminal existence. It is an "experiment" that grotesquely mirrors the experiment that was foundational to the United States (as it is described by the film's white villain). The Tuskegee Syphilis Study is never invoked directly, yet it can be seen as constructing this conspiratorial dimension: "Though Taylor does not directly mention this study in any interviews, the Philip K. Dickian levels of



paranoia experienced by the protagonists must have stemmed from all the conspiracy theories he heard growing up” (Flarity 74).

The theme of the Faustian bargain that is Cash’s “white voice” is even more present in *They Cloned Tyrone*: Fontaine discovers that the man he has been originally cloned from is a Black scientist who has convinced himself that a gradual process of racial blurring through cloning is preferable than the alternative, the destruction of African Americans through racist violence. The cloning process symbolizes alienation. Du Bois’s ideas of double consciousness and “two-ness” can be seen in this situation, since cloning literally entails the doubling of the individual, generating, however, doppelgängers who lack autonomy and self-awareness, mirroring a sense of racial alienation. Indeed, Fontaine confronts one of his doubles and comments “you ain’t me” (01:02:05). Metaphorically, an African American feels completely detached from himself. Another Duboisian concept appears here, that of the color line, that divides the lives of Black and white characters. The scientist’s desperate attempt at solving the problem of the color line entails a process of self-erasure. The anti-humanistic reification of Black bodies that Mmembé identifies in Afrofuturist narratives is also present here. From Mmembé’s perspective, Afrofuturism is a rejection of humanism. The Black African experience of enslavement and racist exploitation makes of Black people a prototype of the “not-human” in future capitalist society. “The Negro would be the prefiguration of this future, as his history suggests the idea of an almost infinite potential of transformation and plasticity” (Mbembé, *Critique de la Raison Nègre* 125, my translation).<sup>2</sup> The idea of transformation potential and plasticity of the Negro experience emerges clearly in the scene where Fontaine confronts the scientist, who illustrates how he is altering the DNA of Black individuals so as to gradually render them white. The presence of clones in test tubes in the background reinforces this sense of objectification.

Cloning is a frequent theme in film, treated with varying degrees of scientific accuracy and seriousness. Jay Clayton notes that films often use cloning to elicit shock, horror or laughter, whereas literary fiction represents clones as “analogues for marginalized groups in current society – racial or sexual minorities, women, people with disabilities, the poor, the homeless, the displaced and stateless. They excite empathy and political awareness. Sorrow, not terror, is a dominant emotion” (185). The shock-

<sup>2</sup> “Ce futur, le Nègre en serait la préfiguration en tant qu’il renvoie, de par son histoire, à l’idée d’un potentiel de transformation et de plasticité quasi infinie.” (Mbembé, *Critique de la Raison Nègre* 125)

ing and humorous representation of cloning is present in the film (the title makes it obvious that the representation is not entirely serious) yet the cloning of African Americans aims also at exciting political awareness. In *They Cloned Tyrone* the symbolic white supremacist conspiracy works differently than in *Sorry to Bother You* in a way that is intertwined with the setting. Riley's Oakland is a multiracial world: the film's villains are exclusively white but the exploited RegalView workers and then protesters are Black, Asian, Latino and white. On the other hand, the Glen appears as a self-enclosed African American universe where the only white characters are the conspirators (derided for their love of bland, unseasoned food) even though the most significant villain, the original Fontaine, is revealed to be Black. This character potentially echoes a scientist significantly named Doctor Crookman in George Schuyler's early Afrofuturist novel, *Black No More*, who invents a machine called "Black-No-More" that turns Black people's skin white. In both cases, these African American mad scientists are supposedly aiming at improving the condition of Black people and eliminating racism; however this process eventually entails a form of erasure and potential annihilation.

## Conclusion

It is interesting to note that *Sorry to Bother You* and *They Cloned Tyrone* both have endings that point ambivalently to the impossibility of truly dismantling structures of capitalist and white supremacist power. Cash Green, as well as the three protagonists of *They Cloned Tyrone* all become more invested in their communities and more socially conscious in the course of the narratives. Yet, in the two films, the apparent positive and redemptive conclusions are unexpectedly upturned. In the first film, Cash has avoided the trap of the Faustian bargain, but the end of the narrative is ambiguous, especially as Cash eventually transforms into an equisapien. In *They Cloned Tyrone*, the cloning conspiracy is uncovered, resulting in the rescue of the clones, but the final scene surprisingly reveals the existence of the titular Tyrone, a clone of Fontaine living a practically identical life in Los Angeles rather than in the Glen. This suggests that the impact of the conspiracy (and symbolically, of societal control of African Americans) is too pervasive to be combatted efficiently. In this vein, attempts at rebellion against the capitalist and racist establishment prove futile. *Sorry to Bother You* and *They Cloned Tyrone* illustrate the prominent elements of Afrofuturism in cinema. Both films combine aspects of science-fiction,

magical realism, social commentary and satire to enact meditations on the African American condition.

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