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An Annotated Telling of the Misadventures of Shylock Jones, Negro Super Sleuth, Compiled, Redacted, and Edited by Kev Street

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*An Annotated Telling of the Very Real Misadventures of Shylock Jones, Negro Super Sleuth,
Compiled, Redacted, and Edited by the Author*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by
Kev Street

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

To the wretched, for the many

First a word from our sponsors:

Marina, Marisa, mysterious Hua

—no Krishna, Jehovah, or Zeus or Allah—

Fanon and Brown Jesus—what lessons they taught!

But mostly Seuss, Carroll, Doom, Pharoahe, and Thought.

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1 Do not fall prey to the tired worn cliches of herofare. Humble origins and epic battles, heartbreaks and newfound loves, a vicious plot twist, lessons learned, the end. If you've seen one you've only ever seen the one. 'Tis the same dull tale told from myriad mouths and prettied up with sick'ning prose. Insipid incipit, middling middle, and timid treacle the rest!

—From Pookie's *Black Bible*

(al • ə • WISH • əs)

Shylock Jones, negro super sleuth, was onto something.

'Twas a cool October day and the sinking sun cast all New York in a calm crepuscular blue. Sensing twilight, and the cloak it provided for the doing of nefarious deeds, the super sleuth hopped on the uptown A at 125th in Harlem to chill at his boy's crib in the Heights.

His boy Chico sat at his full-immersion VR rig hunched, headsetted, playing a video game. Shylock Jones sat on the couch indulging in yay and the limitless entertainment a third-party Kodi plug-in allowed. He scrolled through the content alphabetically, Q to R to S, then T. Down the T's he went till he chanced upon *The Cosby Show*. This raised a brow. And thusly the tumble down the rabbit hole began.

The Cosby Show was an Eighties primetime sitcom that afforded the amerikkkan negro experience a dignity thentofore unseen on the small screen. It centered round the Huxtable household, a well-adjusted family consisting of father Cliff, an OB-GYN, played by Cosby; mother Clair, a lawyer; and their five kids Sondra, Denise, Theo, Vanessa, and Rudy, eldest to youngest respectively. Throughout eight seasons the family dealt with mostly benign problems, mostly solved within the confines of their brownstone in Brooklyn Heights, and nary once betraying the knowledge that the Empire had conspired for a half-millennium and counting to exploit negroes for resources and labor. It was a show about normal black people with money. Which is to say, a show about exceptional negroes. In other words, a show about typical middle-class white people who happened to be black.

And it was beloved by white and black audiences alike.¹

There were many theories for this. It normalized negroes instead of pathologizing them; it chose an intriguing sci-fi conceit in which alien androids in negro biosleeves approximate black normalcy, thereby stoking debate on what exactly an Ideal Negro is or ought to be; it was funny. Or something else besides, who knew. But what it definitely did not do was portray the lived lives of actual negroes. Bill Cosby did not like how most negroes lived their lives. All this to say *The Cosby Show* was less a celebration of negro culture than a twisted conservative appeal to mythical negro unicorns as imagined by Bill Cosby himself.

But the show was objectively funny; and Lisa Bonet, who played second eldest daughter Denise, was objectively the hottest woman on Earth in the late 80's to early 90's and was arguably the source of every fashion trend till at least the early aughts; and youngest daughter Rudy, played by Keshia Knight Pulliam, was objectively adorable. Shylock Jones was a man of facts.

But these were the vestiges of facts. Little informative granules, culled from pop culture's psychic wasteland. Synapses responding to cues on the screen, and refracted through a coke-addled brain.

No, no, none of this was what caught his third eye and pulled its cosmic pupil wide.

What had happened was while Shylock Jones sat on the couch flipping a BIC pen with his sinistral fingers and peering into season 2, episode 15 of *The Cosby Show*, a scene played out

¹ It was odd that *The Cosby Show* was oft-considered the height of negro comedy. The superlative negro sitcom was *Martin*. *Martin* was the negro *Seinfeld*. (*Seinfeld* was also the negro *Seinfeld*, but the stiff impersonal nature of amerikkkan demographic statistics allows little room for nuance and so cannot account for why negroes would enjoy shows with a non-negro cast. amerikkka still has trouble defining what constitutes a negro but the unspoken rule seems to be: you know one when you see one.)

There are no Nielson numbers for whether all the other racial categories in the Census peeped *The Cosby Show*, and dug it accordingly.

where Theo and his best friend Walter “Cockroach” Bradley conspired the first of their many, mostly benign schemes. This scheme involved avoiding the actual reading of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which was required for a high school assignment, and instead listening to a vinyl recording of *Macbeth* but skipping to the juicy middle. First Shylock Jones chortled at Theo and Cockroach’s hijinks; then grimaced at the thought of cockroaches, the filthy neopteran scum with whom he’d nonetheless had an intimate relationship growing up on account of their ubiquity in public housing though all told they possessed a tenacity that afforded them a certain respect for he and they were soldiers in the same Struggle and separated only by kind not degree but had Cockroach’s nickname been “Waterbug,” Shylock Jones wouldn’t have sympathized with him, for waterbugs were clearly the embodiment of an ancient evil, and some of ’em could fly; then he remembered that Theo’s middle name was Aloysius. Odd, that. Theodore Aloysius Huxtable. It was both the least likely negro name and the blackest name imaginable. Incongruous, poetic, extra, saddity than a muhfucka. Aloysius. How a kid in a 70’s commercial would describe a spoonful of cereal. Silly, darkly deep. And it became clear that within this show, indeed this episode, in fact the middle name Aloysius itself, lied the telltale key to the workings of Bill Cosby’s duplicitous mind.

It was at this critical juncture that Chico, during a lull in a two-hour deep *Destiny: Redux* raid, took respite from epic simulated battle to do a couple lines and found Shylock Jones glued to the TV screen.

“Oh shit,” said Chico, his stocky frame and affable disposition filling up the room, “fuckin’ *Cosby Show!* Yo real talk I can’t even fuck with *A Different World* no more. Shit is crazy, right?”²

Shylock Jones nodded.

“It’s like finding out Big Bird ate all the kids who came to Sesame Street,” said Chico.

The gauntlet, thrown: Shylock Jones took up the challenge. “It’s like if Bob Ross turned out to be the Zodiac.”

Chico laughed and coiled one of his dreads. “Yo it’s like if Mr. Rogers molested all the puppets in the Neighborhood.”

They both laughed.

“Right?” continued Chico. “Yo tell me how this nigga’s middle name was McFeely? How you gonna let a dude named *McFeely* anywhere *near* your puppets?”

“Word,” said the super sleuth while in deep ponderance, his pen at his temple. “Yo him and Cosby was on some ugly sweater shit too. See that’s the key: avoid muhfuckas with ugly sweaters.”

“Nah niggas gotta avoid sweaters *period*. Full stop.” Chico did another line. “That’s how they got Biggie. This guy what, three hunnid and change, walking’ around in them ugly-ass Cooji sweaters, lookin’ like a peacock with a hyperthyroid. You could target that nigga a mile away.”

² *A Different World* was a *Cosby Show* spinoff that followed second-eldest daughter Denise as she underwent mild trials and tribulations at the fictional Hillman College. It was arguably the better of the two shows, for the simple reason that the black characters seemed aware that they were in fact black as opposed to, say, alien androids in negro biosleeves approximating some creepy Ideal Negritude.

They were on the verge of something. Shylock Jones smoked his pen in lieu of a loosie and fleshed out the plot. “Right, right. So the government soaking ugly sweaters in a stupidity serum so that when niggas rock ’em they start slippin’—”

“—Cuz they know we start all the trends, see?” Chico tapped his temple. “*We* start rockin’ ugly sweaters, then all a sudden the whole *world* start jockin’ ugly sweaters—”

“—So they turn us dumb which in turn turns the whole world dumb, and they corner the sweater market. Yo these muhfuckas is *diabolical*.”

“Facts.”

They gave each other dap, laughing at their ridiculous theory; then quickly grew paranoid and scanned the corners of the room for listening devices, for perhaps they were correct; then turned their attentions back to their respective screens as if fleeing the scene of a thoughtcrime. Shylock Jones rolled the Jefferson bill tighter and did another hasty line, sniffing a couple times to prevent a drip.

The Cosby Show had returned from a commercial break, and with it Shylock Jones’ burgeoning Cosby theory. He parted his lips to relay some finer points of the theory but Chico was already settled into his VR rig, his headset on, his on-screen avatar merking the myriad marauding hordes of cyborg colonizers, or alien conquerors, or humanoids with a vague hatred of all existence—and more power to him. One cannot distract a friend in the fray of galactic revolution. The game was afoot.

And so the negro super sleuth homed his wits back to the magic glowing parallelogram, where season two, episode fifteen of *The Cosby Show* was still in play, and tried to catch his prior train of thought while tightening the Jefferson’s roll.

Jefferson. The archetypal amerikkkan hypocrite. His was the only true narrative the country played out in a perpetual loop. To wit: Some self-important man assumes power, gains influence, posits himself a great man of integrity forever hemmed in by lesser, looser men and so goes about his days proclaiming ideals he himself does not abide by, setting standards he himself does not live up to, espousing rules he himself does not follow, all the while acting out the lesser, looser impulses of his otherwise godly constitution on the bodies of subordinate men, and sometimes children, but always, always, women.

And while *The Cosby Show* went on another commercial break, Shylock Jones' synapses aligned and hummed a terrifying chord.

In which a pretty white woman during some unspecific protest march hands a pig a Pepsi and solves systemic injustice; in which a pretty black woman showers with a bar of Dove soap and emerges from the bath a pretty white woman; in which a handsome black man drives a Jaguar well above the speed limit and somehow avoids pig harassment

Shylock Jones did a line and persevered for the episode's duration. It felt as if *The Cosby Show* was some Looking Glass exercise where the given narrative implied its opposite. Look: Walter "Cockroach" Bradley, a loveable goof, all his schemes lacking teeth, yet he shared nomenclature with unholy invertebrate vermin. And *Macbeth* was merely a MacGuffin, incidental to the plot, a ploy to motivate Theo and Cockroach to action, but of course *Macbeth* is the classic tale of a man whose thirst for power underscores his own moral weakness and decay. And later in the episode Denise came through the front door and Shylock Jones could no longer suspend his disbelief at how lightskinned'eded she and Sondra were, next to the rest of the family. Maybe Clair or Cliff dabbled and bred outside of the negro persuasion, but never spoke

of it, and entranced the family through alien means to never speak of it, lest they ruin the illusion of faux negro perfection. Clearly the Huxtables were not as wholesome as they appeared. And the show revolved around the Huxtables but was called *The Cosby Show*. The man dissociated from himself. And Cliff was an OB/GYN. He literally was alone with women at their most vulnerable, and had the legal capacity to administer them powerful drugs. So on so forth whathaveyou.

But then there was Aloysius.

Aloysius. Like a thorn in the brain.

See, Bill Cosby was notoriously hyperconscious of the show's perception. He hired a psychologist to read over scripts and ensure that the show—in dialogue and tone and even set design—would not show negroes in a negative light. He fired or reprimanded actors if he found their real-world choices antithetical to the show's agenda.³ He whitewashed his own pro-black experiment. The sheer lengths Bill Cosby went to ensure faux-negro integrity made Theo's middle name seem like an extraneous quirk. And “Cockroach” was just a nickname, and the two lightskinned'eded daughters were cast simply for their charms and acting chops, and *Macbeth* could've just as easily been *Hamlet*, in which case Shylock Jones would've ruminated on the tale of a man who contrived fictions to soothe his conscience, but whose fictions unwittingly led to his demise.

And “Aloysius” was the opposite of profound; that Shylock Jones ever thought otherwise only pointed to the workings of his own mind and left Cosby's more inscrutable than ever.

³ Carl Anthony Payne II, who played Cockroach, was fired for growing his hair in a way that too closely resembled the whims of actual negroes; Lisa Bonet clashed with Cosby over her general bohemian and real-life unwed pregnancy with Lenny Kravitz's baby. This was likely the reason her character was later exiled to Afrika—the continent, mind you, and not some specific geography therein.

The downside to deductive reasoning: any plausible lead takes one down a rabbit hole, and if the rabbit hole does not end at the solution one can only hope to escape before the main mystery chills.

The comedy of deductive reasoning: if one does not necessarily limit the scope of inquiry, one winds up traversing nigh-infinite rabbit holes.

The tragedy of deductive reasoning: even if you solve the local mystery you're forever confronted with the Grand Whodunit, not the why of murder but the why of matter, not the when and where of the nefarious act but that the act ripples through time, it warbles our view of the past and shapes the future in its image; and the who is but a temporary phenomenon, there will always be another to fill the role, for you can catch the criminal but never touch the crime.

There is no upside to deductive reasoning. Though solving puzzles is its own reward.

“Yooo tell me how these wack cheesin’ muhfuckas ’bout to win woowoow dude just merked me with the Graviton Lance that shit is way too overpowered oh my god *this* nigga over here cornercamping”—Chico was having a rough go at gameplay—“see but then ya’ll wonder why I don’t fuck with PvP mode see *this* why, cuz the weapons ain’t balanced the fight mechanics is trash the level layout is retarded what the f—yo Shy lookit this lookit this!”

Shylock Jones took respite from the one screen to look at the other.

“This is what I was talkin’ about, how wack players could win cuz the gameplay’s trash, plus they walkin’ around with a bunch of powerups cuz they maxin’ out their parents’ credit cards with in-game purchases, yo what’s the world comin’ to—yooo these dudes merking me soon as I respawn fuckin’ gay ass Graviton Lance goddamit cocksucker motherfucker!” Chico threw his controller on the desk. “This game is bullshit.”

Such is the coded and colorful language of war.

Chico and his online teammates had quit the *Destiny* raid to hone their skills in the game's Obelisk Player vs. Player mode, but the rival team quickly got the upper hand not through finesse and strategy but by exploiting the many flaws in the game's new design. It was doing heavy damage to Chico's morale.

The negro super sleuth considered this while his head slowly twisted back to the TV screen. "I mean it works tho...like if the system built with flaws and you exploit the flaws how is that cheating?" It was unclear if Shylock Jones was talking to Chico or the air or the TV screen. "Less you tawkin' bout honor or some shit. Nigga you ain't *honorable*, you playin' a fuckin' video game. You ackin' like it's literal warfare. Nah, it ain't even *virtual* warfare, it's just kids with guns tryna get over on other kids with guns. Matter fact, if you gettin' rocked by scrubs then *you* a scrub, nigga. You need to get off your noble warrior high horse and get to work. I'm saying though if the Matrix got glitches then use them glitches to your advantage. See the trick is you gotta adapt to the enemy's adaptation—"

"—Yo I only got the one ghost decoy tho...yeah but if I use the decoy and it don't work...aight I'm sayin' tho if this shit don't work we're fucked," said Chico to the voices in his headset.

They say the traditional lines of communication have broken down. In fact the lines have been overbuilt, there is nothing left *but* communication, from the banal and whiny like a comment section to the hyperspecific and dense like a Reddit thread, there is only the One Dialogue where every possible thought is expressed at whim, ad nauseam, there is but the Grand

Vomitus of Content Perpetual, may the nuance of your frequency be wholly absorbed in the All-Encompassing Din, forever and ever, amen.

Though the art of the decoy was a time-tested strategy. Force attention and resources on this thing to leave that other thing wide open, to slip in unnoticed. The Literati called this a red herring, a plot device meant to throw the reader off the scent.

Ah, there it was, hidden in plain sight. Shylock Jones had assumed that “Aloysius” was some inworld key that would unlock the vast Cosby mystery (there was also *The Cosby Mysteries*, a show in which Bill Cosby played a brilliant retired criminologist who helped his detective friend solve tough cases every now and then, but that was a rabbit hole the super sleuth consciously refused to tumble down). Perhaps it was a red herring to distract him from all the other retrospectively obvious clues in the show. But it was *because* “Aloysius” was a quirk that made it so odd, for Cosby went out of his way to control the show’s perception both on- and offscreen lest the messy contradictions of real negro life bleed into his creation. Everything meaningful, all of it a simulation. Shylock Jones snorted the final line and dug deep down another rabbit hole while *The Cosby Show*’s end credits scrolled up the screen: the last twenty-two minutes he’d been viewing the show through a retroactive filter, as if the future was embedded in the past. This is, of course, a paranoid approach to watching TV. But it did push latent ideas into sharp relief, like a lone streetlight amplifying the menace of night. For obsessing on Theo’s middle name made Shylock Jones hyperaware of how weird *The Cosby Show* actually was. Red herrings everywhere, meant to throw the audience off the scent. This plot point, that character, those portraits of important negroes hanging on the Huxtable walls, the myriad little whys meant to draw attention from the Big Why, the Red Herring writ large: the existence of *The*

Cosby Show itself. Ditto Bill Cosby's standup, his movies and cartoons, that "Pound Cake" speech⁴, the collective Cosby contribution to amerikkkan culture from jump was a plot device in Cosby's IRL narrative, meant to throw people off the scent. Which made his fictions real with a capital R. Not some mere abstraction housing truth, like a joke, but a tool to better hide the violence, like a silencer round the gun muzzle.

This was an unfortunate rabbit hole for Shylock Jones to tumble down. A whole suite of neural connections once taut and calcified were now softening, unspooling. Every time he laughed at Bill Cosby's rubber face and bug eyes on the small screen, some woman in real time woke dazed and drugged and disheveled. Shylock Jones winced at the thought; another neural knot unthreaded. And all of television was a red herring for corporations hawking product, governments hawking values. Psychic tools precisely honed to hypnotize the human brain. *Paranoia sets in, conspiracy theories move inland from the fringe.* Science fictions not malevolent but benign, concealed in the everyday. Cathode rays and liquid crystals and little squares of pretty light slowly replacing the sun. Photons riding easy waves into the eye and so the mind, supplanting memories, embedding Kellogg's in a childhood cupboard. Coke on the table. Shylock Jones but a player in another's simulation, Chico too, both of them avatars in the algorithms of a higher god, that god beholden to gods higher still.

The negro super sleuth pinched closed the dime bag and channel surfed for lighter fare.

Within the infinite spectacles he chanced upon a *National Geographic* documentary in which some Afrikan tribe engaged in some Afrikan ritual. While subconsciously performing the

⁴ "Looking at the incarcerated, these are not political criminals. These are people going around stealing Coca Cola. People getting shot in the head over a piece of pound cake! Then we all run out and are outraged. 'The cops shouldn't have shot him.' What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand?"—a quote from Cosby's infamous speech at the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* 50th anniversary dinner, May 17th, 2004. It is a seminal text for students of respectability politics.

amerikkkan habit of cultural synecdoche (where, say, a whole continent of roughly three thousand ethnic groups speaking roughly two thousand languages could be represented by one tribe with clicks in its mother tongue), he remembered that for the Igbo of Nigeria there was such a thing as simultaneity, where people came in pairs and realities toggled for the same space, where events comprised the past, present, and all possible futures, where truth could only be seen by obscuring it, where the boundaries of man's dominion overlap.

Through this lens Bill Cosby was not a monster masquerading as a clown but rather a monstrous clown. And not even a monster but a man with a heinous flaw, not even a flaw but a common trait of powerful men through antiquity, not a symptom of a disease nor the disease ravaging the body but the body itself, updated with new tools to extend its reach, a supraorganism, man and myth and monster, hilarious and heinous, both a step forward and two back, he was all of this and all at once.

Which, in a way, is more terrifying.

(Shylock Jones also chanced upon the cartoon *Rick and Morty*, which reminded him that humans are fundamentally unwise and petty yet wield tools exponentially more powerful than cathode rays and liquid crystals.)

“Nah the aiming's way tighter than the last one but the weapon's ain't balanced for shit.” Chico again, conversing with the voices in his headset. He was now guiding his avatar through a spaceship's corridors and killing the odd humanoid along the way. “What? Yo the beta was janky as hell, the fuck you tawkin' bout?” He impaled two humanoids with the Graviton Lance. “Hahaha yeah I know I tawk mad shit about the Lance but it's fun as fuck.” Two more

humanoids. Another. His fingers deftly handled the controls, a veteran of cosmic battle, a poet of death.

On the couch Shylock Jones chewed his BIC pen in lieu of food and culled meaning from every show and movie and commercial, getting closer to a Grand Unified Theory of mediated entertainment, his fingers guiding the control through infinite portals, a sojourner through spectacle, a journeyman of the mind.

“Yo I preordered *Call of Duty*, that shit looks insane,” said Chico. “Yo. Yo Shy.”

Shylock Jones was knocked out of his stupor and looked at Chico, who was looking at him. “Wha happen?”

“I preordered the new *Call of Duty*, with the cel shading?”

“Oh word. That shit looks insane.”

“Haha that’s what I said.” Chico was staring at his screen at this point, so who knows who he was talking to.

“Yo it’s about to be ten,” said Shylock Jones. Though he was staring at the TV when he said it.

“Wha?” said Chico to whomever.

“It’s almost ten.”

“Oh shit yo I’m out I’m out..nah I’ll be back in like a hour but *Game’a Thrones* ’bout to start yeah yeah aight peace.” Chico tossed his headset on the desk, logged out of *Destiny* and dashed the short distance to the couch.

Shylock Jones steered the Kodi control through the myriad portals of the magic illuminated box til he got to HBO, catching *Game of Thrones* at the opening credits' final trumpet swell.

Chico plopped down on the couch, briefly bumping into Shylock Jones—

In which Shylock Jones is reminded that there is more information in a touch than in any 22-minute sitcom, than in all the annals of history; in which it is revealed that his attempts to SOLVE RACISM are a justified ploy to keep in touch with his people while an arm's length away for touch brought him not comfort but chaos like a bolt of lightning to the brain so he scrutinized it with the same tools he used upon the Cosbys and Jeffersons of the world; in which he must confront his true fascination with the Cosbys and Jeffersons of the world, that they did not withdraw from touch but instead built whole worlds that allowed them to touch with impunity, he would spend his whole life trying to hack such dark minds and this is what sustained him, perusing the black corridors of the mind and committing the twists and turns to memory—but what does it say about a man that he finds cold comfort in the company of those he despises? Could he be a moral hybrid, a half-evil? Well so be it, no time for such distinctions in the thick of it, the revolution is nigh, but it will not be televised so back to it

—And Shylock Jones said, “yo relax, fam. Tell me how you got crazy hand-eye coordination but can't walk across a room.”

Chico replied, “oh you got jokes? That's why you balls deep in TV shows, cuz that's the closest you could get to muhfuckas without creepin' 'em out.”

To which Shylock Jones replied, “I’m balls deep? Nigga *you* balls deep in *Destiny* cuz in real life you a nine to five commute-to-work muhfucka who gotta kiss the boss’ ass to get a point five percent raise.”

To which Chico replied, “yo you gonna talk the whole show?”

And they both homed in on the glowing pixelated square, balls positively lodged, just as lily white Dany—of House Targaryen, Protector of the Realm, Mother of Dragons, contested inheritor to the Iron Throne—was about to reluctantly bed *Khal* Drogo—Dothraki warlord, his nation famed killers on horseback, brown and savage and merciless, his long braid proof of victory in every battle—for the custom of Dothraki men is to subjugate their women, through violence, through rape. The same ol’ narrative of white virginal perfection sullied by the dark marauder. But Dany would soon turn the tides of power, in the bedroom, and so their marriage, and then all of Westeros. For she’d received a wedding gift of three dragon eggs, out of which magic would be borne back into a world long thought disenchanting. One could dream.

If only magic were real, thought the super sleuth. Or science sufficiently advanced. If sticks and stones thrown across the ground could divine futures from their final positions; if stars and planets in their infinite cycles could sway the living; if particle accelerators revealed a dimension where the first European ship to the Motherland was attacked and drowned by a giant squid. One could dream. And why not magic? Why not a tear in the spacetime continuum? Logic had only got him so far; perhaps there were other portals to peruse.

But back to it. Dany would have to unite many armies against the myriad threats vying for control of the Seven Kingdoms; the resurgence of the supernatural in a world thought ruled

by men; the growing ranks of White Walkers, the army of the dead, leaving the cold remains of whole cultures in their wake. White Walkers. Indeed.

SOLVING RACISM would have to wait—woe the long-suffering negroes of antiquity—for the game, *the Game*, was afoot.

Meanwhile...

White noise. Static fuzz filled the screen, fizzled in the ear. Streaks of color shot across like visible wavelengths. All black. Audio but no visual; video but no sound. A rogue meteor conked a satellite or a rogue satellite took itself off the grid or the local grid was overworked from constant flooding and rotting infrastructure. These and other theories.

Finally reception returned. The spectacle continued, apace.

In which a bored white man with a vague white-collar job chews a Mentos to invigorate his work ethic; in which several light-skinned negroes enjoy Heineken responsibly on the white sands and clear waters of some vague beach; in which kids of every racial persuasion and sex bond with a new Mattel doll of vague ethnicity and gender

Minnie MacKenzie—freckled, bespectacled, frizzle-haired, beige—stared blankly at the flatscreen over the bar. She was biding time, waiting for something, someone. Her Heineken bottle remained untouched with its cap propped open a half circle, for she now feared some ad agency had either pegged or primed her to drink it. She checked her analog watch, bulky on her thin left wrist, then her smartphone for a second opinion: 7:29. Seven plus two was nine; the root cube of 729 was 9. Doing the math allayed her tapping foot. 72 was a multiple of 9; the digits added up to 18, a multiple of nine; 7 and 29 were prime numbers. To check the time at such a busy number was a coincidence.

FoxBloomberg's channel 5 was airing *The Paper Chase* in its 7:30 slot, a live action game show where contestants literally ran through a domed, five-story obstacle course in pursuit of legal denominations of amerikkkan currency. Also rare diamonds and gems, Warhol prints and Basquiat paintings, first edition baseball cards. Pure silver cutlery donated by royal estates.

A cheeky critique of capitalism; a cynical product of late-stage capitalism; a ploy to sneak commie sympathies to an unwitting public. These and other theories.

ABCDisney's channel 7 was showing *Jeopardy!* in its usual slot, with IBM's WatsonX now hosting the show. Channel 9—now a subsidiary of Tyler Perry's growing TYPE media empire—was playing some black sitcom where good hardworking godfearing negroes rolled their eyes at their lazy jive-talking relatives. Antics currently ensued.

The little hand leaned a little past 45. Outside, clouds gathered, fat with rain.

The barkeep—Rue Lover, clear of skin and sight, blond-Caesar'd and bull-pierced and brown—hovered the remote at each channel long enough to gauge the plot or premise before flipping to the next. She stood at profile behind the bar, the better to pivot her gaze from the screen to the large windows looking into the dark Harlem night. Civilians passed by, this one clutching her pearls, this one his hat brim, this one her collar to shield against a sudden gust. Rue assessed their gaits as they walked by. She was searching for someone, something.

Minnie chewed the fat. Of her pork rinds, with the barkeep. Small talk sustained the illusion that the future would look much like the present. She ordered a frozen Paloma, her favorite drink, which just so happened to be cocktail number nine according to the drink menu scrawled in thick white chalk on the black board right of the flatscreen. Two occurrences of nine,

of anything, were a coincidence. One fixates on a number and one sees it everywhere. Perhaps the universe was a numerical construct.

Though three portended doom.

“What am I watching?” said Minne, laughing at some mishap playing out on the screen.

Rue looked out the windows then up at the TV. “ I Dunno. Looks fuckin’ terrible.” She pressed a button on the remote that did a thing and information suddenly appeared at the screen’s bottom: *The Good Life* (action/comedy), TYPE 9, 8:11 P.M. “Oh this that new Tyler Perry shit. My boy swears by it.”

The clean slickness of Rue’s slang, her accent from nowhere, put Minnie on alert. Otherwise Rue read as unspectacular, dressed in all black and alternative-styled like every barkeep everywhere.

“Yeah I don’t know about this boy of yours,” said Minnie.

Rue could not place Minnie at all, not on a map, not by diction or dress or pitting her vibe against the phase of the moon. She sat with a long neck and dancer’s poise, suggesting refinement, yet wore her hair untamed, her blue overalls baggy and stained with paint or grease or both.

“Oh yeah nah he got bad taste in everything,” said Rue. “I could change the channel.”

“It’s fine,” said Minnie, “I’m not really watching anyway.”

“Heard.” Rue made a calculation, not of numbers and their meanings but of the timeframe required for true human connection. Time was a limited resource. Gathering intel was the job. “So what you gettin’ up to tonight?”

Minnie mulled the question over with silent contempt. Now was not the time for details. She sipped her Paloma. “I’m just...I’m just bored. I drink when I’m bored.”

Rue nodded, switching tactics. Her smartphone on the bartop ticked away silent seconds: 8:15:46, 47, 48. “Yeah this spot ’posed to be live by now, I dunno where eybody at.” More civilians passed by, briefly backlit by the storefront glow from the bodega across the street. “Ain’t nobody invitin’ us to the party,” Rue said with a chuckle.

Minnie, now honestly bored from waiting, said, “cheers to a party of two.” She raised her glass, waiting for Rue to do the same.

“I don’t drink when I’m workin’” said Rue.

Minnie laughed and cut her eyes in suspicion. “What are you, a cop?”

“Yeah, I’m undercover. In the world's most boring bar. Don’t tell nobody.”

“I will immediately tell everyone I know,” said Minnie.

Rue smirked, shook her head, fiddled with her gold septum ring, readjusted her tactics yet again. She poured a shot of whiskey. “Cheers.”

...

Time flattened in the wake of cautious camaraderie. The big hand trembled in the void between 8 and 9. Half past, quarter to.

Minnie, forgetting herself, talked looser, faster. “Oh my god this is, just, the most contrived situation! *Now* I get it, why everybody’s just watching old shit again.”

“I mean it’s funny tho, it’s doing its job,” said Rue, nursing her second shot. She quickly eyed movement through the panes.

Minnie sloughed a straw through her Paloma's pink melting slush. "Yeah but it's not *funny* funny. Like we're not laughing *with* it, we're laughing *at* it. It's so bad it's funny."

"It's so bad," said Rue.

"Oh my god it's so bad!" Minnie gut laughed, which jogged her memory, and she tried to steel herself for what was to come, what should have come by now, what would come at any moment.

The Good Life had entered its comical climax, where all the small misunderstandings over the past forty or so minutes were finally colliding in a blinding funny fury. The protagonist, Dewey Good, was driving his usual bus route when his hotheaded cousin from earlier in the show gets on the bus and decides, right then and there, while Dewey is driving, while Dewey is *doing his job*, to confront Dewey on the accusation that he, the cousin, is

*"Always **borrowing** money—how you gon' borrow somethin' if you don't never give it back?"*

"Ima give it back when I got it!" says the cousin with cartoon flare,

"But you ain't never got it to give it!" says Dewey while steering the bus, a packed bus, while white passengers look on with worried faces,

"Exactly!" says the Cousin, "Cousin" the character's credited name, "so how Ima give it, Dew? How Ima give somethin' I ain't got? That's like a cosmic impossibility!" This line extra funny because Cousin's known for salting his talk with afrocosmonautic jive,

“I don’t even want the money, Cuz,” says Dewey while skipping the scheduled stop, and the passengers ring the bell to remind him of this fact, “I just want you to acknowledge that you never pay me back—”

“Sir you skipped the stop!” shouts a passenger while pressing the stop button repeatedly,

“Oh here we go, says Cousin, “Dewey Do-Good, don’t do nuthin’ wrong, can’t let nuthin’ go. Why you bringin’ up old shit?”—the cursed buffered by a network bleep,

*“How it’s old if you still doin’ it?” says Dewey while making a hard right turn, the bus’s right tires lifting off the ground, the bus skimming parked cars and setting off their alarms, the passengers panicking, “you got on the bus, **my** bus, knowin’ you owe me money, and you ain’t even gonna pay the fare! You ain’t got three dollars, Cuz? Damn!” He skips another stop on the route going fifty an hour on a twenty an hour road, the people waiting outside cursing him out as he drives by,*

“Oh what you tryna say, Dew? You sayin’ I’m cheap? You know I ain’t got a job right now—”

“Negro, you ain’t never got no job!”

“Wooow. In front’a all these white people? You outta pocket right now.”

“Three dollars! It’s three dollars! Just gimme three dollars and we straight!”

“You a cold piece, y’know that? Ackin’ like three dollars gonna alter the course’a your sad blue-collar existence you know what—”

and Cousin rifles through his baggy sagging jeans and reaches into his back pocket and the passengers, seeing this loud negro pulling something out of his back pocket, start pressing the stop button even more and hollering and climbing out the windows of the moving bus, and

Dewey slams the brakes at a red light and everyone jerks forward and Cousin, holding three crinkled dollars in his hand, looks at the passengers all crunched up fearfully in the back of the bus, two of them half-hanging out the windows, and Dewey sees what Cousin sees, and they both look at each other, then the camera, and say, “These white people be trippin’!”

Then Dewey gives his signature sign-off wink and the end credits roll—

The show was interrupted by breaking news:

A referendum on the NYPD budget, taking place in the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. building on 125th, was halted by protestors loudly denouncing the pigs in African Square, right outside the government building. The protest started small but quickly swallowed up the block and street and avenue. It turned out the protest was a ruse to stall the referendum while a smaller group—“radical anarchists,” according to the news reporter—scaled the building, flashbombed the government officials, and fled the scene with sensitive intelligence. Most of the smaller group was quickly apprehended, but a few escaped with said intel in tow. Live cell phone and drone and satellite footage showed several balaclava-clad “vigilantes” repelling down the south facade of the building, some holding what looked like toy weapons. A snitching number scrolled across the bottom of the screen on repeat. The manhunt was on.

Both Minnie and Rue tried not to look at anything in particular, and in so doing looked at everything in its glaring vital particularity.

The end of the world, the beginning of one, the precipice between. These and other theories.

“We livin’ in crazy times,” said Rue with no conviction.

Then the screen crackled again, the picture pixelated, the news anchors' faces warped to devilish features, their eyes scowling, smiles curving to the top of the screen, teeth stretched to sharp points, then the white noise, the fuzz, the fizzle.

CUT TO: CLOSE-UP OF FLATSCREEN; PAN OUT TO WIDE SHOT OF BAR.

MINNIE MACKENZIE sits, flighty and booze-addled, on the FAR LEFT barstool.

RUE LOVER is standing behind the bar, RIGHT of the FLATSCREEN. The Flatscreen shows a cavalcade of provocative images: a montage of b-movie film clips, social media posts, raw pig-cam and military drone footage, the odd time lapse of a seed sprouting to fruition, etc.

Minnie and Rue gesture cheers from their respective vantages.

MINNIE

I wonder, though.

RUE

Say more.

MINNIE

About all of that, all that's transpired on this, this little light box-

(points to flatscreen)

-just our corporate overlords projecting, fucking, corporate-speak into our brains.

RUE

"Corporate overlords."

(scratches cheek)

I mean yeah, rich people suck. But they just assholes. They not like - they don't care about nothing but makin' money. They not out

here, like, drinking afterbirth outta the skulls of homeless people-

MINNIE

-they absolutely fucking are-

RUE

-they just doin' whatever fatten they wallets.

MINNIE

Sure but it's getting harder to do that without deception and, and skullfuckery-

RUE

These shows, y'know, maybe they puttin' secret messages in your head. I mean I doubt it but maybe, let's say you right. Know what? Wouldn't make a difference.

MINNIE

(annoyingly slurps paloma slush through her straw)

How so.

RUE

Cuz muhfuckas wanna be hypnotized. They *been* under the influence. They was in line for that good dope, and all these dudes in the C-suites had to do was chop it up and cut it with whatever made it hit harder-

MINNIE

-“They,” so not you, you're above it all, you're removed-

RUE

-but y'all the ones standing in line with your veins out, waiting for the needle. Only thing you really doing is choosing which line to stand on.

MINNIE

(gestures as if making calculations in the air)
"Choice." I hear it over and over, "choice."
Like a fucking affirmation. Blue or Red,
rock or a hard place, fucking, fucking
autobots or decepticons. And then somebody
comes around, usually right around election
time, telling me

(looks Rue up and down)

to buck up and deal. Those are the choices.
And I'm like, what if all the alien robots
creep me the fuck out? Where's the non-robot
option?

RUE

(massages her forehead and rubs her eyes)
Can I ask you a question? Why so cynical? I
don't get it.

MINNIE

(does a double take)
Are you - is that a serious question?

RUE

No wait a minute. Yeah, it's not looking too
good, but what are you doing about it?

Minnie looks off to the side and smirks and adjusts her glasses.

RUE

Like everyday you don't benefit from it. Oh
but it's horrible, it's the end of days,
woe is me, I'll just go to a bar and watch

TV. See, I hear people talk like this and I just roll my eyes.

Minnie mockingly rolls her eyes.

RUE

Nah go ahead. Make your jokes. Cuz you don't want the world to be different. No, no you don't. Cuz if it was different you wouldn't have anything to complain about. Look, you got Dewey Do-Good, right? Busting his ass at his job, solid job, he's making good money, he's a good citizen, all that good shit, right? And everything's good, til somebody don't wanna pay the fare-

MINNIE

(puts hands up in exasperation)

-oh but then Cousin comes through with his hand out and collapses the social order! Zombies and contagions! Everybody for themselves! Cuz god forbid he rides the bus for free, or somebody gives him three dollars - imagine it, the horror - a society full of maniacs with three dollars riding the bus for free! Our children ride those buses! Our grandmothers!

RUE

(breathes deep and abruptly shifts tone and demeanor)

Take a breath.

(pours Minnie a glass of water, gestures her to drink it)

Cuz you getting a little too reckless, alright? You don't know me like that.

MINNIE

I mean you're a cop, right? I think I know you pretty well.

RUE

'Scuse me?

CLOSE-UP TO FLATSCREEN

FLATSCREEN

In which a butterfly emerges from its chrysalis at a rapid frame rate; in which a violent tremor collapses a major California road, and behind the road a blazing wildfire, with all the sky tinted a menacing ochre-red; in which happy Afrikan children in some Afrikan country play between mountains of discarded tech, their thin limbs coated in gold flecks and blue cobalt dust, etc.

Rue and Minnie slowly drift their attentions away from the Flatscreen. Rue impatiently looks at the time on her SMARTPHONE, then she looks out the window. Minnie downs the whole glass of water and nervously taps her foot. She checks her watch. She taps a beat on the bartop.

MINNIE

So you got Dewey Do-Good-

RUE

Oh, fuck off, aight? I tried making conversation, I'm not good at this shit. They don't really train you for this part of the job.

MINNIE

So you got Dewey Do-Good, and his name is literally Good, and he's a certain type of man, isn't he? All stoic and dignified.

RUE

Whatever.

(pours two more shots, slides one down the bar to Minnie)

Cheers.

(downs her shot)

MINNIE

(runs pointer finger around the shot rim)

And then Cousin - well he's a certain type of man too, isn't he? He's got this super thick slang and he's super dark-skinned and his pants are damn near round his ankles. He's the lazy buffoon. The welfare recipient, god forbid. He's the antagonist to Capital, enemy of the state. They're not even trying to be subtle. And this is a Tyler Perry show, it's on his network. So he's got final say on the scripts. You look at Perry's canon: sixty fucking years of telling black people to pull their pants up. I mean a bot's probably writing them at this point. Perry could've died fifty years ago and we wouldn't have noticed.

RUE

(checks the time, checks out the windows again)

You done?

MINNIE

(talking out loud to herself now)

It's not a network, it's a fucking
propaganda wing. You turn on, click, change
the channel, click, they're telling you to
go to church, click, they're telling you to
take a pill, click, love your job, click,
join the army.

(downs her shot)

RUE

Y'know the problem with people like you is
you think you right. And then you get up in
arms when anybody thinks differently-

MINNIE

-you have the most curious accent-

RUE

-it's the smugness, that smug shit y'all do-

MINNIE

-it's like a philandering lover, just comes
and goes-

CLOSE-UP TO FLATSCREEN

The volume on the Flatscreen turns up. The screen turns to white
static, then all black. Reception returns.

SLOW PAN-OUT

FLATSCREEN

*In which more updates inundate the screen on
the aftermath of the BREAKING NEWS in
Harlem, where some key perpetrators are
identified and their names and likenesses
shown on the screen-*

Rue and Minnie pay close attention.

FLATSCREEN

-in which degraded cell phone and satellite footage of the "RADICAL ANARCHISTS" is analyzed to reveal that what looked like toy weapons were in fact stolen military pulse-cannon technology; in which the following commercials:

A marine in green fatigues deftly pilots a walking Mech, her body housed in the Mech's massive green-fatigue painted frame. She looks at the camera and says, "they said being trans would hold me back." She presses a button on the Mech's left-hand rig and an M134 minigun pops out of the Mech's shoulder. "But I'm here to prove them wrong."

-paid for by the U.S. Army

"Are you feeling down? Can't seem to get out of bed in the morning? Find it hard to concentrate?"

MONTAGE - beautiful actors performing all of the above.

"You may be a CADET."

Acronym's meaning scrawls across the bottom of the screen:
Climate-Affective Dystopian Environmental Trauma©

*"But hope is not lost. Take back control.
You CAN do something."*

MONTAGE - beautiful actors donning fatigues and mounting Mechs.

"You can fight. You can win. You can save the world. And we'll give you all the tools you'll need along the way."

MONTAGE - new pulse-weapon tech, different model Mechs, self-driving urban assault vehicles, robot dogs and drone birds and bees, etc.

"Join the fight. Make a difference. Because there's more than one way to be a cadet."

-paid for by the U.S. Army

Rue and Minnie feel some type of way about all that's just transpired on the little light box.

MINNIE

Well you got one thing right: we are definitely up in arms.

(smirks at Rue)

RUE

The hell's that supposed to mean?

CUE LIGHTNING. CAMERA SHAKES AND FALLS TO FLOOR, SO BAR IS VIEWED SIDEWAYS. STATIC FUZZ EFFECT. SMPTE COLOR BARS APPEAR WITH THE MESSAGE: "DO NOT ADJUST YOUR SET."

CUT TO:

Suddenly the bar rattled from a boom of thunder, reception fritzed, car alarms went off up and down the block. A wall of water fell from the sky.

The clock struck nine, post meridian.

The threes have it.

PULP⁵

Just then a swarthy hooded spade appeared seeking refuge from the rain, worse for wear but cool despite, a copious napridden coif atop his fine-chiseled blue-black features, eyes the white devil's hue, kicks trailing the muck of prior menace in their wake. He stood at the threshold arms akimbo; staccato lightning lit his lithe and dapper frame. From behind his thought-furrowed brow he fully swept in one fell swoop the dingy dimlit den. Routes were plotted to hasten getaway, and bodies vetted to discern potential friend from foe.

The stranger scoped the bar, and sidled up, then settled down. Minnie MacKenzie sat hunkered at the bar's left edge, and he the middle, with three stools between them. Each gave the other wicked side-eye. Rue Lover from her vantage behind the bar dressed him down and sized

⁵ Noun, literally: from *pulpe*, "fleshy part of a fruit or plant," this from the latin *pulpa*, "animal or plant pulp; pith of wood" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*); "the soft fleshy internal part," "fleshy tissue," "A soft, shapeless, wet substance or mass, esp. of disintegrated organic matter, produced by crushing, boiling, pounding, etc.," (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Or as metaphor: "the innermost, central, or most valuable part of a thing...something that lacks stability, strength, or firmness," and specifically, "[a] popular magazine or book, printed on cheap 'pulp' paper and typically lurid or sensational in nature. Hence, more generally: such works as a genre; any popular or sensational writing that is regarded as being of poor quality." (*OED*).

The most apt description comes from the biography of famed and infamed publisher Frank A. Munsey. In Munsey's words:

"We want stories. That is what we mean—stories, not dialect sketches, not washed out studies of effete human nature, not weak tales of effete human nature, not weak tales of sickly sentimentality, not 'pretty' writing....We do want fiction in which there is a story, a force, a tale that means something—in short a story. Good writing is as common as clam shells, while good stories are as rare as statesmanship." (Britt, 1935)

From all this we can deduce a good, simple, working definition of pulp: the fleshy part, boiled down.

Pulp, because of its "sensational" quality, leans heavily into the genres of crime and science fiction, horror, and thrillers. Since these genres are rarely given the scholarly treatment (unless, of course, they were tackled by dead white men and women from the distant past), we shall collapse the line between pulp proper and genre generally, for both categories get ignored at roughly the same rate.

And from here we will abandon the popular "we" in favor of the academic "one," the better to be taken seriously.

him up then double-took him, caught off guard by his pupil's netherworldly blue. Knowing what was what, the stranger did the only thing that broke an awkward tension.

“So a black guy walks into a bar with a parrot on his shoulder. Big, blue parrot”—he locked Rue's gaze—“and the bartender asks, ‘where'd you get it?’ And the parrot says, ‘Afrika, they got millions of 'em over there.’”

Rue grinned; Minnie guffawed. From this the stranger deduced who was deeper in the cups.

Presently all three sat or stood, in wait of some great happening. Rue cracked her knuckles to prepare.

“What'll it be, boss,” she queried to the stranger.

“I don't drink,” he replied.

“You came to the wrong place.” She poured two fingers of tequila neat in two shots and slid one to the damp detective. “On the house.”

He peeped the shot, its giver, the flatscreen over the bar.

In which a negro bio-cop with shoulder cannon berates the local negro youth for sitting on the stoop and blaring certain music while drinking certain neon beverages out of brown paper bags

Just prior the stranger's small role in the ongoing New York rebellion was nearly thwarted by traitors and treacheries but he'd fled the bedlam, with pilfered intel in tow, and time enough to lick his wounds. Presently booze beckoned, which would offer mild relief from said wounds but

deplete his cunning. And the flatscreen gave a glimpse into a near dystopian future. All points in time were fraught with peril.

The sly sleuth kinked glasses with the barkeep and took it, to the head and down the hatch.

Shylock Jones was his name.⁶ Negro super sleuth is what they called him, in jest and

⁶ Shakespeare—a white man sometimes tenuously credited by other white men as the primogenial rapper in another petty attempt to steal the sovereign state of cool from the negro’s clutches—once queried in his usual pentametric meter, “What’s in a name?” Well it shall be stated here that, to the many lineages borne of the Afrikan Diaspora, names contain nothing less than the sum total of their history. That is to say, nothing at all: if one encounters a negro named Bob, or surnamed Watkins, or any other of the infinite Anglicized variations of names, one is encountering a negro marked with their oppressor’s name; or a negro produced by an ancestor’s rape; or a negro with a name made up on the fly, perhaps to conceal the “true” name of a master they’ve escaped, or simply to blend in. (Sometimes a European surname is the product of two souls, one black one white, forming a consensual loving bond via marriage. Sometimes.)

Were Shylock Jones to harken back to the origins of black and scour what little evidence was kept of his lineage, and good luck with that, he’d not find some great tribal leader named Jones who once ruled the sub-Saharan scape or whatever but likely some aggressively average male of European ancestry, for Jones literally means “son of John” if anglicized from Welsh, or is a patronym of the English *Johnson*. (Sources too myriad to recount.)

Ditto “Shylock.” Or perhaps not. Or possibly so. Suggestions for the “origin” of names are another tenuous affair, for surely all names are made up, and disparate cultures often have similar phonetics but with wholly different meanings. “Shylock” is of ancient Saxon origin and means “white-haired” (Orgel; 151-2); but possibly it comes from the Bible (*Selah*, or Shiloh, meaning variously: a place of rest, “peaceful,” Pacific, Tranquility, the Messiah) (Orgel); but maybe it has Hebrew origins, derived from *shalakh*, meaning cormorant (a cormorant both a waterbird and a “gluttonous, greedy, or rapacious person,” per Webster’s Dictionary) (Orgel).

Most obviously “Shylock” is the name of the infamous Jewish moneylender from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*.

Yet as this unknown all-knowing Orgel reveals on pages 151-2 of some dull academic text that virtually no one has read, Shylocks were out and about in Shakespeare’s sixteenth century London, working as “goldsmiths, mercers, and most visibly of all, scribes.” (ibid.) Traders, all. To craft raw precious metal into art, or provide textiles for same, or to be a public writer (copyist, notary, scribe) is to live at the behest of others’ passions, to make their business one’s own. Shakespeare did this for a living with his plays and sonnets. He made history his own, the royal court, the lowborn, the supernatural. “All the world’s a stage,” that old row. All this to say that names bear no mark save the one they make for themselves, but they do tend to follow one, baggage in tow, to the grave.

And they outlast their hosts. Shakespeare himself—if indeed that was his real name or gender—in his time was not a literary superstar but a fairly middlebrow populist. He made up words whenever he saw fit, had no aversion to puns or alliteration or dick jokes, and soaked his plays with blood and sex and magic, and as was the standard of popular plays from his time, the performances were overtly melodramatic and overacted and filled with special effects. “Pomp and circumstance,” that old phrase. Of course he is now revered as a serious genius of unrivaled sophistication, but that’s got little to do with Shakespeare and everything to do with how modern institutions choose to read and perform his work. (Stewart, 2006.)

All *that* to say that one has little control of one’s own name. It is a mark made deeper by others’ crooked carves. History either renders one historic, or renders one not at all.

But nevermind “Shakespeare” or “Shylock”. Names mislead. Surely content is the important thing. And how content is read, and by who, does more to affect how that content is perceived than the content itself. There are arguments for Shakespeare’s lines and letters being of the most refined in all the English canon; they are not. “There is nothing either good or bad,” that old saying. They are bawdy, tawdry spectacles of smut and gossip. They are soap

with all seriousness, within the secret groups where cats knew the time but showed up late to spite it. His rep preceded him, the odd truth buried in myriad apocrypha. He could fell a ninja swarm without scuffing his kicks, leap tenements in a single bound, get a pig to throw his badge and blue allegiance to the wind and grow a garden in their stead. He was spartan-lean, or linebacker-thick; a guile-laden man of many or a lone and sullen vigilante; of hard-boiled blood but tender of head; Batman. Or his butler Alfred, depending on the source. By all accounts he was a negro, though few knew whether he could pass for white or blend with night. Some told tale of his devil eyes and others his demon hue—woe, to lack melanin in the irises but have its great abundance in the skin, as if the one to make up for the other, yet for their pairing to sow discord in the minds of squares and other cats not down and with it, but so it goes.

There is, of Shylock Jones, but one immutable fact, to be carved in his tombstone if indeed he is a mortal being: he ain't never suffered no fool gladly, not never, not one.

Shylock slid a hand down the dewey sleeve of his brown waxed cotton jacket and flicked the residue rain from his sinistral fingers. He took his fro-suppressing hood off, then patted and sculpted his fro back to its usual imperfect shape. From within that epic mound of coarse tight-coiled hair he retrieved his pick, pulling the brass-knuckled handle from the base of splayed steel teeth. Housed in the handle was a blade, a push-dagger, sharp from neglect; there was a hidden cubby in the base, which he tucked under the bar to prevent prying eyes, and shook the cubby's contents into his palm to scrutinize with feel alone, in the safety of shadow. Some sleek, next-generation jump drive, far as he could tell, buffered by a rubber casing. He put it back in the

operas, cheap thrills. They are remixed and remastered according to whatever producer's whim, whole passages redacted, whole historical time frames abandoned. And sometimes they rhyme.

They are more akin, then, to pulp.

cubby, the handle back in the base, the pick back in his fro where it was swallowed wholly up like a jungle reclaiming its dead.

Rue peeped him, Minnie peeped Rue, and Shylock peeped their peeping in kind. The sleuth retrieved from his jacket's inner breast pocket an aluminum snuff bullet, half-filled with coke, and took a conspicuous sniff. Coke was technically, tepidly legal in New York City, a mild win hard-fought for in the late twenty-twenties, when crack use was on the rise yet again. But its public consumption still rubbed civilians in raw discomfiting ways. All the better to throw 'em off the scent. Better to reveal a weakness than the possible future of technology. Thusly all the peepings began anew.

Shylock was suspicious, natch. He darted his deep distracting devil blues from the brown lady to the beige and back again. A deduction was in order. His technique, to wit: assume the worst, then reverse engineer the assumption til the facts jibe with the scene, from paranoid to plausible to probable. Once the scene is pared down, reconstruct the likeliest scenario and be content with this reconstruction. Sleuthing is a soft science, a tool to tease meaning from the rigid rules of physics. Though there is the rare moment of wonder—fleeting, and few and far between—where the raw tactics of deduction pluck a clue from one realm that point to the existence of another. On these occasions a proper sleuth must steel themselves and follow that clue wheresoever it may lead. This is the danger. To turn away is to deny the clue its power. There is closure in half-truth, cold comfort in not knowing. Closure, comfort, both corrupt. Those who keep company with either should ply more timid trades.

There were three variables holding court in Shylock's brain. The first: the identity of the jive-ass muhfucka who turned coat and nearly sank the mission, forcing all comrades to flee or risk devolution in the bowels of the Empire.

The second: a fog clouding his thinking since that morning, when he received a call from an unknown number with the old 718 outerboro area code. He hoped it meant nothing, but in all likelihood it meant everything, and more besides. Familial drama. Traumas and petty grievances all the way down, all the way back, and before that the lash of the whip, and before that the dark hull and darker fathoms, and before that a void. And perhaps the call and the ruptured mission were connected...hence the fog, the nagging doubt, a tug of a weak sentient gravity. What of it. Others starved or lived hand to mouth. The fog was of no consequence.

Or something nefarious. A brain buffer inserted at birth to keep uppity field-leaning negroes at bay; the sum total of amerikkkan fuckery calcifying into one neural lump; dehydration. Paranoid to plausible to probable.

He gestured for another shot, and was given it, and gulped it down, followed by a coconut water from another jacket pocket, its contents drained til the cardboard container suctioned inward in a centripetal twist. What's in a number, they say. What do they know. One could escape the home and circumstance but not the lineage, the blood. This was unfortunate.

Presently he no-look hook shot the empty container and swished it in the garbage can at the corner of the room, no doubt a side effect of his latent negronic super-athleticism, and as he put his hand back in his pocket he grazed the hardcover of his favorite book—Pookie's *Black Bible*, a tiny tome of polemics and blasphemies he kept on deck for whenever his energies waned—which reminded him that talks of fortune were a crutch for the weak.

The third variable: who, exactly, in this bar round this very hour, was awaiting receipt of the pilfered drive.

A pig siren dopplered down the block. Shylock and Minnie shifted in their seats, each noticing the other's shift. The sleuth mulled over his fight-or-flight scenarios, and all seemed lacking and doable, dulled or brightened by the respective qualities of spirit and snow. This is of course when the barkeep rolled up to keep a fish on the hook.

"Nother shot?" Rue asked. "Helps with thinking."

Shylock played it cool, nodded yes.

"I'll drink to that," said Minnie.

And they all clutched their newly filled shots, tensely awaiting some great happening.

The brown barkeep, the lightskinned'ed lady: both suspect. Sleeper agents from the FBI, sniffing about the hood for negroes with revolutionary zeal. This was not paranoia, for there was precedent.

"You good?" Rue asked Shylock to get the ball rolling.

"That's a loaded question," he replied, sniffing the shot for faint parts-per-million whiffs of nefarious chemicals, "but no."

Minnie gulped her shot and gripped her empty rocks glass like a weapon. Rue slowly tucked a hand behind her back.

Shylock continued, "It's unknown unknowns, ladies. The main issue. Top'a the ballot. Them unknown unknowns gonna get us all." He was on one, and many besides. "So Donald fuckin' Rumsfeld, you heard'a him? SECDEF under G. Dubya Bush? Anyway he's being questioned 'bout invadin' Iraq with like no evidence—this after 9/11, like oh two—the

Department of Defense is like, ‘yo how you makin’ this Olympic-level leap to weapons’ a mass destruction in Iraq? Where the receipts?’ Rumsfeld goes, ‘look. There are known knowns: things we know that we know. Now there’s also known unknowns: things we know we *don’t* know. But here’s the kicker, my fairweather friends: there’s also *unknown unknowns*, things we *don’t know* we don’t know. And those are what we gotta worry about.’⁷ He gauged their relative reactions to his dredging up of ancient history, and tailored his tale to suit. “So two things. One, that’s the most artful dodge in all’ a human history. And two, it just so happens to be true. We out here tryna prevent against shit we understand but when the aliens come it ain’t gonna be on no spaceship, dig, they gonna ride in on theta brain waves and make first contact in our dreams, they travellin’ the cosmos in beams’ a light cuz they got ridda physical ships a million years ago, shit they got ridda *bodies* a million years ago, they made up’ a sentient time-collapsin’ plasma, and if they *wanted* to kill us, we’da *been* dead. ’Nuff said.” He reached across three stools to offer Minnie dap, and she begrudgingly obliged.

⁷ The actual quote, from a U.S. Department of Defense news briefing, February 12, 2002:

“Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tends to be the difficult ones [*sic*].”

Of import here is the sheer and utter lack of anything approaching the normal decorum of high intellectual thought in the above quote. It is pure speculation backed by no evidence. It sounds hifalutin but is deeply shallow. To look “throughout the history of our country and other free countries,” one will find all sorts of difficulties arising from all kinds of novel circumstances, known and otherwise. The word “free” does Herculean lifting here, for once it is uttered, all that comes before or after gets subsumed by it. One does not need content, or even facts, once one feels their freedom, whatever that is, is threatened. Nevermind that Rumsfeld starts the quote by questioning the very assumption of facts (“Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me”). Nevermind basing amerikkan foreign policy on what is basically a thought experiment.

Mind, simply, this: that pulp need only tell a good story, and the audience will gladly fill in the blanks. A pithy phrase will fare far better than all the deep-thought data in the universe.

Shylock then queried to the room, “y’all believe in aliens?”—and with this he’d played his part.

Thusly the happening commenced.

“No,” said Rue and Minnie in tandem but slightly out of sync, “but I can be persuaded.” They looked at each other with befuddled faces.

At this Shylock Jones jumped from his stool, which metranomed and fell, and he backed up into the center of the bar to better gauge the scenario. There was to be the simple exchange of a script determined pre between him and one, and only one, accomplice. It was impossible two disparate people would have the same word-for-word answer to such a specific question; it was possible; it was coincidence. With his true-tried method of deduction falling short, the super sleuth went analog and simply dug the scene. Minnie was terrified, flushed, her hands up as if in surrender in between pushing her spectacles up the ridge of her nose; Rue was all even-keeled and cool, her hand still tucked ’hind her back. Shylock grabbed his pick, keeping his thumb against the base for quick retrieval of the blade, and homed in on Rue.

“What you said your name was?” he queried.

“I didn’t,” Rue replied. “Look, I’m as confused as you. But it doesn’t have to go down this way, Shy.”

Minnie picked up on the sudden disappearance of Rue’s slanted speech.

Shylock piqued a bushy brow. How easily the barkeep had said his nickname, how cozy and familiar it rolled off the tongue. In his line of work real names were not given, and in any event should never be said aloud. The barkeep was either a rookie—unlikely, for she’d not been shook by the sudden turn of events—or a pro, State-trained, and so confident, as the State always

is, in victory. But she knew his nick, and therefore his government, and so likely his Mom Duke's address. What dark fate that all roads led back to family, that every twist and turn was but a path back to the womb. He pondered his level of sobriety. The dull thudding fog had made its way back into the wrinkles of his brain. His guard was down when the day's events required his guard at its baseline negro level: heavily fortified, at all times, against all affronts real and perceived.

Shylock quickly did a bump from his snuff bullet.

Suddenly the front door swung open and a dolled-up lady gallivanted in, a party unto herself, and three heads swiveled to meet her, and six eyes cut her every which way, and still she persisted.

"We're closed," said Rue, adjusting the hand 'hind her back.

The lady scoffed and sashayed and gestured to the sign on the door. "The sign says you're open."

"Old sign."

The lady rolled her eyes and sucked her teeth. "Well then take the sign down then!" And she huffed and exited with exaggerated pomp and sway.

Rue came from behind the bar and walked side-wise to the door, her front to Minnie and Shylock the whole time, and when she got to the door she locked it.

"Oh see but then you gonna lock the door," said Shylock, "and you keepin' that hand tucked like you already know how it's gonna go down." He was back in the sweet hug of paranoia but had to fight against the two infernal pulls of white alkaloid and alcohol.

Rue slowly put both hands up where all parties present could see. To which Minnie, who'd been cowering but all-the-sudden procured a spine, pulled out from the big front pocket of her overalls what looked like a toy weapon, small and its capabilities unknown.

And Shylock, fearing the jig was up, brandished his pick blade, the blade tucked between his ring and middle.

And Rue, knowing the jig was up, deftly pulled a snub nose from the small of her back.

Time slowed in anxious anticipation as the trio stood in obtuse triangular fashion, tension thick as the leaden air.

In this palpable lull, Shylock Jones tried to tease a tale. He did this often. If enough tropes revealed themselves he could dig the scene and forge the necessary traits to survive it. He panned his devil blues side to side in one singular saccade, taking in the bar proper, its dimensions and acoustics, the ambience, the vibe. That slow conical sway of the hanging light fixture's dull dusty bulb, its soft yellow light. The dialogue wafting from the flatscreen, a negro bio-cop giving local hoods the whatfor. A deluge outside slapping the pavement, wind buckling the window panes. Three strangers, three weapons, one pilfered drive: who and which and what a red herring, the MacGuffin, Chekhov's gun?⁸ They were in a bar: a Western, the possible but unlikely turn into

⁸A red herring is a logical fallacy where a false or misleading statement is intentionally inserted to divert attention away from the actual argument. It is also a plot device or arc that purposely distracts from the main plot. Red herrings are heavily used in pulp crime and detective novels, to keep the reader on their feet, as it were, allowing for a more involved reading experience. It is as if the reader herself is on the case, and so responsible for the outcome. Arguably, the structure of storytelling in each vignette of Quentin Tarantino's 1994 pulp fiction *Pulp Fiction* is a red herring writ large, for each plot arc presents the characters as protagonists/heroes (mostly engaged in the mundane and ordinary), when in fact they are all antagonists/villains (mostly attempting to kill each other). The film reads as each character's redemptive arc from a life of crime to an honest living, but because of how the vignettes are ordered in the film, each character has either just killed someone or is on their way to kill someone. The viewer, however they may feel about crime and killing, is left sympathizing with an entire cast of criminals/killers.

A MacGuffin is some physical thing, vaguely described, that is of utmost import to the characters and plot of a story but inconsequential in itself. It can be literally anything—an old napkin, say—so long as it drives the plot forward and motivates the characters. The superlative MacGuffin is the whole canon of writer/director/producer JJ Abrams. Abrams even has a name for his MacGuffin: "The Mystery Box." As he relayed in a 2008 TedTalk, "it represents infinite possibility, it represents hope, it represents potential," referring to an actual Mystery Box on stage

romantic comedy, pulp noir. Or even neon noir if he accounted for the overly illumined New York nightscape, as if in denial of the now common rolling city-wide blackouts.

But not enough action had accrued for the sleuth to make a viable deduction. There was the small question of whether to let the scene build of its own momentum—in which he'd have to keep his wits about him, yes-and, a hand firmly clutched round his pick in preparation; or use the limited contextual cues to deduce the most likely narrative outcome, giving him first move advantage.

There was the big question of whether to let objective reality aid in his deduction: fomenting revolutions local and global; the alleged feasibility of small-scale quantum computation; the growing frequency of inclement weather, that torrential downpour outside the third in a week, clearly the result of global warming or rather its negligent denial. Political thriller, sci-fi, dystopian catastrophe porn.

Though global warming was unique, for it rendered all prediction null. It was less a planning for rogue weather than a madcap adapting to whatever form a warming core temperature took, be it the mere severe dip or spike in the mercury dial or a biblical swarm of mutated locusts. It was not lost on Shylock that he sought redemption in the literary realm, where tropes correctly applied or avoided would guide him to the final act with minimal damage.

Survival in the real world, with its thinning narratives and cynical circular arguments, could only

that he'd kept since childhood and allegedly never opened, but also to the metaphor. Abrams is best known for co-creating ABC's *Lost*, a show that by its seventh season had so many Mystery Boxes in play that it seemed all the weird happenings on that deserted island were caused by, to wit: God (and/or the devil), the Government (all of them), aliens, time-dilation, interdimensional travel, the machinations of someone's (or the collective plane crash survivors') fevered dream, or none of these or some or all of them. The glowing suitcase in *Pulp Fiction* is another example.

Chekhov's gun is, strictly, the principle that every element in a story must be useful to the plot; in its broader use, it is an element introduced in the plot early on that must then be used later on in the story. The playwright Anton Chekhov did not invent the principle but popularized it. Examples are, well, guns in Chekhov's plays. The gold watch in *Pulp Fiction* is another example.

be dealt with, all was elbow grease and gumption, chewing gum and grit, paper clips and cunning. Math could not make calculations fast enough. Numbers held no hope. Only variables would see the other side of it, would make it through the unknowable unknown.

Finally Rue sighed, breaking the infinite blip in action. She slowly put the snubnose on the warping hardwood floor, and the swinging yellow light cast her bending shadow in forms evoking ghoulish apparitions. Shylock, not one for signs, considered this a sign, for its horror elements revealed yet another genre, one in which negroes rarely survived.⁹

⁹ The horror movie trope of negroes-not-making-it-to-the-end is contested. Some claim the trope is that the black guy—it is usually a guy—dies *first*, as if to avoid further racial inquiry; others claim the trope is that he—he is usually the sole negro—dies *at all*, as if it is his job to color up the fodder. (There are cousin tropes where the negro exists as comedic relief and/or to help white characters on their hero’s journey to the final scene.) Still others claim that Jordan Peele’s 2017 film *Get Out* effectively killed the trope for good: a negro not only made it to the end but brutally murdered all the white characters for good measure. There is some truth in these claims, but the last claim is ripe for further scrutiny.

But first, a joke:

I got fed up with TV and shit, cuz I seen all the Star Treks. I start watching cable. I was watching *Poltergeist* last month. I got a question. Why don’t white people just leave the house when there’s a ghost in the house? Y’all stay in the house too fuckin’ long. Get the fuck out of the house! Very simple: If there’s a ghost in the house, get the fuck out! And not only did they stay in the house with the poltergeist, they invite more people over! Sitting around going, “our daughter Carroll-Ann’s in the television set.”

If I had a daughter, went down to the precinct and say “look man, I went home, my fucking daughter’s in the TV set and I just fucking left. You can have all this, I ain’t going back to the motherfucker. I just came down so when she ain’t at the school you don’t think I killed the bitch or anything like that. But she is inside the TV set. You can have all that shit. Thank you.”

“Mr. Murphy, didn't you try to save your daughter?”

“Yeah, I’m a man, see I tried to save her, I turned the channels, the shit didn’t work. I got the fuck out.” The kid was only 6 years old in the movie, they couldn’t have been too attached to her.

In *The Amityville Horror* the ghost told them to get out of the house. White people stayed in there. Now that’s a hint and a half for your ass. A ghost say get the fuck out, I would just tip the fuck out the door! Lou Walker looked in the toilet bowl, there was blood in the toilet, and said, “that’s peculiar.”

I would’ve been in the house saying, “oh baby this is beautiful. We got a chandelier hanging up here, kids outside playing. It’s a beautiful neighborhood. We ain’t got nothing to worry, I really love it, this is really nice.”

“GET OUT!”

“Too bad we can’t stay, baby!”

—Eddie Murphy, *Delirious*, 1983.

In his article “Can One ‘Get Out?’ The Aesthetics of Afro-Pessimism,” scholar Ryan Poll digs up hidden dimensions of fear, politics, and race in Murphy’s classic bit, saying, “[I]n its dominant form, the [horror] genre works because white people fundamentally imagine the world without horror. Yes, such can happen, but it happens ‘over there,’ distant from the everyday ontology and experience of whiteness.” This explains their need, in Murphy’s

telling, to investigate the source of horror, to collapse the distance between them and “over there” rather than running for the hills.

But in *Get Out*, the negro cannot run, or walk, or even look away from the horror.

The film follows Chris, a dark brown protagonist with big expressive eyes played by British actor Daniel Kaluuya, as he goes on a trip to rural Upstate New York to meet the rich, white, liberal family of his girlfriend, Rose, for the first time. All the white people he encounters are creepy (cringe is the word), and the negro maid and groundskeeper seem to be auditioning for an antebellum revival, like word never got to them that the Union won the war. With doom-laden harbingers encroaching on Chris from all sides, he must keep his wits (it is not his wits the whites are after), he must keep his cool (it is this they always fetishize), in order to impress Rose and her family. When Rose’s mother Missy hypnotizes Chris, allegedly to cure him of his cigarette addiction, she gives him a glimpse into his future by pushing his consciousness deep into the fathoms of his mind, and deeper still, till he can only passively observe, till he is robbed of all agency, till he is a prisoner in his own body, adrift in his own mind...

It is eventually revealed that Rose and her family are part of a secret cabal called the Order of the Coagula, where rich white people kidnap and transplant their own brains into negroes’ allegedly superior bodies. This procedure, the “transmutation,” is a partial transplant; the parts of the negro’s brain connected to the nervous system must remain, for a smoother transition.

It is this remaining part where the negro is confined, where Missy confined Chris during hypnosis, the place where they cannot run from, or even look away from: the sunken place.

As Poll has it, *Get Out* is, ostensibly, a film about modern slavery. And the sunken place serves as a lucid visual exploration of Afro-pessimism*, the philosophy that argues black chattel slavery was not “simply another chapter” in history but “the creation of a new world, the creation of modernity, and the creation, to use [philosopher Frantz] Fanon’s words, of a new ‘species.’” (Ibid.) If the Coagula is meant to be the natural evolution of the black body—as superior housing for the superior white mind—then the sunken place is the afro-pessimistic brand burned into black consciousness: perpetual awareness of the negro’s true place in society, as sub-, as fodder, “over there,” forever housed in what French sociologist Loïc Wacquant coined the “carceral continuum.” (Ibid.) In *Get Out*, negroes not only never made it off the plantation, they were doubly confined in a prison of their own minds.

Surely this is a fate far worse than death. But the negro makes it to the end.

The movie, in fact, begins with a mild twist on the trope: a negro wandering lost in the affluent “maze” of the suburbs, who is quickly captured and thrown into the trunk of a car—kidnapped, like a certain several million people from a certain sub-Saharan location. He does not technically “die” first, not exactly, though the reveal of him later in the film as a negro meat puppet for an old white man is surely a kind of literal hell. But Chris makes it to the end.

There is the tell-tale scene where Chris, now certain these rich white people deep in the woods are engaged in archvillainy against the negro race, snoops around in his girlfriend Rose’s closet (which is left suspiciously ajar, as if baiting Chris, as if playing with her prey) and finds a blood-red painted box centered on the floor, like a presentation, filled with Polaroids of Rose with varied negroes. A keepsake of conquest. (This is a literal red herring; the scene plays out as if Chris has finally stumbled upon irrefutable proof of the goings-on, but when he goes downstairs the whole family is waiting for him. They already know he knows. That he found physical proof was of no consequence. This gives credence to the idea that Rose indeed left the box out as a gesture of cruelty.) There are nine photos of negro-adjacent Rose shown on-screen, one of which is Rose with the negro maid; there is the negro groundskeeper; there is the negro from the film’s beginning. Other families in the Order of the Coagula presumably have other ways of trapping, and have trapped, other negroes. Who knows how many failed negro experiments were buried in the woods before the transmutation was perfected.

And the transmuted negroes are, again, not “dead”: they are left in the sunken place, to watch their white captor’s wield their black bodies in perpetuity.

But Chris makes it to the end.

In the original cut of the film, Chris makes it to the end only for the pigs to pull up and arrest him; the final scene is of Chris talking to his friend, Rod, from behind prison bars, considering next moves. This ending was scrapped when test audiences found it too dark and on-the-nose depressing, a sentiment that director Peele agreed with. The theatrical ending is pure catharsis: as Chris is on the ground choking his white girlfriend to death, he hears sirens and looks to his left, his once expressive eyes now sad and heavy, but the siren is revealed to be Rod getting his attention with the horn of his airport security vehicle. The audience is terrified, then relieved. And Chris not only makes it to the end but gets a ride.

“Look,” said Rue, “I was told to meet you here. And say the line. That’s it. I’m on your side.”

He is forever altered, forever burdened with absolute proof of the negro’s sordid state in the modern world, he has blood on his hands, justified blood but blood nonetheless, but he subverts the horror trope.

The viewer must contend with whether this subversion was worth it.

(An absurd irony, to round it all out: most of the cast and crew during filming stayed in an old hotel, right on the water in Fairhope, Alabama, that served as a Confederate hospital during the Civil War.)

*It cannot go unsaid that Afro-pessimism is a controversial philosophy, as it provides negroes little quarter for redemption, or escape, from their enslaved past, nor does it posit a future where escape or even reparation is possible. It is a decidedly dour and sobering intellectual pursuit. And it seems to excuse the actions of house negroes and their commitment to Capital and conservative values at the expense of everybody, especially negroes, while rendering amerikkka’s indigenous groups—who arguably had a far worse go of it, not that it’s a competition—invisible in this “creation of modernity.” It also makes the negro the key element in amerikkka’s grand narrative, as if the creation of the negro was either the goal of the colonial project, or that the negro, once created, is the only thing making the project worthwhile. If history is merely a story filled with tropes and clues to guide the reader along, then Afro-pessimism assumes the negro is either Chekhov’s Gun or a MacGuffin. Chekhov’s Gun, for negroes’ former enslavement is but a harbinger for future aggressions (they were introduced early in the plot, and so surely must be a meaningful entity later on); a MacGuffin, for slave labor is so vital to the colonial plot, to the infrastructure of the modern world, yet the slave’s true dimensions are obscured and for the colonizer’s eyes only. There is in these, as in all things, some truth.

But the negro is, mostly, a red herring. They are not the only ones.

In *New York Magazine*’s oral history of *Get Out* (February 19, 2018), Allison Williams, who played Rose in the film, explained the strategy for throwing viewers off Rose’s malevolent scent:

[W]e built out two decoy arcs. One of them was this racial “wokening,” so that the audience thought she was learning about racism. The other decoy was Rose’s attempt to get Chris to open up, because he lost his mom. Both of those things come to a head at the lake when they’re talking, and she says, “All right, let’s go home.”

The very *concept* of racism was merely a tool to get Chris back into the house (for a house negro is always preferred); Chris “opening up” makes him more amenable to white peoples’ needs (his vulnerability is cruelly used against him). More red herrings. Racism is real and vulnerability valuable, but they get Chris back *in* the house. Even the *film’s title* gives away the secret for making it to the end, yet Chris does the opposite. Hence the “decoy arcs”—red herrings—are designed to keep the real plot hidden. The audience knows nothing good can come from entering that secluded house in the woods, but maybe, just maybe, if enough racism is acknowledged, if Chris opens up enough, there is perhaps the slightest improbable sliver of chance that those rich white liberals won’t snatch his body and swap out his brain. It is almost as if the negro is most valuable when walking into a trap, or already ensnared. The ultimate “decoy arc” is that the viewer sympathizes with Chris at all, and so follows his hopeful, good-faith journey into the very heart of darkness. (Chris’ best friend Rod, who is the comic relief, the jester, the fool, fulfills his trope by housing all truth in jest. But he never suffers the harsher indemnities of *Get Out*’s alleged Afro-pessimistic world, and in fact constantly lectures Chris, and so the audience, on how to avoid them. “The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool,” that old row.)

If anything, *Get Out* is less subverting an old trope than revealing a truer, more horrifying one: that of the negro who covets whiteness enough to put themselves in its dangerous proximity, who, when the voice says “get out,” stays and looks around. For whiteness—that is, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy—is a tender trap for all who seek it, and a slasher film for all who lie in its wake.

If anything, Afro-pessimism is *itself* a red herring in the story of amerikkkan Empire. Pity the sad, dancing monkey, rather than punish its captor, who’s run off with the money and made out like a king.

Though it is true that tropes, correctly applied, tend toward cliché and stereotype, it does not follow that tropes should be avoided. For a genre is but a collection of tropes, correctly applied—and endlessly explored and subverted. *Get Out* did not kill the kill-the-negro trope so much as mutate the trope til it grew monstrous and hulking, exploding out of its own limitations. So, so many negroes died, or “died,” or might as well have been dead. Better fake negroes in pulp than real negroes in the world. One finds the most egregious depictions of society’s ills in pulp, whereas normative media tends to gloss over these ills, and shave down society’s rougher edges. Pulp, literally, was printed on rough-edged paper. To play in pulp is to only ever deal in real.

May it ever be so.

Which of course, per trope, is what one would say when one wasn't on one's side, so Shylock shifted his gaze to Minnie, not to accuse but to accumulate data.

“You,” he said pointedly with pick pointed to emphasize the point, “what's yur name?”

Said Minnie with trembling lip, her toy-like weapon aimed at a vague space between Shylock and Rue, “we, we're not supposed to give those out I thought.”

Shylock darted his piercing pupils a final time between the two femmes—

—when suddenly Rue reached for her snubnose on the floor so Shylock threw his pick and Minnie shot her weapon and Rue managed to let off a round—

and after, when the action settled, Shylock assessed the damage; the light swayed violently, likely nicked by a projectile; Minnie had been thrown back and over the bartop; his pick blade had stuck in the front door, behind Rue, who now laid slumped unmoving against the door. Shylock once-overed his frame for evidence of mortal injury, and finding none, did a bump to calm his nerves.

“Fuck,” said Minnie, lifting herself up from behind the bar, her overalls soaked in liquor from the bottles shattered all around her, her frizzled hair now static-straight in all directions, “this fucking thing is so sensitive, I didnt mean to—” she fiddled with the very real weapon's knobs and another surge of energy gathered in a humming green electric glow in the weapon's barrel, then shot out a clear concussive blast that warped the surrounding air, exploding all the top shelf liquor and flinging Minnie to the far side of the back bar. “Fuck!” As she shuffled in place on the floor she muffled, “this is all fucked...”

A dead-on deduction, and even with the damp detective's dual and dueling wits was duly noted.

As Minnie groaned and tried getting up Shylock sprinted, hopped the bartop, rushed her, caught her arm and twisted her wrist til she dropped the weapon. He scooped it up and backed away.

“Y’know,” said Shylock while walking over to the slumped barkeep, “they say the hallmark of a villain’s when they start tawkin’ in the middle’a the action.” He checked Rue's vitals, wallet, rounds, if any, left in her snubnose. “Least, that’s how it goes in the comics.” He slyly pocketed Rue’s wallet then pulled his pick from the door’s wood grain. “Now you was just tawkin’ to yourself, but Ima count that as a monologue.” He carried his and Rue’s and Minnie’s weapons to the bartop and laid them out, the pulse cannon contraption next to the snubnose next to the pick. “As for me, I just got an affinity with words, soul of a preacher, who knows.” The gunmetal-gray teeth of his pick were stained with blood. “And the Fed—well she ain’t said nothing since you damn near put her through a wall, but still.” Rue stirred painfully back to waking life. “Now here’s the rub: which one’a us the villain?”

One could also say the hallmark of false confidence is to talk big fore and aft but never midst the action. But one never truly knows what personal proclivities will spring sudden from the spirit when in the thick; Shylock merely had the advantage of lifelong training in the hidden arts, rote and muscle-etched, and courages anew from powers powdered and high proof.

Minnie, assuming Shylock’s question was rhetorical, said nothing but withdrew into her calculations: three people, three weapons, each linked to the scene, now a crime scene, three a dividend of nine, she had not signed up for this but of course knew if the rebellion was to succeed, and she to remain a part of it, her number would be called soon enough. She’d gone

aways in this line of thinking and so barely registered Shylock looming over her, the snubnose aimed at her chest.

“Yo,” cut Shylock, “hey!” He snapped to startle her attention. “How’d you get one’a these prototypes?” He gestured the snubnose to the pulse cannon contraption on the bartop.

Rue, still slumped against the door and slowly gaining consciousness, lifted her head and dabbed her cheek, which had three vertical slits pulping blood, and passed out again.

“I helped, I helped design them...” said Minnie.

“What you mean ‘help’? What do you, work for fuckin’ DARPA?” Shylock grew more impatient as Rue stirred more to wakefulness. “You got a ID? Gimme yur wallet.” He gestured a come-hither with the snubnose.

“No,” said Minnie, “I’m just a, I work for, well I *worked* for an R&D company. Independent start-up. Whatever our clients wanted. Honestly we barely knew what we were working on most of the time—”

“Yeah we ain’t got time for ya whole life story.”

“Right.” Minnie searched her overall pockets in a daze. She found her wallet in a back pocket and Shylock grabbed it and stepped back, put the snubnose on the bartop, rifled through Minnie’s many laminated cards for anything that would raise a brow.

“Small firm,” Minnie continued as if trying to convince herself, “subsidiary of a subsidiary. Right hand doesn’t know what the left hand’s doing, you know how it goes.” She grew in what passed for comfort and got up off the back bar’s sticky ground.

“I got no idea how this shit go, that’s why I’m askin’,” said the sleuth. He looked over at the barkeep, who was half conscious and likely concussed, and sighed through his nostrils. “I’m

assumin' you know what this is." He took his pick apart and shook the jump drive into his palm, feeling out its shape for signs of damage.

Minnie MacKenzie's eyes widened. "Yeah it's a prototype drive? From what I heard it's the first quantum—"

Shylock shushed, a pointer finger pressed to his big lips. He scanned the ceiling, the corners, his bulbous'd reflection in the concave surface of a plump whiskey bottle. The bar was cased and swept beforehand, but one never knew, and even knowing helped little with the unknown. "What would you do?" he said. "If you were me, I mean."

Minnie pushed her spectacles up on her nose. "I mean do you want me to answer or is that—"

"No it's, I mean if I don't give you this"—he darted his attention to the drive—"then it was all for nothin', right?" He squeezed the drive in his fist.

Shylock appeared to be a master of asking questions that were both rhetorical and not, so Minnie just started responding to whatever he said. "Yeah I got everything set up on my end." She looked round the room right quick. "I got it from here."

Shylock stared deeply at Rue Lover, the brown barkeep from the Bureau, according to the FBI badge in her wallet. She was coming out of her slumber. "So who the fuck is that?" he queried.

Minnie answered, "you said she was a Fed—I mean you know her employer. That can't be a good sign, right?"

“Fuckin’ signs, man.” Shylock shook his head. “Aight.” He offered the drive to Minnie, but when she grabbed it, he redoubled his grip and said, “I’m keepin’ yur wallet. So if it don’t happen, I’ll know.”

“Yeah,” said Minnie, nodding nervously, “no I’m on it. Understood—”

“You still here? Go, Go, Go!”

Minnie harbored the jump drive in a small breast pocket, hustled her bearings, hastened to the front door—

“The back door, go out the back”—

And hastened to the back door—

“Take your heat, I don’t need more heat”—

And grabbed the pulse carbon cannon contraption and hastened to the back door, round the corner past the can through the neon’d exit, fin.

The sleuth huffed in and out in rapid succession to psych himself up. He took a bar napkin and cleaned his bloody pick. A pig siren rang out and he froze, til he realized it was coming from the flatscreen

In which the negro biocop and his backup robo-dog pull up to the same stoop in a standard-issue pig hovertank to instill fear in the local youth by lifting one by the back hem of his baggy neon pants and berating him as a warning to the others while the robo-dog electronically yipped and wagged its robo-tail

and as he peered deep into the screen deducing subtext from cliches and tropes, his devil blues, in the screen's mild reflection, lined up with the negro biocop's deadly bionic reds, and he slowly succumbed to this portentous alignment, filled as it was with the fate of all those who hold fast to a cause no matter the price...

Rue stirred to waking life again and moaned, breaking the spell.

And so Shylock Jones looked for and found the bullet casing but panicked when he realized his prints were everywhere hence the meeting at a public place but even so, so he copped the snubnose and rubbed it down with a damp dirty bar rag and hurried with it to the back exit, doing a bump along the way which officially deaded his hope of quitting yay anytime soon, and he ducked down the alleyway trying to play it cool and stepped into the main thoroughfare and slipped into the crowd, trying not to run or look behind him, and the rain had stopped but started back up again which was a relief for the downpour furthered obscured his movements and he turned the corner and skipped down the steps of the 145th St/8th Ave subway station and almost paid the four dollar fare til he remembered he'd have to use the MTA's OMNY credit card tap system and even though he'd procured several cards not his own it felt wrong to betray his current position so he slipped through the emergency gate when someone leaving the station opened it but this method could've got him busted by the pigs so he ran down the remaining steps and slyly dropped the snubnose in the gap between the platform and the waiting uptown D, and pushed through the closing doors, and sighed.

Strangers looked and looked away.

They were on to him; they could tell he was high; they were briefly taken by his eyes and hue. Paranoid to plausible to probable.

He'd go three stops then catch a train in the other direction, just in case.

A comedy of errors, then.¹⁰

¹⁰ Alas, research only gets us so far. We could regale ourselves the densities of a thousand thousand critical tomes and n'er approach *a* truth, let alone *the* truth, capital T, that thing akin to whats-his-name in the sky, the light the truth the way, the end-all be-all Grand Universal Theory. For the (human) world is ending, and not in the myriad small ways human civilizations have come and gone, but in the big way, as in we have, like Abrams with *Lost*, put so many novel narratives of global destruction in play that it is no longer possible to keep track of our collective story. So unknown unknowns then. Such is the world we are set to inhabit. There will come a time (we're probably already in it, but how would we know) where the vaunted thinkers of the day will be so far behind in knowledge and ideas to combat human failures that *they* will seem like loons in tin-foil hats. We're on our own. All the comfort-chasers are flocking behind the rich, awaiting whatever pittance may befall them; all the rich are fueling their spaceships and stocking their state-of-art bunkers. Either the rest of us find what we need with readily available sources, or we make our reality anew, from scratch. We are, all of us now, merely pirates adrift in search of elusive bounty. We must plot our course on the fly.

Dead reckoning.

How perfect a pairing of words for our predicament.

And from here on out we will abandon the formal "we" for the cool and sober "one," the better to keep a critical mind while the sky collapses on one's collective head.

11 You are not the special soul what makes it big, you are not destined for greatness, there is no struggle for which your input tips the scales to one side or the other. There are no scales. There are no sides.

12 There is but the cool and sobering wrath of numbers, and the odds are against you. There is only the bless'ed respite luck bestows upon the lucky, and somewhere well without that gilded realm lies you. What of it? No tears will be shed by your absence; no celebration awaits your presence. Who cares?

13 Curs'ed is the soul what lives in thrall to narrative and, so enthralled, conjures origins and fates from the swirling dust in air. Is not ev'ry mote beholden to whatever breeze or stiff wind, stirred in the wake of whatever passing thing? Why this sticking to script, this tether to tale, to lone myths and collection visions and contrivances of beginnings and ends? Why this pathetic need for plot?

—From Pookie's *Black Bible*

too cipher six nine stop won cipher stop won three

Avast! Avast and fly yer jollies half-mast while we proof the galleys of all verminous mutiny, hold fast yer fire while we plug the hull of leaks and scrub the deck of bad blood, for there be traitors in our midst - scourge of scourges - and such deadweight'll be spared the quick cutlass or plodding plankwalk but thrown overboard to buoy in the blue as chum for crab and Kraken - so in the mean ahoy no friend ships, assume 'em fiends, provide none quarter, til we rout the scoundrel, scalawag and scum from out our ranks!

oh nine stop three seven a

—intercepted internal Party message

and Jones makes it to the end

Shylock Jones, ghetto gumshoe Gotham-born, rigged the interior for self-destruction and fled into the unknown seeking safe harbor.

Verily a reprieve was warranted and summarily given, for the heat had set its sights upon the Party and the clime had hobbled Gotham with its endless tears of tempest. So Shylock, keen for action in the relative calm, perused tales of terror and suspense whilst stuck in the void.

What had happened was the super sleuth sent word to the Party on the moves made that fateful night at the No Holds Bar in Harlem, how he'd did the dirt but a pig was rooting in that same mud, which portended ill for the Party moving forward. So he swiped the swine's personal effects and sent digital pics of their porcine persuasion to the relevant sources, along with a heavily redacted narrative, that said

too cipher six nine stop won cipher stop won too

**Bounty swindled; goods bartered. Vermin on deck rocked the boat.
Best batten down the hatches or trim sails. See attachment.**

oh nine stop too three p

—YERRR—

, and since then the super sleuth had holed up in the top floor loft of an abandoned South Bronx warehouse, avoiding yay and his own paranoid thoughts while awaiting next moves from the higher rank-and-file.

He was in a lull. No ups and downs from the daily perils of the Movement, an even keel from sobriety, comms were quiet, news nil. Nothing trending. Already the Party's haul of revolutionary new tech was out of the news cycle. Since then a storm surge had flooded Freedom Tower's sub-levels, and commentators were quick in calling the weather itself a terrorist threat. So the slow burn of social collapse played itself out. And Shylock, rogue and churlish from withdrawal, could do nothing but contemplate the limits of lone and lonely action in the void that was the warehouse, and so the sinking world.

While so alienated he watched *Alien* for the thousandth time.

Alien was a 1979 sci-fi/horror film directed by Ridley Scott, in which the blue-collar crew of the commercial space-mining vessel *Nostromo* is awakened from cryostasis by the ship's AI to heed a distress call from a nearby moon. Over the slow burn of the flick's first half it is revealed that the AI—MU/TH/UR 6000, called Mother by the crew—was given a directive by The Company to retrieve an alien specimen from that moon at all costs.¹¹

Havoc breaks loose soon after.

¹¹Ridley Scott's *Alien* and John Carpenter's 1982 film *The Thing* have much in common. They are both doubly generic, technically horror with sci-fi conceits; they both deal with isolation (in the void of space and the middle of Antarctica, respectively); they both have a mostly male cast (*Thing* having no women at all). Both are creature features (the titular *Alien* and *Thing*).

They both show the day-to-day drudgery of blue-collar work. Though ordinary folks in extraordinary settings is a common trope in horror and sci-fi, the depiction of boredom and grunt work is not. In fact the characters in both films *mostly* stave off boredom: they goof around, play cards, drink, quarrel over petty grievances, until they are forced into life-or-death scenarios. (In *The Thing*, the crew of U.S. Outpost 31 must survive the menace of an alien—thawed from the Arctic ice after 100,000 years—that can wholly assimilate other organisms and even mimic their personalities. Paranoia quickly ensues.)

Both films have negroes at odds with the rest of the crew. In *Alien*, the sole negro Parker is always vying for more respect from the higher rank-and-file; in *Thing*, Childs the mechanic is always squared against white protagonist MacReady, the helicopter pilot, over leadership of the rest of the crew (Nauls, the other negro, is the crew cook). On Fandom.com's *Thing* fan page, Childs is labeled the deuteragonist, second most important, of the cast. This is suspect. Childs and MacReady share much in common. Both are natural leaders. Both exhibit hot heads and then, when necessary, cooler ones. Though one gets the feeling that the rest of the crew just feels more comfortable with MacReady in charge. It is possible to read race into this assessment; it is impossible not to.

Shylock was still in the film's early stages, watching it in his white skivvies on a mattress on the floor, furthest from the front-facing windows and front entrance, nearest to the fire escape. One must always have a path of egress in case of emergency, so on so on etcetera. He was not watching the flick so much as three-dimensionally plotting the potential power plays among the doomed crew. The crew, to wit:

—Dallas, the Captain, highest ranking member of the crew, ruggedly handsome and cool-headed white man, who by standard movie metrics would be the main protagonist/hero,

—Kane, Executive Officer, white man of second highest rank, who would come to host the crew's impending doom in the most violently literal way,

—Ripley, Warrant Officer, white woman in charge when Kane and Dallas are off the ship, mostly by the book til the book no longer applied,

—Ash, Science Officer, "British" "white" "man," his being British a sly amerikkkan dig at their stuffy counterparts across the pond,

—Lambert, Navigator, another white woman, who occupies the typical hysterical female role against Ripley's no-nonsense character,

—Parker, Chief Engineer and sole negro, who feels disrespected (and underpaid) considering his relative importance on the ship,

—Brett, engineering technician, white man of lowest rank and least command, who shares with Parker the same dark humor (and money woes) about their lower status.

And between them, tension. Perhaps racial. Maybe gendered. But always, always over power.

There was also Jones, the ships' cat, a ginger amerikkkan shorthair. The plot progressed.

In which Dallas, Kane, and Lambert leave the ship to look for the source of the signal on the moon; in which Kane looks over some egg-like biology and a facehugger latches to his space helmet; in which Ripley, in charge when Kane and Dallas are off the ship, follows protocol and refuses the three crew members reentry to prevent contamination, but Ash lets them on anyway

Shylock peered deep into the screen, his head propped on a slick black silk-covered pillow. For the negro must be ever vigilant in retaining moisture in the coil. He was specially hip to the character Parker, who though hot-headed managed to keep his negro cool, and was always talking about either partying or money. Natch. It was not lost on Shylock that a negro had somehow retained his perceived negrocity roughly twoscore and ten years in the future; it was duly noted that negroes were in the future at all.¹²

¹² In the 2003 Toronto International Film Festival Dialogues, where TIFF screened a director's cut of *Alien*, actor Yaphet Kotto, who portrayed Parker in the film, told the story of being present at the August 28th, 1963 March on Washington, where he "stood there, at the steps watching Dr. King talk about his dream, and wondered whether or not I would ever see that dream."

On September 8th, 1966, three years after Martin Luther King's speech, *Star Trek* debuted on NBC in the 8:30 primetime spot, in which Captain Kirk leads an interracial crew as they travel through space on the USS *Enterprise*, in a distant nigh-utopian future. Their mission: "to boldly go where no man has gone before."

Or woman: black Broadway singer and dancer-turned actress Nichelle Nichols was offered the role of Lieutenant Uhura, one of the first televised roles of a black woman not only in the main cast but in a position of authority. She was set to leave the show after the first season and return to Broadway. But while attending a fundraiser, a big fan of *Star Trek* told her how much he valued her work on the show. She recognized him, of course; it was Dr. King. Nichols told King she was leaving the show—and before she could explain why, King replied, as Nichols tells the story in an interview for *Television Academy Foundation* (October 13th, 2010),

You cannot... For the first time on television we will be seen as we should be seen, everyday, as intelligent, quality, beautiful people, who can sing, dance, who can go into space... [*Star Trek* creator] Gene Roddenberry has opened a door for the world to see us. If you leave, that door can be closed... your role is not a black role, it's not a female role, he can fill it with anything, including an alien.

Nichols wound up staying for the show's entire run.

The main takeaway here is that the leader of the Civil Rights Movement was a Trekkie. (In fact, as Nichols relayed in the interview, *Star Trek* was the only show that King and his wife Coretta let their kids stay up late to watch.) Such is the cosmic importance of sci-fi that Yaphet Kotto "turned down other roles that offered far more

But the plot kept thickening, juicy-like.

In which Kane is taken to the medical bay, where it is revealed that the facehugger had somehow eaten through the helmet and firmly latched itself to Kane's face, hence the name, with its tail tightly wrapped around his neck; in which the crew attempts to pry it off, only to find its blood is corrosive and eats through the ship's hull; in which it is revealed that the facehugger has inserted itself down Kane's throat and made itself vital to his breathing

Shylock kept peering, with his hackproof laptop resting on his gut, the laptop custom built by a comrade with stolen hardware, the flick pirated from the latest backdoor breach of Warner-Amazon copyrighted material, and streamed from a torrent site on a Tor browser through a dedicated VPN. One can never be too careful whathaveyou. He was having a harder time concentrating between fantasies of coke laid come-hither on a table. He was losing his grasp on the negro, and their condition, in the fray.

In which the crew checks up on Kane to find him free of the facehugger and seemingly healthy, The facehugger's crablike exoskeleton shed on the floor; in which the crew celebrates Kane's apparent recovery over a final meal before going back in cryostasis for the ten-month trip back to earth; in which Kane writhes in pain and the aliens's second form, the chestburster, does what its name implies, then scurries off into the bowels of the ship

money” just to be in *Alien*, he said in an *IGN* interview in 2021, even though he “knew before I opened the script that my character wasn’t going to make it to the end. Because I know and film fans know, two things will happen to the brother in any movie like *Alien*. He’s not getting the girl, and he’s not going to make it.”

To be a negro who makes it into space, if not to the end, is to be a whole 'nother type of exceptional: the negro made banal. In the arctic, in the void. Anywhere one can imagine. One can dream.

Parker, in the fray, was in turns mad and resentful and deferential when taking orders from the higher-ups. There may have been some negro frequency to which Shylock had not yet attuned. But Parker seemed to be suffering the same affliction as everyone else on that doomed ship: the hostile unknowable threat of a nature untamed. And now, gone rogue.

A common trope of horror movies is that most characters make choices antithetical to their survival, and so never make it to the end. This trope prevents relating too much to the characters, and the viewer remains critical, distant, hyperaware.

*But dead that, thought Shylock, muhfuckas relate **too much** to the characters, that's why niggas be screamin' at the screen, they be tryna help, they might could be of service, they out here loud in the theater doing the lord's work, cuz dead ass ain't nobody makin' good decisions when they fightin' off a alien with acid blood on a tin can in outer space.*

It occurred to the super sleuth that his usual approach to media critique—a cogent hood analysis of the negro in art in order to foreground symbolisms buried deep in the amerikkkan lizard brain, for in that tortured psychic realm lay the likely pieces needed to SOLVE RACISM, and so end amerikkka as one knew it—was getting played out. All of Earth was now a compromised ship, corrosions leaking through the hull, foul agents run amok, the U.S.of A. the main corporate-driven culprit, sending its dark designs loose in everybody else's business. Whoever made it to the future, negro or otherwise, would have their work cut out for them, and all of it drudgery, blue-collar, grunt.¹³

¹³ In a March 25, 2024 *Guardian* article, director John Carpenter relates how *The Thing* was a flop in its theatrical release, mostly because of the film's bleakness, the thread of nihilism, the ambiguous ending where one is left unsure if Childs or MacReady, the only survivors, have been assimilated by the alien. As the straight-talking Carpenter has it, "[the audience] wanted to know who the thing was—which was left up in the air. They hated that but I didn't care, that's the way I wanted to end it. The film was about the end of the world." There is something to

And between these dark thoughts, flitting visions of thick white lines batting eyes at him.

Shylock paused the flick and got up and stretched, thought twice about smoking a loosie, checked his phone for updates—that same 718 number, calling his phone—and peeked out the front and back windows for any unusual activity. A fog had entered his brain again. Coke withdrawal; hunger; too many variables in play. Ash had gathered round all the joints on his dry blue-black skin. It threatened to take full control. Ash, a formidable foe, and frequent foil, of the negro's condition since the Passage. And acids, fatty and essential, its cure. He hunkered back down, took an Adderall and tried to focus his mind back on the *Alien* plot.

He was at the crucial twist in the flick, in which it was revealed that Ash, the Science Officer, was an android, sent by The Company to make sure the alien specimen was collected even at the cost of the crew. And as the super sleuth observed Ash twitch and his brow bead in white sweat, as he glitched and grew crazed and murderous, as he tried to stuff a rolled up porn mag down Ripley's throat, as Parker clocked him with a fire-extinguisher and Ash bled thick white fluid and violently flailed even as his head hung half-severed from his neck, Shylock Jones heard the tell-tale sounds of movement through the loft.

Thusly his own plot thickened.

...

Shylock Jones, intrepid ink-black investigator, did not bother investigating. In human history discovery was an alleged awe-provoking journey through a vast and endless expanse; in human law discovery forces both parties to show they whole ass before the court. Shylock was not in the mood for either. All was revealed by the creak and whistle of the old steel door moving

be said for embracing the unknown, for accepting that some problems cannot be solved but simply dealt with as they happen. Carpenter later remarked that the ambiguous ending was why the film still has a cult following.

through its rusted hinges, followed by the groan of rotted wood just under the threshold. The creak and then the groan, such was the poetry of entry. Trespassing was a misdemeanor, but if he got caught and went before the court, discovery would reveal a gun and extra cartridge in his black survival duffel, a felony. Shylock wasn't keen on catching either case.

But there was clearly another entity in the barren third floor loft, a moving thing of weight. The front door was locked. Or it wasn't. He'd lapsed in his conditioning, got too comfortable in peacetime. It was possible he forgot to check the perimeter for signs of intrusion. Or maybe he didn't. The fog, the withdrawal, the waiting, all combined to cloud his narrative. Days went by in hours. But Shylock only ever used the fire escape for entry and exit, there were less prying eyes minding other people's business, the backlot was reclaimed by nature and so gave better coverage for evasive maneuvers. He likely locked the door. The door could only be locked from the inside. Who or whatever else was there knew how to pick a lock. Shylock thought of Ash using his artificial wiles to get the alien on board, the alien creeping through the ship. *Who knew of the hideout what thing was upon him who ratted him out*

There was a rat infestation. Rats were not big enough to groan the wood. Coyotes had made their way down from upstate. There were raccoons. Coons were known to undo locks and open doors—but they would have to open it from the inside. The door might have been unlocked. *It only takes the one to infiltrate, to open the door for the rest*

Though cats were good at evading detection. They would hide in wait, and only move when conditions were prime.

The loft was a cavernous square with thick cement columns equidistant throughout the space, and the front door was round a corner and down a long hallway. Whatever was lurking

about was either still in the hallway or hiding snug behind a column. There was an empty red oil drum tucked in the back corner farthest from the door, between a brick wall and the back windows leading to the fire escape, where Shylock had laid the mattress and done most of what passed for living. The oil drum had been used as a burn barrel by whoever squatted in the spot last, and the super sleuth had wisely purchased a bag of fine gravel from the corner store for the quick snuffing of fire. All corner stores now carried sand and gravel bags for flood relief.

Shylock deftly snuck about the mattress, collecting necessary supplies—Adderall, his brown waxed cotton jacket, his afro pick with the handle shaped like a cutlass hilt—and stuffing them in his black duffel. He gathered all the loose-strewn tech around the mattress—earbuds, smartphone, laptop—and chucked them in the burn barrel, found his lighter hidden in the sheet's fold, took the silk cover off the pillow, lit the pillow on fire, threw the blazing pillow in the barrel. Sparks shot out, whites and yellows. A digital self-destruction, in case his tech had been compromised and hacked. *They know your every move your life is expendable who knows what evils They've already let loose*

Not three minutes had passed since he heard the telltale sounds. Minutes lasted hours.

He'd pilfered two wallets from that fateful night at the No Holds Bar in Harlem, in order to pass the details on to relevant members in the Party, and since then he'd kept them tucked under the mattress. Shylock moved to throw them in the blaze. Best to cover all his bases, to rid himself of the past, to be done with this chapter. And as he moved something pinched his back and he heard a zap sound and a current ran through his frame and he seized up and fell out—

—and when he regained muscle function, he found himself laid back out on the mattress. The fog had been replaced with a woozy cognition, aching muscles. A figure decked in all black,

face mask to cargos to combat boots, was looking through the wallets with their back turned to him. A rookie mistake.

The super sleuth quickly got to his feet and moved to yoke the figure out, but miscalculated his recovery and stumbled into them with his full weight, taking both of them to the ground. The intruder, on the floor, got Shylock in a closed guard, their legs locked around his hips, and managed to get the stun gun out from their left cargo pocket to use on him again. But Shylock, from his top mount straddling the figure's torso, quickly locked their left arm in a classic amerikkana, his left elbow tucked into their neck while he leaned into the arm lock, torquing their elbow and shoulder past comfort.

"Drop it," shouted Shylock, "drop it!" He tightened the arm lock, straining the shoulder tendons.

The intruder quit struggling and dropped the stun gun. Shylock scooped it up and yanked off the enemy's face mask before dismounting.

She sat up from the ground, breathing heavy, hair matted but still frizzled, freckled face flush and sweaty. She retrieved her glasses from her other cargo pocket, frowning at the bend in one of the temple hinges.

"Minnie?" said Shylock, startled. "Fuck is this?"

Minnie massaged and rotated her left shoulder. "You took my fucking wallet. Remember? I keep a tracker hidden in there. In the—inside the leather."

Shylock sprinted to the front windows and scrutinized the block. Dusk approached. Pigeons across the street fought for crumbs.

"You followed?" asked Shylock.

“No, I don’t think so—no. I’m not a rookie, Shy. That’s your name, right? The Fed called you—”

“Yeah you are. Green than a muhfucka.” Shylock suddenly realized he had nothing on save his skivvies, and was ashy than a mug. He speed walked back to the mattress, pulled his too-tight faded black skinny jeans on, then his canvas high-tops. “I mean what was the plan here,” he asked while lacing up his kicks, “just confront whoever you found and fight ’em to the death for some fuckin’ credit cards?”

Minnie sighed. “I’ve been tracking my wallet the past three days, and it hasn’t moved once. I figured you threw it out or something.”

“The fuck you care about a wallet? You shouldn’t be here.” Shylock shook his head.

“I need my shit, Shy. What do you want me to do, get new IDs? Go into a government building and give all my information to a government employee? During peacetime? They got, like, soldiers in all the buildings now.” She became suddenly pensive. “I’m kind of—I’m off the radar right now.”

“*You* off”—Shylock grew animated—“*I’m* off the radar. Off the grid, shit I’m tryna get off the goddamn *planet*, way shit is goin’. I swear to god, if you was followed—”

“I wasn’t followed.”

“—if somebody saw you snoopin’ around and called the pigs—I mean, you used the front entrance!”

“Is there even anybody on this block?” asked Minnie. “It’s a fucking dead zone.”

“Always somebody somewhere seein’ somethin’.” Shylock noticed the blaze in the burn barrel getting out of control, the noxious chemical smells in the air, the smoke billowing. If no

one was snooping before, they in all likelihood were now. He grabbed the filled gravel bag and hoisted the whole 40 pounds over the barrel, dumping gravel sparingly to get full coverage, then wholly to suffocate the flames. His eyes teared up. He gagged, he coughed. And so Shylock Jones, ashen coal-black charbroiled negro, sighed at the low point of his day.¹⁴

“Dammit, Minnie. Got me slippin’. All this for a wallet. You know what peacetime means?”

Minnie adjusted her crooked glasses. “I know what peacetime means—”

“It mean we preparin’ for war. Block’s too hot right now, s’why *we* cooled off. They out here callin’ in anything suspicious. Eybody on edge.”

Shylock realized how easy it was for Ash, the android, to dupe the civilian crew of the *Nostramo*, how easily The Company could loop unwitting civilians into the fray.

“Thanks for the history lesson,” said Minnie, walking over to the front windows and carefully peeking out. “But *this* is the situation. SNAFU, remember? First thing they taught us in training: the situation you’re *in* is the one you gotta deal with. So I’m here now, I fucked up, whatever. It’s done. What do we do now?”

Shylock tried to rub his upper back where Minnie stuck him with the stun gun. “I’m gonna be sore for like a week. So thanks for that.”

“Yeah well I think you fucked up my shoulder. So we’re even.”

¹⁴ Both *Alien* and *The Thing* have a prominent scene of a negro wielding a flamethrower. In the former, Parker tries to torch the *Alien* but cannot because Lambert, hysterical and frozen in fear, won’t move out the way; in the latter, Childs torches the whole kennel of sled dogs after it is revealed that they have been assimilated by *The Thing*. It is poetic that the so-called hot-headed negroes are entrusted with fire.

No dogs made it to the end.

Next moves, thought Shylock. That's all there ever was, all the blue-collar crew of the *Nostramo* had to work with. Maybe NEXT MOVES was the new problem he'd spend his days trying to solve.

He'd all but forgotten the plot to *Alien*, and so any useful deduction on the negro condition therein.

The crucial weakness of deduction: it only works with the clarity of hindsight, with the scene played out prior to one's arrival; it can lay a path to the past but has no working key for any future door; it cannot account for the unknown. Shylock's current worries were not the black pall of racism but the black cloud coming inland from the Atlantic, not the vagaries of zombie capitalism but the vagaries of weather, rats and leaks and unlocked doors, the hyperlocal and banal, normal human error and existential human dread. Coke withdrawal. Brain fog. Ash creeping up his limbs, plotting his end. No logic but the street fight, the opponent everywhere and nowhere. The alien; The Company. What difference. And him hunting for meaning and narrative arcs in a story being written on the fly.

All ad hoc everything.

"Aight," said Shylock, "this spot compromised. We gotta go. Through the back."

Minnie screwed her face up, blushed again. "Like the fire escape?"

"Yezzir."

"I - I'm afraid of heights."

Shylock guffawed and rolled his big blues damn near out the sockets. "Course you are."

"Fuck you," said Minnie, and meaning it.

The telltale blues and reds of the jakes cycled their light patterns from out the front windows.

Shylock could not help himself. “Told you.” He checked the burn barrel for any sneaking flames, threw his duffel over his shoulder, opened the back window and stepped through it onto the rickety fire escape. He looked at Minnie. “You comin’?”

Minnie stood, holding her wallet, paralyzed.

“Yo, we gotta go,” said Shylock. “I can't wait for you.”

“Yeah,” Minnie responded, taking a hair tie off her wrist and fitting her flattened mound through it into a ponytail, “no I - I'm right behind you.”

Shylock shook his head. “Don't get caught.” He went to descend the fire escape but stopped, pulled the stun gun from his back pocket, threw it back to Minnie, who fumbled the catch but caught it, in the end.

And as dark descended from the sky, so the super sleuth descended into the bowels of the Bronx, where black creatures of every persuasion stirred.

...

Night settled in, the air fresh and cool. It felt like fall was supposed to feel, how the old heads described it. Cool, calm. Normal. Which of course meant a storm was on the way. Shylock shouldered through the backlot bramble and lifted the chain-link fence dividing private from public. He bent and maneuvered through the hole, unhitched his black duffel where it got stuck on the fence, stepped out onto the deserted side block, headed north away from the pig lights. Shylock thought of his naked torso glinting in the half-moon light,

In which the alien's final form is revealed: the xenomorph, eight-foot, blue-black, slick, sharp-cornered, its hermaphroditic anatomy with overtly phallic features—its dick-shaped head, its pharyngeal jaw that thrusts and penetrates—always shiny and wet, leaking saliva or acid or post-natal slime, dripping sex and blood and violence

How negroes rarely made it to the end,¹⁵

In which Parker tries to get Lambert, in full feminine hysteria, out of the way so he can torch the xenomorph with a flamethrower; in which Lambert and then Parker are killed by the alien

¹⁵ Keith David—another theater performer-turned-Hollywood star—in that same *Guardian* article thought back on his role as Childs in *The Thing*, saying “traditionally, the Black man is not the guy who lasts to the end. This was one of the first movies where the black guy lasts to the final scene. I don’t think I’m the only brother who’s ever survived in a horror or sci-fi movie, but I’m certainly one of the few. It was great foresight on John’s part”—referring to director John Carpenter.

There is a tendency for genre films (overwhelmingly white but what isn’t) to be progressive in casting, representation, even subject matter. One can speculate how the low-brow, low-budget status of genre simply allows more freedom, and therefore subversion, in narrative: if no one is watching, one can take bigger risks and care less about catering to a general audience. But the filmmakers, when asked, tend to shrug off any allegations that they were being overtly political—feminist, anti-capitalist, race-conscious, whatever. Much is said on the *The Thing* itself—as allegory for the AIDS crisis (all the characters are men infected by a new unbeatable entity), as metaphor for women (the podcast *Faculty of Horror* found a quote from John saying, “I thought it would be more interesting if the female presence was the creature, with all these men not willing to be taken over by it”), as metaphor for the Cold War and the Red Scare (the enemy can be anyone, even you). Not much can be found on a negro making it to the end.

The role of Ripley was written for a man; Ridley Scott, in a May 29, 2020 *Los Angeles Times* interview, said on casting Sigourney Weaver for the role of Ripley, “I think it was [then president of 20th Century Fox] Alan Ladd who said, ‘why can’t Ripley be a woman? [...] I thought, why not, it’s a fresh direction, the ways I thought about that. And away we went.’”

Director George Romero, in an August 31, 2020 article from *thewrap.com*, said, on casting negro actor Duane Jones as the lead of his 1968 horror movie *Night of the Living Dead*: “Duane Jones was the best actor we met to play Ben. If there was a film with a black actor in it, it usually had a racial theme [...] Consciously I resisted writing new dialogue ‘cause he happens to be black. We just shot the script.”

It seems happenstance—kismet, luck—is roughly as important to any social movement or cultural revolution as the day-to-day grunt work of organizing and activism. No one truly knows when or how the next spark will fly, and where or what it will ignite. But one does see precedent for negroes wielding flamethrowers, in space and at the end of the world. They don’t even have to make it to the end.

Duane Jones did not make it to the end of *Living Dead*; he was killed by cops, who mistook him for a zombie. Romero claimed to see no politics in this either.

How he'd left a comrade in the fray, per protocol, but could have moved differently, put a new narrative in play,

In which Ripley, the lone survivor, rigs the Nostromo for self-destruction and flees to the escape pod; in which Ripley goes back to rescue Jones, the ship's cat; in which it is revealed that the xenomorph has hid in the escape pod but Ripley flushes it out by opening the hatch and blowing it into the void, and Ripley goes back in a cryostasis pod with Jones on her belly, the both of them floating through the void in hopes of rescue and safe harbor

Shylock found himself attracted to Minnie, and lightskinned'deded negresses in general. Another small, hyperlocal, quasi self-hating problem he'd yet to solve on account of the big overwhelming ruthless Now. But he'd made a bad first impression, and now a second one. So be it. One less deduction to make.

This, thought Shylock, mouthing the words under his breath, this how They do, how They get you, got you all caught up on the convenient fiction of race so you ain't thinking 'bout the fact of your animal nature, that you a spark in the bulb of the human species, a spectral color, light bouncing off a surface, that you'se a commoner among commoners, a fellow traveler on Spaceship Earth, that we's aliens trapped in the doomed vessel SS amerikkka, duking out survival in a hostile ship but gettin' blamed for the ship's demise, like we aksed to be on this ship, like that corrosive blood ain't been collectin' in the vessel, like it's bubbling and eating thru the

hull by our actions and not The Company's, like they ain't start it? Who the captor and who the captive? Who the alien? Who invadin' who?

There was a growing homeless population in the South Bronx, not from rent increases but from condemned buildings that landlords never bothered retrofitting to the new normal, forcing tenants out for their own safety—a clever way to avoid due process and civil suits. Shylock kept his shirt and jacket off to better blend in. If the pigs came through looking for a quick fix to meet their quota they'd pass him by and let him lone, he'd be just another dark dreg, another ashy negro caught in the churn, another rough beast limping towards Bethlehem.

All the better to loose his anarchy upon the world.

And what is the negro but a xenomorph? A creature stolen and studied for some foreign interloper's nefarious purposes? A hypersexual being dripping fluids, seeking white vessels to fuck, contaminate and breed, all sleek and black and phallic, driven by low passions and base instinct? Is Alien not the colonizer's wet feverish nightmare, their own dark designs coming back to haunt them? Are they not the architects of their own demise? And what is Ash but a corruption of the human soul, a blunt instrument of kkkapital, modified to do The Company's bidding without need or want, without complaint or comment? Is Ash not the perfect slave made in his master's image?

The first droplets of rain hit his shoulders, providing some much needed moisture to his skin.

A mixed race couple, high-yellow and white, of upper-middle class funk—spectrifiers, the trending term of art, a compound of “speculative gentrifiers,” a new class of new-money folk buying up doomed land betting that the second and third waves of climate catastrophe would be overhyped, giving them prime real estate at the end of the world—saw Shylock, half-nekked and ashy, walking in their direction, and they quickly crossed the street.

And just like that, SOLVING RACISM was back on the agenda.

It occurred to Shylock Jones that from now on he'd do the due diligence of packing a half pound of shea butter in every survival kit.

Magical Negroes

Shylock Jones, handsome hoodied hawkshaw, brazen-fro'd and blueblack as a moonlit night, ducked into a Harlem alleyway to slip the Feds and consider next moves.

Lo, a winter squall did verily descend upon Gotham, heaving heavy winds and heaping blinding white aspersions feet-thick along the East Coast. Shylock, taking respite from the Grind, went to the Magic Johnson Theater on 124th and Frederick Douglass Blvd to peep a matinee showing of Stephen King's *It*.

To wit: *It* was a 1990 two-part television miniseries based on the 1986 namesake book, following the lives of seven kids from the fictional town of Derry, Maine, and their struggle against an ancient malevolence. The TV movie was mostly faithful to the book, using the narrative device of flashback, where the grown-up seven recollect their childhood woes. *It*—the titular malevolence—emerged every 27 some-odd years to feast on humans, with a preference for children. *It* mostly took the form of Pennywise the Dancing Clown, but could morph into *Its* victims' respective fears, for fear seasoned the flesh before the kill.

In which the mostly empty theater fades to black and the movie begins; in which a little white girl is killed offscreen by Pennywise; in which Pennywise, from inside a storm drain, lures in a little white boy named Georgie with the promise of a good time, then grows monstrous fangs and bites Georgie's arm off before dragging him into the sewer, at which point the audience provides commentary:

“Yo where this nigga’s parents at? Type’a bad parenting is this”

“How you don’t know not to talk to a clown in the sewer? See this why I can’t fuck with horror movies, cuz ain’t nobody got no common sense”

“Yup, cuz you dont know how to mind ya business”

The seven kids, having bonded through traumas shared and personal, form the Losers Club to ward off evils local and cosmic. It’s members:

- Billy, the stutterer, whose brother Georgie’s gruesome death puts the plot in motion;
- Richie, the sarcastic loudmouth;
- Stan, the Jewish anal-retentive;
- Eddie, the hypochondriac momma’s boy;
- Ben, the fat one;
- Beverly, who suffered every abuse at the hands of her father;
- and Mike, the negro.

The Losers Club find the courage to fight *It* and head to the Barrens, an old abandoned sewer tunnel in the woods, where *It* lives and feeds. Through various trials and revelations they defeat *It* but, unsure if *It*’s dead, agree to come back in 27 some-odd years to finish the job.

Midway through the flick Shylock Jones grew irritable, jostled in his seat, furrowed his brow, sucked in stale theater air through his teeth. Mike, the negro child, left a psychic aftertaste,

bittersweet. Good ol' Mike Hanlon, smart and kindly negro, who Shylock Jones had never thought twice about, was now all he could think about. A side effect of trying to SOLVE RACISM: it becomes blinding when present, glaring when absent, follows one wherever one goes. It is the Pennywise of amerikkkan ideologies, it is *It*.

Someone arrived late to the movie—a cardinal sin—and sat directly behind him.

The movie continued. More cool-headed action from Mike, good ol' Mike Hanlon. Shylock Jones took a clandestine box of dark chocolate-covered raisins from his jacket's inner pocket. Theater prices were not keeping pace with working class wages. He bit into one, rolled the chocolate round with his tongue. Another bittersweet concoction to consider.

A second latecomer tiptoed in and sat three seats to his right.

Kid Mike Hanlon, in his introductory scene, gave a brief history of Derry during a classroom show-and-tell. He shared old photos of Derry's industrial beginnings—the iron works, the sand pipe—along with tales of horrifying happenings at each—a deadly explosion, a disaster where hundreds of the town's early settlers mysteriously vanish—and then, in the very next scene, is called a nigger and chased by the local punks into the woods.

A third latecomer crept into the theater and sat three seats to his left. Shylock Jones tensed up.

In fact, grown-up Mike Hanlon was the first main character introduced in the movie, as he observed the pigs clearing the crime scene of the little white girl brutally murdered by Pennywise at the movie's beginning, good ol' Mike Hanlon taking notes from the sidelines as the pig chief berated him for not minding his business, Mike Hanlon, whose poor black ass stayed in racist-ass Derry while the rest of the Losers Club left to become they best self, good ol' Mike,

who became the town librarian, benefactor of knowledge and history in a town that cared little for either, a man whose soul was so pure and good he took a thankless job in a shitty town just to save the town from itself, who forgoed intimacy, who hunkered down and studied while the other Losers gallivanted round the globe awash in wealth and success, who even as a kid, even after all the bullying and death threats and his parents dying in a house fire, was cool-headed and determined while the others whined and fussed over normal kid stuff, who singlehandedly got the gang back 27 some-odd years later to finish the job. If not for Mike, good ol' Mike Hanlon, the world would still be terrorized by *It*.

It occurred to Shylock Jones that Mike Hanlon was a magical negro.

And with motion complex in conditioning yet swift in practice the super sleuth jumped over three isles of seats in turn and sprinted to the emergency exit, with all but one latecomer in tow.

...

Shylock Jones leaned into the squall. He tucked his formidable fro into his hoodie's hood, that hood into his brown waxed-cotton jacket hood, searched within his fro for his pick with a secret blade in the Black Power-fisted handle. God forbid, but god is known to hover idly by when shit goes down, and cannot be counted on to intervene.

Escape was paramount. He hastened his pace, never looking back to gauge his pursuers' level of threat. They would not have true aim, for visibility in the storm was next to nil; they would not catch him on foot, for he was formidable on all terrain save water, and tempered in all climes save the open sea. They could, however, wear him down. Or worse, lure him in with the promise of a dull middle class life free of relevant struggle so long as he toed the line, or towed it

in their favor. Or rally more sleeper troops in deep cover from the corners to corner him. Who knew how many spooks lived among the fray.¹⁶

Escape was all-important. Cold air filled his nostrils, stung his face. He jogged through the thick sticking snow to 125th and dipped west to St. Nicholas Ave, towards St. Nicholas Park. A burly man in a charcoal peacoat kept Shylock's pace; another, lying in wait under a bodega canopy, joined the first. As Shylock Jones approached the corner of 125th and St. Nick, a woman, standing with hands in her long black trench's pockets, activated and joined the other two. Dig the monochrome tones of the Law, navy and gray and shades of black, black shades to hide their features, learned gaits. But 125th is a wide dual-lane street, and they were on the side where traffic bound west. An accordion-bus came slowly barreling down Shylock Jones' eastbound side, chains on its tires for friction in the snow, and as it passed it briefly blocked their line of sight. The super sleuth hitched himself to the back right side of the bus, cold fingers and wet sneaker boots wedged into any crevice they could find. A boy sitting in the back of the bus peeped Shylock Jones through the window, then put his headphones on and minded his business. The two who'd tailed the sleuth from the theater suddenly switched direction and ran after the bus, and one slipped and fell from the effort. The other three ran into the street and sprinted to catch up to him, but the bus sped up and cruised through two green lights, giving Shylock Jones

¹⁶ *The Spook who Sat by the Door* (1973), a film based on the semi-autobiographical novel by Sam Greenlee, follows Dan Freeman (natch) and his misadventures working in the CIA. Freeman is their first negro hire; though on paper he is overqualified (college graduate, Korean War vet with extensive arms and combat training, highest marks in CIA training), he is really hired to deflect accusations of racism. (His job more-or-less amounts to manning the copy machine, but there were talks of giving him a desk by the front door, where he would be most visible.) Freeman quits, and uses his CIA background to secretly train and radicalize black gang members in Chicago for revolution. Antics ensue.

Spook was suppressed upon its release, and Greenlee was convinced the FBI was behind the suppression. Tim Reid, who played grown-up Mike Hanlon in *It*, acquired the rights to the film and released it to general audiences in 2004. Reid located a remaining negative of the film, which was stored under another name. As he told the *Chicago Tribune* at the time, "when they want to lose something, they lose it."

"Spook" is old slang for both a house negro and a spy.

a solid two-block lead. As it slowed he hopped off and skidded on the plowed, icy street, dipping down Malcolm X Blvd to 124th, toward Marcus Garvey Park.

Shylock Jones kept hideouts in the four boros that matter, always situated near a park. One must always have access to the natural world etcetera, earth's bounty keeps one keen on one's origins so on so forth whathaveyou. Of more import was their lack of high walls and access codes and cameras, the better to avoid capture. Escape was a dominant negro theme. Since colored people time immemorial. Physical, first. If not physical—and who could blame the protonegroes for their fear of death-diving into the Atlantic, or fleeing into the vast wild of the New World, dogs and armed men on horseback at their heels—then mental, at least, even if by the grace of the oppressor's god. If not mental, then lineal, with eyes low and hands busy, saving piecemeal coin from kith to kin to kith again.

Though torching the lot remained a plausible option.

Shylock Jones scaled a black wrought-iron gate between two brownstones, across from Marcus Garvey Park. Once over, he lost his footing from the frost on the rustic rusted lattice, and landed awkward on his right ankle. Through grit teeth and grimace he ducked behind a dead tree in the alleyway, flattened himself against a brownstone's red brick wall, to consider next moves. He peeked around the tree trunk; one pursuer skulked by, another, then nothing. He waited, still. No miracle, no magic would reveal a hidden truth or path. He would have to strategize on the fly.

This, this is what the super sleuth found so troubling about Mike, good ol' Mike Hanlon. Where was his oppositional spirit? The chip on his shoulder? He came from the working class, and grew up in a mostly white working class town replete with the telltale isms—whence his near-religious calm and grace? Shylock Jones thought and thought while he waited out his

throbbing ankle, but could not arrange a synaptic chain that would lead Mike Hanlon to such an outcome. This no doubt spoke more to the sleuth's disposition, but surely some truth lied therein. Magical negroes are always poor and rarely learned, and though magic would likely solve a great many of their problems, they defer to any Miss Ann and Mr. Charlie they encounter. The only explanation for such a disconnect took Shylock Jones out of the plot and into the mind of the plotter.

A good faith reading of Mike Hanlon's narrative arc: he represents the Struggle writ small, forced to uphold the status quo of a society that hates and fears him all the same.

A neutral reading: any member of the Losers Club could have taken the helm and stayed behind, it just so happened to be the negro.

A bad faith reading: Mike is a magical negro.

All readings served the State and could therefore be rejected outright but the latter was the most plausible, for Stephen King had used the trope before.

Shylock Jones started digging at the base of the tree.

There were far more egregious magical negroes in King's canon. To wit: Dick Halloran from *The Shining*. Dick speaks in a kindly negro patois and has telepathic abilities—the titular *Shining*—and learns a little white boy named Danny has them too, and so spends his narrative arc helping the little white boy he just met master the *Shining*, at great cost to himself. (In the book he is injured; in the movie, directed by Stanley Kubrick, he is murdered. Make of Kubrick's decision to slay the sole negro what you will.) This arc was particularly damning, for the point of telepathy is to share and access the mind without the need for physical proximity. Dick Halloran could have guided the little white boy remotely, from anywhere on earth, from the *moon* if he

bothered to hone such remarkable powers, but the magical negro suffers from a comic irony: having superhuman powers but a subhuman brain to use them.

But also: John Coffey from *The Green Mile*. John is a six-foot, eight-inch mentally impaired negro with a kindly negro patois, who is on death row for raping two little white girls, a crime he did not commit. John is built like a linebacker. He is highly emotional, and empathetic, and kind and quiet and gentle and kind, and shares the Lord's initials. He can also heal the sick and dying with his touch. John spends his narrative arc helping the very same people who locked him up and hate and fear him, only to get the electric chair at the end, accepting his fate with gentle grace and quiet kindness.

And finally: Ellis "Red" Redding, from *The Shawshank Redemption*. Red sounds more-or-less like a human negro. He spends his narrative arc helping white man Andy Dufrayne navigate prison life. Dufrayne is serving two life sentences for murdering his wife and her lover, a crime he did not commit. While Dufrayne is aloof and in-his-head and unfit for prison life, Red is street-smart and hip to all happenings—yet Dufrayne is the one who escapes from prison, while Red continues serving time.¹⁷

¹⁷ *The Shawshank Redemption* is based on Stephen King's novella *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*. In the movie Morgan Freeman plays Red; in the book, Ellis Boyd "Red" Redding is a red-headed Irishman. Both versions of Red were actually guilty of a heinous crime. (In the novel, he attempts to murder his wife to inherit her newfound wealth by cutting the brakes in her car, but she winds up crashing into another vehicle, killing a neighbor and child; the film version of Red never reveals his crime.) Freeman was initially skeptical of taking the role, but was eventually persuaded, and it would end up being one of his most celebrated performances.

It is of course known that Morgan Freeman is a negro and not, in fact, a redheaded Irishman. The issue is not one of race or representation so much as their unnecessary inclusion. Casting a red-headed Irishman in the role would have had the effect of representing two white men bonding in prison. This is a likely occurrence, as roughly 60 percent of the U.S. prison population is white. It would not have been the most novel film conceit, but the plot of *Shawshank* is novel indeed, for the main protagonist Andy Dufresne was a banker before his arrest, and Red was at least money-adjacent; Andy uses his financial wherewithal to help his captors with their money woes, and uses that limited social cache to get himself and other prisoners needed resources; Red uses his ground-level wherewithal to sneak contraband into the prison, thus providing fellow prisoners more resources; all the while of Andy's sentence he was digging a hole, with a rock hammer Red had procured for him, from his cell to the sewer system, and he eventually escapes through the slowly dug tunnel after nineteen years behind bars. (The hole was hidden under a poster of Rita Hayworth, hence the novella's name.)

One would think a negro with telepathy, or healing hands, or a resolute mind wisened by worldly hardships, would make more consequential moves. Would that a negro with god-like abilities could become a god, and the reckoning it implies.

(Some would argue Mike Hanlon and Red are more akin to house negroes, not magical negroes. But house negroes benefit from their actions, whereas magical negroes do not. House negroes become capitalist billionaire rappers, supreme court justices, the president. Same as it ever was.)

Escape was the goal. Shylock Jones dug with brittle fingers through the snow and wet, packed soil at the tree's base, and pulled from the muck a survival pack in vacuum-sealed plastic.

In which a lady peeps him from a side window and closes the shade, minding her business for better or worse

He blew on his hands and rubbed them together, used the teeth of his pick to tear the edge of the plastic, and pulled from it a waterproof ballistic nylon duffel. Its contents: a snubnose .22 with

All this to say that the book was brimming with amerikkkan social critique, and like any critique of amerikkka, race is of course at the fore even if it plays the back. The movie could have spoken more to the U.S. prison system as a macrocosm of U.S. capitalism at large, where those already well-resourced have the advantage of "escaping" the day-to-day; or how those with less resources are largely confined to hustling a living *inside* the system, rather than escaping it; or how the combining of so-called book and street smarts is a truly viable long-term strategy for escape from the system (and its eventual destruction: Andy mails proof of the prison's many financial corruptions to the local newspaper after he escapes, forcing the prison warden to commit suicide rather than face arrest, thus ending, at least, that warden's evil reign).

But all that gets talked about is the budding and beautiful friendship between the hip negro and awkward white guy. Such is the weirdness of race that interracial relations are seen as something almost sublime. Had both actors been white, one wonders how an audience would have taken to the film, and more importantly its more important implications.

Frank Darabont directed *Shawshank* in 1994. In 1999 he would go on to direct another King adaptation, *The Green Mile*. Audiences adore this film as well.

Currently both *Shawshank* and *Green Mile* are in IMDB's 250 highest ranked movies of all time, numbers 1 and 28 respectively.

extra cartridge, dual-band walkie, flashlight, pack of Reds for nerves, dried fruits and meats, three sealed water bottles, geiger counter, portable water filter. God has a plan, but tells no one what it is, so one must be prepared for anything.

Shylock Jones stuffed the gear back in the duffel and slung the strap across his chest. He got up from kneeling and winced, forgetting to keep weight off his ankle. He waited. A half-hour, an hour. Finally he climbed back over the gate with measured footing, accounting for the sprain. When he touched the ground he saw, through the shifting snowfall, a silhouette across the street. A long trench, shades of black: the woman from before. He held a grip on the pick in his fro; the silhouette hovered a hand at hip level, then put both hands slowly up, and moved to close the gap between them.

A lump on the sidewalk caught the super sleuth's eye. Several saccades built up the image of a man in black, slumped unmoving in the snow, a service pistol still in his hand.

Raised hands were a heuristic to ease conflict. But also a calculation to stall conflict, and bide time to consider next moves. Shylock Jones split the difference and detached the hidden blade from his pick, tucking it between his pointer and middle. He bent his knees and slid a foot forward to ground his weight on his healthy leg.

The silhouette crossed the street, arms raised. No sooner did she come close enough for Shylock Jones to see her features than a burly man in black came swooping round the corner, his charcoal peacoat billowing like an owl's wings eclipsing its prey. The sleuth and the silhouette reacted quicker than thought would allow and drew their weapons.

Shit went down, and god was nowhere to be found.

...

It behooves a plot to have a fitting end. In another sense, plots can only be realized so long as their details are kept concealed.

In which the following: kinetic frenzy; blows thrown and parried; a spark of gun fire, magnesium white; skin slitting, blood arcing through the sky and speckling the settled snow; a spook reveals themselves, further thickening the plot; two bodies on the ground, fates unknown; folks who don't mind their business and call the pigs, who arrive to find a scene sans suspect

Shylock Jones shrugged his shoulder to prevent the duffel's sling from falling off, and flipped up the collar of the charcoal peacoat to further hide his features. He'd shed his brown jacket for fear it may have been bugged, likely in the theater. His blood was no doubt on the jacket. There would be no clear path tracing the blood to him, but one never knows, and to think too deeply on the matter would only impede the making of moves. He took a wandering path, pimp-strutting to play down his limp. Word on the pig frequencies was one suspect had a limp. He puffed his afro out with a pick missing its handle, a ploy to keep his left arm above his heart. A bandana was tightly wrapped around the bicep, per the fashion, or gang affiliation, or to stem the bleeding. A bevy of narrative arcs to throw pigs off the scent. It was sheer luck he escaped mostly intact, let alone alive. It is a miracle he escaped at all. It was an act of magic, a collusion with dark forces to warp the very vibes of matter to his will. For if negroes were indeed magical, they'd take that secret to the grave.

The block was hot, the blizzard cooled it down. Cars had to creep for want of traction, eyes cut to curb wind and flurries and now sleet. The D train on St. Nicholas Ave was the new

goal. Nicholas, patron saint of children, the needy, the sick; of wolves and thieves; known for miracles and helping the wretched in secret. People to this day share stories alleging his various acts. So be it. Let time and legend fill the plot.

Further in the film *It* is revealed to be an ancient cosmic malevolence, a quasi-entity, whose true form can only be described as “deadlights.” *It* is not an object, but a subject, and can only be perceived in limited forms by the limited mind, and made real by that perception. *Its* fuel is fear, so fear is what *It* manifests. *Its* common earthly form is Pennywise, but when cornered reveals a truer form of a giant spider-like creature. *It* is a telepathic shapeshifting spider-clown from outer space.

An alternate reading: within *It* lie the myriad isms and inhumanities, the Supreme Evil Metaphor from which baser evils are borne. *It* thrives in the dark corners of the human heart and mind. And only coalition, union, solidarity could ever stop such evil from rearing its shapeshifting head.

Stephen King, all considered, was one groovy cat.¹⁸

¹⁸ “...I would never consider diversity in matters of art. Only quality. It seems to me that to do otherwise would be wrong.”

-tweet from Stephen King, 7:20AM, January 14th, 2020

The tweet was quickly taken out of context, as he was expanding on a previous tweet about the Oscars, to wit:

“As a writer, I am allowed to nominate in just 3 categories: Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Original Screenplay. For me, the diversity issue—as it applies to individual actors and directors, anyway—did not come up. That said...”

-tweet from Stephen King, 7:18AM, January 14th, 2020

That said... if quality is to be the superlative metric of art, then surely King’s use of the magical negro trope would sully a sizeable portion of King’s canon. They are a trope, and tropes are defined not by their quality but their lazy repetition. The issue is that the same mind who can conjure up a telepathic shapeshifting spider-clown from outer space can only write one negro, with minor variations. This leads to darker implications. King sees negroes this way; he doesn’t see negroes at all, so pulls them together with whatever fragments he can find in his native Maine, the whitest state in the U.S.; he cares little either way, and simply writes according to his whims.

It is also plausible that King writes negroes in what, to his mind, is their best light. This would be the scariest story of all.

17 This reluctance to kill is a silly convention. One can not only slay the living, but a habit, a down-spiraling thought, the ego. Those narrative darlings, clinging to life on the page. Whatever the creature, the method is the same: bloody, violent, absolute. Choose your weapon, pick your victim, do the deed. The bloodier the better.

—From Pookie's *Black Bible*