



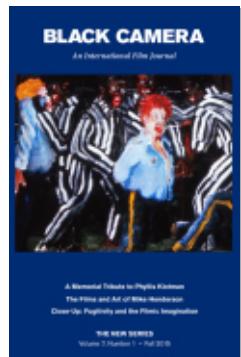
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Close-Up: Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination

On the Chronopolitics of Black Social Life; or, How Mister Winfield “Sends Go”

M. SHADEE MALAKLOU

Abstract:

This essay examines how the relationship between black performance and black ontology might disrupt the chronopolitics of social death. To date, critical reception of The Inevitable Defeat of Mister & Pete (dir. George Tillman Jr., 2013) has read the film as a multiracial coming-of-age story about two children on the run from state social services in a nightmarish Brooklyn landscape. Against these readings, I argue that the film is available to a more radical interpretation that locates, in the character of Mister, modes of black performance that puncture and disrupt what Frantz Fanon describes as the fact of blackness. Mister’s dreams of escape materialize around a casting call for child actors in Beverly Hills, for which he spends his fugitive summer preparing. His study of acting engages in a serial invention of alternative selves—the production of substitute identities by which he invents himself anew in black. Mister’s fugitive maskings enact the black invention that Fanon champions in the figure of “the leap” into other lifeworlds: worlds unbounded by the temporal regime of social death. In theatrical snippets, Mister leans into slow, stalled time to animate life in non-movement; in spite of a formal cinematic structure that thrusts his movements forward, Mister remains suspended in the “colored” time of captivity, which is coincidentally where he cultivates social life.

I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction. I must constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists of introducing invention into life. In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself.

—FRANTZ FANON¹

This movie isn’t just a powerful story [or] a great piece of art. For so many of you, it’s the reality you see every day in your classrooms and in your communities. This is not unfamiliar. Many of you work with kids just like Mister and Pete. You see them every day: kids struggling against heartbreaking odds in neighborhoods torn apart by poverty and hopelessness, surrounded by gangs and

guns and drugs; you see this every day. But, see, this is the thing—the beauty of this movie. This movie isn't just about the challenges that kids like Mister and Pete are facing, [and] that's really why this movie was so powerful to me, because it's also about their courage, their grit, their resilience . . . that these kids displayed even in the most hopeless circumstances. Kids are living like this every day. *Every day.*

—MICHELLE OBAMA²

On January 15, 2014, six months after a July 2013 statement by President Barack Obama that “Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago,”³ First Lady Michelle Obama hosted a White House screening of *The Inevitable Defeat of Mister & Pete* (dir. George Tillman Jr., 2013)⁴ to provoke with considerable urgency a national conversation about the education needs of children (of color) in underserved communities. The event ceremoniously reinforced the President’s North Star goal: a neoliberal promise to Americans that the United States will be home to the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. The North Star goal effectively mobilizes Michelle Obama’s untimely indictment in the service of a future-perfect space and time, one in which children of all races and economic backgrounds share equal access to the goods and services of public education. Meanwhile, her opening statement, above, decontextualizes the diegesis of *Mister & Pete* and the future-perfect space-time hailed by the President; she praises the film as exemplary of the rule and not the exception to routine “challenges, . . . kids like Mister . . . are facing,”⁵ indexing irreconcilable antagonisms and chronopolitical⁶ proscriptions specific to black being-in-the-world, characteristic of a defeat “[from] which ‘there is no intermission.’”⁷ Chronopolitics references the social and political construction of time, namely, the Western space-time continuum, or History, relevant because the study of space-time destabilizes teleological prescriptions whereby black *being-in-time* is illegible and always-already untimely.⁸ The ontological impasse of which Mister’s defeat is symptomatic is “metapolitical no less than it is metaphysical.”⁹ The First Lady’s attention to the interminability of defeat is reinforced by the tautology of a rhetorical *pathos*: “Every day,” suggesting that Mister’s story and its metapolitical/metaphysical impasse strays from the North Star agenda in productive ways.

Alicia Keys, who produced *Mister & Pete* and wrote its score, reflects in her introduction to the White House event preceding the First Lady’s remarks that the film’s “complex” and “honest” story, which “mirrors the reality of so many kids in America,” reminds her of her own childhood growing up in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan and in Harlem—of “how easily that could have been me. . . . How easily I could have been a Mister,” because, in her own words, “it’s just that easy”¹⁰ for black kids, including those

with passing white privilege like Keys and the President (both raised exclusively by white birth mothers), to squirm, and for some to break under the weight of what critical black scholars citing and reworking Orlando Patterson's intervention shorthand in their treatment of the concept-metaphor "social death."¹¹ Conditions of absolute dereliction that congeal under the signpost of social death gesture toward what Saidiya Hartman describes as the "afterlife of slavery,"¹² specifically, to technologies of the Atlantic slave trade that survive, mutate, transform, inhere *still* to annul black lives, "transforming men and women into dead matter"¹³ suspended in the slow, stalled time of captivity. Social death indexes the always already bare life of the black subject-that-is-not-one: the exclusion of the black, natively alienated, vested with sentient but not relational or filial capacity, from human community.

Mister (Skylan Brooks) and his younger Korean friend Pete (Ethan Dizon) are on the run from housing authority officials after Mister's mother, Gloria (Jennifer Hudson), is taken into custody by the NYPD. They "utter the name 'Riverview,' the children's home run by Child Protective Services, as if it were Rikers Island for tots,"¹⁴ and hustle to feed themselves and take shelter from the sweltering New York heat (fig 1). Mister, himself a child no more than fourteen years old, bears custodial responsibility for his eight-year-old friend; first-time black screenwriter Michael Starrbury charges Mister with surviving his own defeat *and* Pete's (fig 2).¹⁵

In this double bind, Mister emerges as the protagonist of social death and, importantly, the author of social life. Starrbury's presumably fictional story painstakingly indexes the fact of blackness as well as its lived experience in the Brooklyn projects with the exception of the film's tired mischaracterization of black women who, in a throwback to Moynihanism—the 1965 Moynihan Report, officially titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," written by then-Assistant Secretary of Labor and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, faults matriarchy for the decline of the "negro" family¹⁶—engender the ideological fait accompli of black pathology and degeneracy, including the stasis or stagnation of black futurity.

Despite this, or better yet, precisely because in social death the black is natively alienated and "kinship is denied entirely by the force of law,"¹⁷ I argue that *Mister & Pete* indict structural antagonism and not filial neglect as the culprit of black defeat. Mister's story resonates not because Gloria "hit the bad mother trifecta: she's a prostitute, heroin addict and welfare recipient,"¹⁸ but because the system was conceived to exclude Gloria and Mister from its institutional protections, or as Gloria notes in the film's theatrical trailer, "Ain't nobody [going to] help us. They never have; they never will."¹⁹ Her comment summarizes with precision how the black subject-that-is-not-one is defeated even by institutional protections erected to safeguard society's most vulnerable people—twice when Mister attempts to use a welfare card to pro-



Figure 1. Mister and Pete struggle to stay cool after the electricity is shut off in Mister's apartment.



Figure 2. Mister panhandles so he and Pete can eat.

cure groceries, for example. Theirs is “the paradigmatic condition of black existence in the modern world”: “a perpetual and involuntary *openness*.²⁰

Industry critics have to date dismissed the film as a voyeuristic coming-of-age story about life in the ghetto.²¹ Peter Sobczynski for *RogerEbert.com* gave *Mister & Pete* only two and a half stars, describing it as “some ghastly combination of *Precious* and *Home Alone*” with “uneven screenplay and tone,

and questionable casting in supporting parts.”²² Stephanie Zacharek for *The Village Voice* praised only the film’s “implausibly upbeat” ending in which Mister reunites with a sober Gloria and writes a school essay about his short-lived exclusion from institutional protections: “[Director George Tillman Jr.] seems to know that we need to go home feeling hope for Mister and Pete, who, it turns out, aren’t so easily defeated.”²³ This reading herds viewers into privileging social death as a character-building or transitory experience as opposed to the constant “state of exception that defines the emerging melodramas of the New World”²⁴ and is concerned only nominally with specific characters and their lifeworlds, ignoring (and, therefore, leaving intact) modernity as a racialized state of exception. Upon closer inspection, the film’s “uneven screenplay and tone,” which, Sobczynski goes on to note, is “borne [not] of reality,”²⁵ curates a fugitive drama in which performative arrangements disrupt the temporality of social death and authorize a chronopolitical coup in which black invention is enacted, however momentarily, even or especially as there is no movement across space and time.

Mister’s alternative selves, made possible in his performances as a method actor, authorize black modes of being-in-the-world, specifically, the black invention Fanon champions in the figure of “the leap” into other lifeworlds unbound by the temporal regime of social death. To leap toward other selves in other worlds “is to escape and yet remain, to continue to relate to the ‘historical’”²⁶ or “the roll and moil of Event,”²⁷ and yet to “never abandon the possibility of an open-ended traveling where reaching toward the universal is to reach for oneself as other, not as the performance of some mask or illusion, but as a process of endless creation, infinitely expressed, and likewise perpetually self-engendering.”²⁸ In what follows, I ask how performative arrangements disrupt or puncture the ontological crisis of the black. Mister serially invents alternative selves in theatrical snippets testifying to the fugitivity and potentiality of black lived experiences in other cosmologies: underground, in outer space, or in the cinematic instance, off screen.

Performance and Ontology: Poetry from the Future-Imperfect

While there’s arguably no unsettling the structural antagonisms and libidinal economy unique to black life because nothing short of *the end of the world* will generate the epistemological catastrophe required as a salve, I heed Fanon’s insight that “an aspect of emancipation” in the immediate present “hinges on what would appear to be simple self-attention.”²⁹ I complicate so as to elucidate a “protocol of healing”³⁰ underwriting Fanonian psychoanalysis in/by which performative arrangements intervene not to resolve or repair, but to puncture and disrupt the fact of blackness, the temporality of

social death, enacting a chronopolitics in which life, animation and movement is located in stasis or non-movement.

I analyze *Mister & Pete* to posit the form and quality of the social life or lived experience, the performance or simulation of life, indeed, the ventriloquism or “self-attention” adhering to the fact of blackness. Social life is as much a performance of the coffle as it is “the pain we can’t live inside of *and* can’t live without.”³¹ In a refrain borrowing from the cast and plot of George C. Wolfe’s 1986 play *The Colored Museum*, a provocation in eleven sketches satirizing representational tropes of black personhood (i.e., the Zip Coon, the Jezebel, the Aunt Hester, etc.), critical race theorist Jared Sexton cites Topsy Washington, a character in the eleventh sketch who imagines a fantasy world “defying logic and limitations” in which “Nat Turner sips champagne out of Eartha Kitt’s slipper,”³² to advise,

Dance to “the music of the madness” . . . for there is freedom and freedom is there, a mad freedom there where there is none, in our unending, uninterrupted captivity in the colored museum, in the baggage we *do* claim, in the pain we can’t live inside of *and* can’t live without. . . . “THERE’S MADNESS IN ME AND THAT MADNESS SETS ME FREE.”³³

The task at hand is to privilege the madness foundational to Topsy’s being, to celebrate her “colored contradictions,”³⁴ a death sentence and concurrently, in/as performance, a life sentence, or the *method* by which she *lives* without a grammar that thinks black life as criminal trespass.

“Courage,” “grit,” and “resilience,” documented by First Lady Michelle Obama in the epigraph above, signpost a political will in which the black slave who exists otherwise “in a collection or dispersal of a class of *things*,”³⁵ a paradigmatic arrangement in which “the slave’s will [is] acknowledged *only* as it [is] prohibited or punished” as “a criminal will, a criminal reasoning, a criminal rationality,”³⁶ animates life as a problem for Western philosophy and its humanist musings. Formally the mark of a transgression—Mister evades Riverview—“courage,” “grit,” and “resilience” also and importantly evidence a political will in which black life is emancipated from the symbolic order inscribing a criminal *logos* to its operations. Fred Moten’s interlocution in his 2008 essay “The Case of Blackness,” mediated here by Sexton, suggests new chronopolitical coordinates in/as performance that cut through the continuum of history, even/as there is “[no] cessation or interruption of historical flow.”³⁷ Moten’s intuition that “the fugitive law of movement that makes black social life ungovernable . . . demands a para-ontological disruption”³⁸ siphons Fanon’s claim that black life requires a leap. To leap is not to “intervene” in, “break” with, or “punctuate”³⁹ the force of History or the timeline of Man; it is to discard with this timeline (all timelines) and its cartographies

(all cartographies), charting new flights of departure without the means with which to enact a teleological schema wherein “the price of our deliverance from ‘history’ (either as ethnocultural code or narrative genre) is . . . a new submission to the norms, protocols, and regulations of a counterhistory, in which invention is reduced to the internal regulation of new symbolic codes of representation.”⁴⁰

While Moten charges Fanon with tarrying (only) with/in the negative space of black ontological impossibility, forgoing the fugitive potentialities of the *ontic*,⁴¹ David Marriott incriminates Fanon completely in this fugitive project; he credits Fanon’s leap with the chronopolitical coup—a coup because it upsets the social and political regime of the forward-moving space-time continuum—that makes a “black life [that] is *lived* in social *death*,” that slow or stalled “colored time” of captivity, possible.⁴²

The black life Fanon phenomenologically describes “in the affirmation of invention as a moment of uncertainty, or radical undecidability”⁴³ is occult; coincidentally, its life-force “is located not in the natural sciences, least of all in biology, but in[a person’s] consciousness, which unlike History, has an indispensable opacity to it . . . that is not at all a narrative, nor anything like a telos.”⁴⁴ The economy of skins and masks underwriting Fanon’s intervention gestures toward not one but two orders of consciousness—a double consciousness, in W. E. B. Du Bois’s formulation. Sylvia Wynter describes the “puzzle of conscious experience” that Du Bois and Fanon distinctly but contrapuntally survey as a breach in modern orders of knowledge, itself a “far-reaching mutational leap . . . [that] could only have been made from the existential ground of the [black],”⁴⁵ further juxtaposing Fanon’s skins to his masks to ask, “What are the mechanisms, what are the technologies, what are the strategies by which we prescribe our own roles?”⁴⁶

For a black invention in which “we prescribe our own roles” to exist, it cannot be induced in/by a “first order of consciousness”⁴⁷ (of skins) which is sociogenically engineered to hate its black person and “law-likely [functions] to *semantically-neurochemically induce* the performative enactment of our ensemble of always already role-allocated individual and collective behaviors.”⁴⁸ In this first order, there is no outside to the paradigmatic arrangement in which “*wherever he goes, a black man remains a black man.*”⁴⁹ For black invention in which “we prescribe our own roles” to exist, it must be feigned, ventriloquized, and/or improvised, enacted by Fanon’s masks.⁵⁰

The restless, serial invention Fanon champions, in which the black is “slave” neither to the “idea” others have of him nor to his “appearance,”⁵¹ is animated by a second order of consciousness (of masks) nestled in that ellipses “where arguments (should) begin, but they cannot (yet) proceed”⁵² because there exists no grammar inscribing a logos to their operations. It is here, in the second order of conscious experience, in which we lose “the very infrastructure with which [we] move through the world”,⁵³ here that courage,

grit, and resilience, that hairline fracture only barely discernable as a political will, suggestive of life in/as death, grasping for freedom even/especially as it testifies to “[the black’s] unending, uninterrupted captivity,”⁵⁴ take their ascent. In the next section, and as my working thesis, I argue that Mister’s courage, grit, and resilience is the tenacity with which he locates social life in performative maskings in which he wills himself into being not in-time, but out of it.

Method acting, which commissions Mister to serially invent himself anew, is the cinematic language *Mister & Pete* uses to experiment with the restorative, future-imperfect poetics black invention gestures toward, broker-ing new relations “between a speaking subject and the grammar of his speaking.”⁵⁵ Following Kara Keeling’s elaboration of Fanon’s sophisticated reference to Karl Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), that “the social revolution cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future,”⁵⁶ I specu-late that black invention finds its grammar not in the symbolic order of this lifeworld, not “borne . . . of [a] reality” in which blacks are gratuitously open to receive the violence that befalls them—Mister is defeated by the eighth grade, by filial relations, by the NYPD and Child Protective Services, by the corner deli clerk, by the shadow economy that employs his mother, by so-cial services and welfare, and even by the utility company that cuts off his access to electricity—but in poetry. Poetry, “with its associated lyricism and fragmentation,”⁵⁷ functions as a formal and temporal disruption; its iden-tifying mark is not its content but its trace: the tempo and rhythm with which poetry effectively cuts through the muck and mire of language-cum-structure.

Mister notably imagines and locates himself as a child actor in Beverly Hills, a city characterized by leisure and privilege, and not, as one might ex-pect, as a working actor in Hollywood. The arrival he envisions is askew or double, filtered through a kaleidoscope or dreamscape, possible only in some future-imperfect space-time: “a moment . . . whose introduction necessarily never arrives and does not stop arriving, and whose destination cannot be foreseen, or anticipated, but only repeatedly traveled, and, therefore, not fu-ture at all.”⁵⁸ This occult moment functions as a spatiotemporal cul-de-sac in which “failures and repetitions at the level of the psyche . . . are nowhere sub-ordinated to a centralizing ideology or a master narrative”⁵⁹ in which synthe-sis and/or reparation—in other words, arrival—are privileged.

Mister Winfield Goes to Hollywood Beverly Hills

Mister prepares for his real-life Beverly Hills audition by consulting the ad-vice of Sanford Meisner, founder of the “Meisner Method,” who instructs (and Mister recites), “An actor must know how to live truthfully under imagi-

nary circumstances. You don't pretend to be the character, you *are* the character. You must learn how to use the reality in front of you. . . . Who am I? Where am I? What am I doing here?"

Meisner endorses a sociogenic method in which actors tether performance to a present moment—"Who am I? Where am I? What am I doing here?"—as opposed to the more popular if nominally bereft "method" acting, which asks performers to search the unconscious for the subtext with which to identify with scripted characters. Legible to industry professionals as rival techniques because one anchors performance in the external world and the other in the vault of the actor's psyche, Mister experiences Meisner and method acting instead as one in the same. Mister finds the resources for black self-invention in what Hortense Spillers describes as interior intersubjectivity: a neurotic "locus at which *self-interrogation* takes place," cohering in the first order of consciousness (of skins) as a "mine" of social production that arises, in part, from interacting with others," borne from racial alienation, "yet . . . bears the imprint of a particularity,"⁶⁰ informing the psyche's second set of instructions (of masks). Performative arrangements exploit that cacophony of voices always already occupying the black psyche; and, because interior intersubjectivity is a mark "not [of] arrival but [of] departure, not a goal but a process,"⁶¹ it qualifies as a particularly resourceful way to induce a Fanonian leap, "conduces toward neither an answer nor a 'cure,' because it is not engendered in formulae and prescriptions. More precisely, its operations are torque-like to the extent that they throw certainty and dogma (the static, passive, monumental aim) into doubt."⁶²

We might remember Topsy's refrain: "THERE'S MADNESS IN ME AND THAT MADNESS SETS ME FREE." The black can only enact social life "insofar as [one] is willing to be anxious or neurotic,"⁶³ or insofar as one is willing to take note and listen to the competing voices clamoring for authority in one's head, or insofar as one is willing to "dance to 'the music of the madness.'" In a neurotic, the "sensorium and . . . body are moving in proximity but not in sync or identity,"⁶⁴ making inroads for the lived experience of the black to take its flight from the fact of blackness.

Spillers extols the time-distancing merit of exactly this kind of performance, which forgoes the pretense of recognition for the chronopolitics of reflection. Performative arrangements impose "the *sense of time* that we could call *distancing*," instructing participants to "[stand] apart momentarily from the roll and moil of Event"⁶⁵ and reside instead in what Lauren Berlant describes as its "hiccups and inconsistencies," which are "maddening,"⁶⁶ because they endlessly, restlessly rearrange themselves to privilege new orientations and to cultivate new relations. Spillers notably inherits this reading from W. E. B. Du Bois, for whom "it was not enough to be seen; one was called upon to decide what it meant. . . . For him, nothing was hidden from the sight

of the man in the mirror, who not only recognized the falseness of his countenance, as in a kind of theatrical mask, but how he had come to wear it.”⁶⁷

Method acting is the means by which Mister collects and wears theatrical masks, not as the sociogenic defeat or “auto-genocidal mimeticism”⁶⁸ in which he “fails to know [himself] as anything but (a masked, white) European,”⁶⁹ but as the black invention and ventriloquism by which “the man in the mirror” from whom “nothing is hidden” curates his collection of masks from the trauma of racial alienation, strategizing with precision when, where and how to don each one (or several at once), “counterinvesting in the [psyche],” that site of madness and dissonance, “as a site of possibility.”⁷⁰

Mister’s is a model of substitutive identification in which “one . . . need not always turn up”⁷¹ to interact with hostile others, least of all to occasions in which the black ego is ripe for trauma. Each mask that Mister calls forth functions as a different *send go*, Spillers’s catchphrase for “the translated inflections of selves beyond the threshold of the fleshed,” for its person.⁷² Mister wears the white imago disingenuously, seeking new selves and new relations even (or especially, as the hyperbolic exaggeration that furnishes truth to the lie) as this effort traffics through stock characters. This ambition is inspired by his love of the movie *Fargo* (dir. Joel and Ethan Coen, 1996), a dark comedy about a staged kidnapping in Middle America, its plot the province of subjects with white privilege, “about these Minnesota people with funny accents.” Mister mimes Steve Buscemi as Carl Showalter, nailing Buscemi’s trademark nasal accent, in the monologue he prepares for his audition: “I guess you think you’re . . . you know, like an authority figure, with that stupid [fucking] uniform, huh buddy? King clip-on-tie there, big [fucking] man, huh? You know these are the limits of your life, man! The rule of your little [fucking] gate here! Here’s your four dollars, you pathetic piece of shit!”

It is as Buscemi>Showalter that Mister is able to de-legitimate the knowing, white authority of bureaucratic henchmen like his teacher. *Mister & Pete* suggestively opens with Mister’s reaction to learning that he has failed an English assignment and must repeat the eighth grade. It introduces dialogue at minute mark 2:40, when Mister asks his teacher for a ride home in earnest, which is to say, with the vulnerability he later disavows in routine performances that conspire to safeguard the black ego. The camera fixates on Mr. Carey from the back, middle seat of a nondescript sedan as he scolds Mister, caricaturing him as too indolent to reap the benefits of a colorblind America rich in social services and upward mobility, while paradoxically also aghast that Mister might ask for a handout (he doesn’t):

Okay, look. I know you asked me for a ride home to try to convince me to change my mind; but I can’t do that. I know it’s hard, Mister, but maybe repeating [the] eighth grade is exactly what you need. When you were offered after school help

you refused it. That's fine, that was your right, we can't force it on you, but now you have to accept the consequences of that choice. I can't pass you. But I'm willing to do what I can to help you. It's plain to see that you need it.

If the black personality's accession to language marks an insertion into the symbolic order of things, then Mister effectively "fails" to reduce himself to the thingliness black people experience as speaking subjects—a clarification intervening in real time to undercut the President's North Star goal, suggesting that a more radical restructuring of education is possible yet. There is no part of Mr. Carey's pomp and circumstance that Mister does not see (through) in this performance; he sends go as Buscemi/Showalter because in *Fargo* he finds the language and entitlement with which to righteously cut Mr. Carey down to scale.

Likewise, Mister does not send go in the interactions that span his relationship with an unnamed Pakistani deli clerk, who in their first exchange receives Mister as a common criminal because the welfare card with which Gloria commissions him to procure groceries is declined, and in their last exchange strongarms Mister into a chokehold to "teach [him] a lesson," protesting, "The little rat stole from me. He wrecked my store." At stake is the social life animated by send go, which contrasts to the suspicion and misgivings, notably, the criminalizing assumption of "darky antics"⁷³ (i.e., lying, loafing and stealing) invoked when Mister shows up in earnest to do his own bidding. Exchanges in earnest illicit a different relationship between the fact of blackness and its lived experience from those in which Mister sends go as one of two substitutive identities: the first as a future-imperfect version of himself, doused in fame and fortune, as a (white) child actor ventriloquizing the black imago, thrice removed from the fact of blackness,⁷⁴ and the second as scripted others, like Buscemi/Showalter, twice removed from racial blackness.

When Mister conspires with Pete to procure groceries from the large twenty-four-hour discount grocery store, Best Market with a welfare card they stole from their neighbor, Curtis's (Rob Morgan's) apartment, he sends go as a (white) child actor, concocting the pretense:

I know it don't make sense: two kids shopping for groceries in the middle of the night. But where we're from, you *don't* want people seeing what you bring into your home. They'll rob you blind for a carton of milk if they have to. So, we shop while they sleep. Plus, my mom she works two jobs and she doesn't have time. And tomorrow's her birthday. I wanted to get groceries and have a big breakfast for when she comes home. I just wanted to do *one thing*, so she would have one less thing to worry about.

Send go is the means by which Mister ingenuously jumps “his circumstance by internalizing his dilemma . . . seeking to resolve it at the level of personality.”⁷⁵ In the melodrama Mister constructs, filiation is not disrupted by the rule of law; stated another way, in performance monologues Mister jumps the natal alienation and filial dispossession he otherwise experiences as the rule of his black being. These and others instances in *Mister & Pete* illustrate routine maskings that ventriloquize the white imago, conspiring at once to subvert white authority, including its nonblack nonwhite henchmen, and to shield the black ego from injury. Send go is a flight of fantasy that fails to broker redemption but generates meaningful and specific effects for the “I” that hemorrhages nonetheless.

Mister Winfield Returns to the Eighth Grade

The film takes off and lands at the same fictional site: the classroom, and more importantly in the same time: the eighth grade. Brows furrowed, Mister sits alone opposite his fastidious white, male English teacher, Mr. Carey at the film’s onset, as the camera assumes Mister’s point of view to alternate between (1) a close-up or mirror shot of Mister’s distraught and dynamic facial expressions, (2) a mid-range shot of the judgment with which Mr. Carey’s knowing gaze receives Mister, and (3) a full-frame shot of the giant, red ‘F’ marking his English assignment.

At the film’s close, Mister reunites with a sober Gloria after two short weeks at Riverview, coincidentally in time for the first day of the new school year, and returns to Mr. Carey’s English class in unusually high spirits. During an in-class writing assignment for which students are asked to produce a single-page description of their summer activities, he composes a manuscript complete with cover page and title. While this “implausibly upbeat” ending at first glance brokers the antiblack synthesis on which modern cinema pivots—it suggests that the defeat Mister endures as an orphan compares favorably to a life in Gloria’s charge, in other words, that he is better poised as a ward of the same state that exposes him to a gratuitous openness—I read Mister’s return to the eighth grade instead as a tautological coup in which he resists the violence imposed by disingenuous teleological prescriptions that pivot on the impossible task in which blacks “overcome” the antagonism and stagnation characteristic of social death.

Mister is no less defeated by state infrastructure than he is by time. Starrbury scripts Mister not to keep track of days passed and to posture hostility toward passage of time as the mark of social life. When Pete asks at minute mark 47:43, “How long has your mom been gone?” Mister responds not with

performative, cool ambivalence or send go, but with an uncertainty characteristic of his routine disposition toward teleological schemas: “I don’t know. Usually they keep her for a day or two. Never more than two weeks.” As Pete points out, “It’s been longer than that.”

Mister spots Sargent Pike (Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje) in an unmarked police car, interrupting talk of Gloria’s return to instruct Pete, “Look down and keep walking.” The camera cuts from this fugitive reflex to a 2012 calendar affixed to the wall of Mister’s apartment home. Surmising that Gloria has been gone for three weeks, Mister poses as her brother, deepening his voice again not with the uncanny bravado of performance but with genuine misapprehension, to phone the NYPD, inquiring about her release. He is surprised to learn that Gloria was discharged the previous week, and deflects by suggesting Pete take a bath because he stinks. Accordingly, the wound Mister withstands is not Gloria’s absence, to which he has become uncomfortably accustomed, but the duration of that absence and its arrival in the present moment—the “carceral register of ends and meanings”⁷⁶ by which Mister concludes that Gloria, no longer a hostage of the state, has freely and voluntarily abandoned him, or that she is dead.

To be sure, confining serial black invention to cinematic structure, in the business of telling stories that begin and end, as Starrbury and Tillman do, reproduces the violence and the myth (and the violence of the myth) of redemption narratives, like those found in iconic films like *Dangerous Minds* (dir. John N. Smith, 1995), *The Blind Side* (dir. John Lee Hancock, 2009), and *The Help* (dir. Tate Taylor, 2011). Cinema animates its objects in whiteface, imposing white invention or subjectivity with telos (in the future-perfect tense, pace Marriott) on black characters with no access to the means of arrival, which is to say, to the currency of time. In this model, black darlings who beget their own “inevitable defeat” do so because they fail to defer to white Others or to amass the white patronage that might deliver one from social death. Originating in the nineteenth century during the heyday of blackface minstrelsy as a pedagogical tool of the white supremacist state, this representational trope pathologizes blacks who fail to overcome structural antagonism as persons unfit—too lazy, too asinine, *too black*—for self-mastery. Mister dodges the disingenuous patronage of the white supremacist state and the reparative fantasy of modern cinema in a single, repeated traveled move: the fugitivity with which he receives (avoids) Child Protective Services.

Talk of Riverview and Mister’s detention therein bookend the film; Riverview functions literally as the archetypal site of social death and allegorically as the site of a potential (if necessarily impossible) synthesis. At minute mark 4:45, Mister rolls into the Brooklyn Park Houses on his skateboard as camera and audio survey the neighborhood’s sights and sounds: men ex-

changing words, one, counting single dollar bills, and children of all ages clamoring on a playground, to say nothing of the picture's score, which belabors a tired tune: "Nothing can bring you down/ Like a mean ol' town."⁷⁷ Mister opens the door to his apartment building and is pushed aside by the spectacle of arrest: Curtis, a black neighbor who peddles drugs, and his son, no older than Mister, are detained by the NYPD. The following conversation, the second to perforate the script, is especially relevant because it positions Riverview as "Rikers Island for tots" while also implicating its institution in the fantasy of reunion between father and son:

Curtis: Yo, what about my son, man?
Officer 1: What *about* your son?
Son (muffled): Let me go! Let me go!
Curtis: It's just me and him. You can't lock me up; I'm all he's got, man.
Officer 1: Don't worry about your son. If you cooperate, then maybe your ass will see him later.
Officer 2: In the meantime, they're gonna take care of him over at Riverview.
Son: Riverview?! Hell no! Daddy, don't let them take me!

Curtis's son breaks free from the Officer's hold, makes a run for it, and crashes into the Sargent, with whom he pleads, "Don't let them take me there!"

Riverview does more than stand in for the social death always already a pox on black existence, masquerading as the life-generating synthesis of institutional governmentality. Mister speaks its name with a *resentiment* at once acknowledging and undermining the chronopolitical proscription blacks weather as the condition of their precarious being.

Starrbury and Tillman endeavor to create a hyper-reflective film about the chronopolitics and possibilities of performance by positioning Mister, who engineers Fanon's "occult instability" as affective sensibility, leaning into the stasis assigned to him by what Wynter describes, though in insufficient terms, as the "normative 'tape of the world'"⁷⁸ and Sexton qualifies more accurately as the slow, stalled time of captivity, at its center. In monologues that intervene in the film's master-narrative and in cinematic structure more generally, Mister embraces being-outside-of-time as a stratagem; each performative reset provokes Mister to (episodically, without recourse to synthesis or landing) create himself anew, not in a futile bid to ascend to the Master's house by donning man's sovereign, human masks (i.e., "worker, woman, man, gay, lesbian, and so on"),⁷⁹ but as a nonsovereign politics of being-in-the-world that conspires to hold the gratuitously vulnerable black ego at a protective distance from social forces that would punish it for existing. The fact of blackness, a metapolitical/metaphysical condition "that is nothing, without ethos or privilege . . . also produces an opening, a frac-

ture,”⁸⁰ specifically, the clearing ground and context for fugitive black becoming in/as disruption. On its platform, sentient experiences, animated by a second order of instructions and “bad faith” self-deception,⁸¹ take their ascent in the absence of any resources to life, indeed, with no available flight plan or designs to land.

In one of only two black impersonations he attempts, Mister reflects as Gloria, I’m going to get us a real house, Mister. I’m [going to] get a job, and I’m [going to] stop doing drugs, and I’m [going to] stop selling myself for money. I’m just [trying to] get things in order. You won’t have to be ashamed to be my son no more. Now, run; run, Mister. I need time alone.

It is no coincidence that Gloria’s fantasy of rehabilitation, as Mister intuits or takes up its meaning, ends with the declarative, “Now, run; run, Mister.” If Mister can be said to have an inheritance, it is the fugitive example he receives from Gloria, whose restorative project exceeds the space-time of the film. The camera cuts from a mid-range shot of Gloria and Mister exchanging words at a restaurant to a close-up shot of Mister, expressionless, on a local bus, sandwiched between Gloria and Pete. Gloria fidgets restlessly en route; her stop differs from the Brooklyn Park Houses, where Mister and Pete are headed, and she disembarks before they do, interrupting an itinerary that anticipates her landing at the site of drug use and sex work. The camera apprehends Gloria pull the line and fumble to get up from her seated position but never shows Gloria actually disembark the bus or arrive at her destination; it only indexes her intention, that is, her leap from one lifeworld toward another, off screen.

We might speculate, as Moten does, that “what’s at stake is fugitive movement in and out of the frame . . . a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure. This fugitive movement is stolen life, and its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression.”⁸² The bus, trafficking in this world, induces stasis and stagnation in black passengers; yet Gloria hitches her restorative project to its ride nonetheless, using its momentum as a fugitive platform from which to move away from relations of her doing but not of her choosing and toward a “black life [that] is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but [that] is lived underground, in outer space.”⁸³

Conclusion

In an interview with *Film Independent* spotlighting his nomination to the 29th annual Spirit Awards, Starrbury notes,

The breakthrough moment [in the script] for me was a scene that I wrote that's not in the movie. After Mister leaves school early on, the Alice character played by Jordin Sparks is there waiting to talk to him. At the end of their talk, she says something like "Don't be a stranger" and he says, "Yeah, I'm moving to Beverly Hills." Well, up until that point I had no idea that was a goal of his. It just sort of came out of nowhere and I went with it. . . . That moment, a moment that I didn't even plan for, set the tone for Mister's goal.⁸⁴

A fictional Mister, animated by real-life black child actor Skylan Brooks, enjoys authorial responsibility for the film's future-imperfect poetics. The maskings and unmaskings Brooks assumes are puppeteered by no one; he, "the man in the mirror" from whom "nothing is hidden" engineers the send go with which he receives the conditions scripted to his character. The performative invention of alternative selves testifies to what I describe as a chrono-political coup which makes black social life in/as social death inhabitable despite a "defeat" "[from] which 'there is no intermission.'" I have turned to Marriott and Spillers to study some of stratagems for disrupting the chrono-politics of social death. Their works gesture toward black invention as a non-criminal if performative political will, specifically, as "a disruptive force that cannot be absorbed into the 'historical, instrumental hypothesis' of a teleological narrative order or account"⁸⁵ imposed by History's meaning-making dialectics, on which the President's North Star goal pivots. The assumptive logic whereby structural antagonisms unique to black life can be remedied in a future-perfect space-time that is merely the redemptive culmination of current forms of governance is a ruse; the comments of the First Lady and Alicia Keys presage what the President does not, namely, that educational "reforms" would only prolong the social death produced by American institutions. This essay has taken their comments farther, by directly calling for a foreclosure of the temporal regime proffering such "solutions," and by calling others to join Mister's leap, enacting a life beyond the cinematic and political strictures of defeat.

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Notes

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ship reminds me that, at its best, critical race scholarship creates a community for those of us otherwise disconnected from the world and its making.

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 204.

2. "The First Lady and Alicia Keys Discuss Education at the White House," YouTube, January 15, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1s5SauByME, accessed June 23, 2015.

2. Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin," Whitehouse.gov, July 19, 2013, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin, accessed June 23, 2015.

3. Ibid.

4. *The Inevitable Defeat of Mister & Pete*, directed by George Tillman Jr. (2013; Film. iDeal Partners Film Fund et al.).

5. "The First Lady and Alicia Keys Discuss Education at the White House."

6. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

7. Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions* no. 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 5.

8. The Richard Philcox translation of *Black Skin, White Masks* reads, "The problem considered here is located in temporality. Disalienation will be for those Whites and Blacks who have refused to let themselves be locked in the substantialized 'tower of the past.' For many other black men disalienation will come from refusing to consider their reality as definitive." See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 201. The Charles Markmann translation reads a bit more clearly: "The problem considered here is one of time. Those Negroes and white men will be disalienated who refuse to let themselves be sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past. For many other Negroes, in other ways, disalienation will come into being through refusal to accept the present as definitive." See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 226 [my emphasis].

9. Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 15.

10. "The First Lady and Alicia Keys Discuss Education at the White House."

11. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

12. This is Saidiya Hartman's phrasing in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

13. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 68.

14. Stephanie Zacharek, "Lost Boys Win in 'The Inevitable Defeat of Mister and Pete,'" *The Village Voice*, October 9, 2013, www.villagevoice.com/2013-10-09/film/the-inevitable-defeat-of-mister-and-pete/full/, accessed July 1, 2015.

15. Pete's mother only appears once in the film: at minute mark 25:00, roaming the streets, doused in dirt, crying and twitching, seeking her next fix. Gloria and later Mister bear custodial responsibility of/for Pete.

16. Spillers offers a relevant and poignant critique of the gender distinctions in this model. See "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.

17. Jared Sexton, "'The Curtain of the Sky': An Introduction," *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2010): 14.

18. Manohla Dargis, "Toughing It Out, Against All Odds: 'Inevitable Defeat of Mister & Pete' With Jennifer Hudson," *New York Times*, October 10, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/10/11/movies/inevitable-defeat-of-mister-pete-with-jennifer-hudson.html, accessed July 1, 2015.
19. This line differs slightly in the full-length feature film, at minute mark 20:50: "Ain't nobody [going to] help me. They never have; they never will."
20. Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 149, original emphasis.
21. Zeba Blay writes, "It's a testament to the script by Michael Starrbury and stellar acting by the cast . . . that the movie doesn't come across as voyeuristic, a touristy excursion into a bizarre and grotesque world." See "Sundance 2013 Review: George Tillman Jr.'s 'The Inevitable Defeat of Mister and Pete,'" *Indiewire*, January 19, 2013, blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/sundance-2013-review-george-tillman-jrs-the-inevitable-defeat-of-mister-and-pete, accessed July 1, 2015.
22. Peter Sobczynski, "The Inevitable Defeat of Mister and Pete," *RogerEbert.com*, October 11, 2013, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-inevitable-defeat-of-mister-and-pete-2013, accessed July 1, 2015.
23. Zacharek, "Lost Boys Win."
24. David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 17.
25. Sobczynski, "The Inevitable Defeat."
26. David Marriott, "Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Sociogeny, and 'the Damned,'" *The New Centennial Review* 11, no. 3 (2011): 86.
27. Hortense Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother": Psychoanalysis and Race," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (1996): 110.
28. Marriott, "Inventions of Existence," 86.
29. Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now," 108.
30. Ibid., 86.
31. Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 6.
32. Frank Rich, "Stage: 'Colored Museum,' Satire by George C. Wolfe," *New York Times*, November 3, 1986, www.nytimes.com/1986/11/03/arts/stage-colored-museum-satire-by-george-c-wolfe.html, accessed July 1, 2015.
33. Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 6, original emphasis.
34. Rich, "Stage."
35. Sexton, "'The Curtain of the Sky,'" 14, my emphasis.
36. Ibid., 15.
37. Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 6.
38. Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 179.
39. Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 5.
40. Marriott, "Inventions of Existence," 48.
41. Moten writes, "It seems to me that [the] special ontic-ontological fugitivity of/in the slave is what is revealed as the necessarily unaccounted for in Fanon. . . . What Fanon's pathontological refusal of blackness leaves unclaimed is an irremediable homelessness." See "The Case of Blackness," 187.
42. Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," 29, 4.
43. Marriott, "Inventions of Existence," 49.
44. Ibid., 48.
45. Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Human-

ness a Different Future: Conversations,” *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 46.

46. Ibid., 34.

47. David Marriott describes this first order of consciousness alternately as an “*unconscious which appears to hate you*.” See *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 90, original emphasis.

48. Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?” 32–33, original emphases.

49. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Philcox trans., 150, original emphasis.

50. Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?” 9–89.

51. Fanon writes, “I’m not given a second chance. I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance.” See *Black Skin, White Masks*, Philcox trans., 95.

52. Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death,” 29.

53. Lauren Berlant, “She’s Having an Episode: Patricia Williams and the Writing of Damaged Life,” *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 27, no. 1 (2013): 32.

54. Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death,” 6.

55. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now,” 122.

56. Quoted in Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 198.

57. Kara Keeling, “Looking for M—Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future,” *GLQ* 15, no. 4 (2009): 567.

58. Marriott, “Inventions of Existence,” 53–54.

59. Ibid., 84.

60. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now,” 84–85, original emphasis.

61. Ibid., 84.

62. Ibid.

63. Marriott, “Inventions of Existence” 68.

64. Berlant, “She’s Having an Episode,” 32.

65. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now,” 110, original emphasis.

66. Berlant, “She’s Having an Episode,” 34.

67. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now,” 104.

68. Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?” 53.

69. Marriott, “Inventions of Existence,” 62–63.

70. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 51.

71. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now,” 115.

72. Spillers describes “send go” thus:

Whenever any one of our three church choirs was invited to perform at another congregation, our minister, suspecting that several of his members would stay home . . . skillfully anticipated them. Those who were not going with the choir were importuned to “send go.” The injunction always tickled me, as I took considerable pleasure in . . . the image of a . . . replica of my seven-year-old self going off in my place. But the minister meant ‘send money’ (i.e., pass the collection plate). Decades later, I decided that the “send go” of my childhood had an equivalent in the semiotic/philosophical discourse as the mark of substitution, the translated inflections of selves beyond the threshold of the fleshed, natural girl. It was not only a delightful but useful idea to me that one herself need not always turn up. One and one did not always make two but might well yield some indeterminate sum, according to the context in which the

arithmetic was carried out, indeed *which* arithmetic was performed (“All the Things You Could Be by Now,” 115, original emphasis).

73. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 28.

74. Ibid., 19. Hartman reminds us, “The effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the back body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible.”

75. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now,” 130.

76. Marriott, “Inventions of Existence,” 84.

77. “Mean Ol’ Town” is written by Ryan Spraker, Patrick DiCenso, and Daniel Ibeh, and performed by Boston-based rap artist EK. Its lyrics include the verse, “Bright lights / Yellow tapes / To local news. / Triple homicide / Ghetto blues. / Trying to make a living / But they won’t hire. / Cause I been to prison / And my past priors. / The block want me, though ./ You know, crime pays. / I ain’t gotta choice. / Gotta find a way. / Or the lady having kids / Just to collect / Welfare. / We in hell here. / Mothers bury their sons. / The life they gave, someone took. / Now she saying her goodbyes, last look.”

78. Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?” 56, 60. Wynter’s reading is insufficient because she doesn’t unpack the teleological mandate of this “tape,” which can only ever be dispensed in one direction—that direction testifying to what Spillers describes “the roll and moil of Event.” See “All the Things You Could Be by Now,” 110. David Marriott makes a criticism of Wynter that is similar to the one I attempt in his essay “Inventions of Existence.”

79. Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structures of Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 100.

80. David Marriott, “No Lords A-Leaping: Fanon, C. L. R. James, and the Politics of Invention,” *Humanities* 3 (2014): 520.

81. According to Lewis Gordon, black life requires conscious self-deception—a Sartrean “bad faith” that simulates “temporal immediation and mediation in the service of evading dialectical immediation and mediation.” Gordon adds, “One can literally live one’s imagined self as though living in the present; without the reflection and relation of past to present and without accepting the array of possibilities that can be chosen as one’s future, a person in bad faith focuses himself, as it were, on immediacy to the point of attempting to substantiate temporal immediacy, to the point of *living*.” *Bad Faith and Anti-black Racism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1995), 58, my emphasis.

82. Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” 179.

83. Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death,” 28.

84. Anthony Ferranti, “Spirit Awards Spotlight: Michael Starbury Reveals the Writer’s Adage That’s Not True,” *Film Independent*, February 3, 2014, www.filmindependent.org/blogs/spirit-awards-spotlight-michael-starbury-reveals-the-writers-adage-thats-not-true/#.VXYwOfk3Io, accessed July 1, 2015.

85. Marriott, “Inventions of Existence,” 69.