

Resistance and Revolution: Fanon, Himes, and “a literature of combat”

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If history is our guide, it clearly records that nothing of any great value has ever changed hands without a struggle, or at least a show of, or threat of, violence. Men simply don't surrender what they think of as their privilege and property except by force. (Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* 77)

Although they never met, Chester Himes and Frantz Fanon participated in an ongoing textual dialogue. Throughout their works, they persistently diagnosed the psycho-social racism of white hegemonic society and imagined forms of resistance that might lead to successful revolution.¹ In the context of Algeria's decolonial struggle, Fanon famously insisted that “[t]he colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence” (Fanon, *Wretched* 86). At various moments in his career, Himes occupied a remarkably similar position, as when he suggests, “the only way a Negro will ever get accepted as an equal is if he kills whites; to launch a violent uprising” (Himes, *Conversations* 57). In addition to such resonances, each author also has a history, however elliptical or occasional, of referring to the other, which asks for them to be read together, especially for their shared reflections on violence and revolution.² In a 1970 interview with John A. Williams, for example, Himes claimed that Fanon “wrote a long article on my ‘Treatment of Violence’ which his wife still has, and which I’ve thought I might get and have published. Because he had the same feeling, of course, that I have” (Himes, *Conversations* 78).³

Himes's recently published "On the Use of Force" (2017), first published in French in 1967 but not available in English until now (except in archives), speaks to this "feeling" on violence that Himes claims he and Fanon shared. As Diego A. Millan notes in his introduction to the essay, "On the Use of Force" "condenses many of the social and political questions Himes explored throughout his career, such as the politics of police aggression and the interrelatedness of sexual and racial violence" (471). Millan argues that "at its core, Himes's work addresses the politics of antiblackness, police aggression, and the lived experience of people who 'are never seen until they lie bloody and dead from a policeman's bullet on the hot dirty pavement of a Ghetto street'" (472). Such a claim complicates assertions that Himes only "directly embraced the logic of revolutionary violence" in *Plan B* ([1983] 1993) or in other isolated texts (Pepper 15). Like Fanon's, Himes's writing reveals a lifelong concern with resistance, revolution, and violence.⁴

Just as timely today as it was in 1967, "On the Use of Force" resembles much of what Fanon writes on police/colonial aggression, especially in *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la terre* [1961]). Himes's insistence that "[t]he brutality committed by the white law enforcement officer comes first," while "[t]he race riot is a consequence" ("On the Use of Force" 375-76),⁵ echoes Fanon's discussions of colonizing violence and decolonizing counter-violence as "reciprocal" (*Wretched* 88). For Fanon, "The development of violence among the colonized people will be proportionate to the violence exercised by the threatened colonial regime" (*Wretched* 88). Both Fanon and Himes therefore recognize that violence emerges dialectically within the oppressive or colonial relation, even if it then exceeds this dialectic.

Similarly, Fanon often had Himes's work in mind. While Fanon's best-known references are to Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), the recently published *Alienation and Freedom* (2018) includes a transcription of notes from Fanon's 1959-1960 lecture at the Institut des Hautes Études in Tunis, in which he refers to Himes's Harlem series (524). And in a

footnote to “Richard Wright’s *White Man, Listen!*,” a 1959 article in *El Moudjahid* attributed to Fanon, editors Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C. Young remark on Fanon’s disappointment in Wright in contrast to Himes (*Alienation and Freedom* 637n.1). This seems partly motivated by Fanon’s critique of Wright, especially in *White Man, Listen!*, for “trying to speak to the ‘heart’ of his oppressors” (*Alienation and Freedom* 637). Given that Fanon emphasizes the need to address the colonized people directly, as I will soon discuss, the subject of address is crucial.⁶

These textual citations and allusions thus confirm and further substantiate an affinity discussed by Greg Thomas, who argues that Fanon’s early citations of *If He Hollers* reveal the way in which both Fanon and Himes analyze the “battering if not crippling” nature of the “psycho-sexual assault of racism” (“On Psycho-Sexual Racism” 219). Thomas continues to describe “a striking kinship between” Himes’s *Plan B* “and Fanon’s own final offering, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The response to Western empire in both is an emancipatory explosion of violence” (219). In this essay, I draw on Thomas’s insights to argue that reading Fanon and Himes together emphasizes a shared interest in an aesthetic of revolution and a revolutionary aesthetic, or what Fanon terms, “a literature of combat” (*Wretched* 240).⁷ Despite all of the critical attention given to Fanon’s writing, his brief discussion of combat literature has been relatively understudied.⁸ And despite the increasing attention given to Himes, critics routinely downplay his political aims in representing violence and revolution. Pim Higginson, for example, directly criticizes readers who claim that the Harlem novels “perform revolutionary labor” (11).⁹ Similarly resistant to constructive political readings, Lisa Fluet argues that the Harlem novels can be read as “populist failure novel[s]” (267).¹⁰ Against such trends, I develop Fanon’s reflections on a revolutionary aesthetic and complicate these readings of Himes by considering his work as exemplary of combat literature. My article follows Himes’s and Fanon’s late writings, which insist that “liberation must, and can only, be achieved by force” (*Wretched* 73).¹¹

Many in the mainstream media and in the academy, including liberal academics, privilege nonviolence over violence, yet this privilege often functions as a way to disavow or restrict the thought of black radicalism.¹² By returning to Himes's and Fanon's engagements with violent revolution, I argue for the value of their work as a resource for thinking revolutionary change differently. My attention to violence also aims to resist "white racial liberal practices of reading African American literature" by refusing to censor the radical thought of Fanon and Himes on decolonization and combat literature (Melamed 770). In the first section, I explicate Fanon's notion of combat literature and put it in conversation with Himes's use of blues tropes. This also enables me to begin considering the international nature of the exchange between Fanon and Himes. In the second and third sections, I follow the development in Fanon and Himes of the revolutionary aesthetic of combat literature. In its representation of disorganized violence, Himes's *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969) sets up the problem of revolutionary action that *Plan B*, the final novel of the Harlem series, will attempt to address by channeling violence into an organized assault on the orders of domination.¹³ *Plan B* accomplishes this, in part, through its controversial ending, where the series' two black detectives, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, are killed. Analogously, Fanon's discussion of "combat breathing" in *A Dying Colonialism* (1959) precedes the decolonizing combat literature in *Wretched of the Earth*.¹⁴ The aesthetic project of combat literature goes hand in hand with the task of decolonization; as with decolonization, at stake in "a literature of combat" is the production of "a new man" (*Wretched* 316). Despite its gendered language, Fanon's "new man" figures an egalitarian disruption of conceptions of the human constituted by violent exclusions.¹⁵ Neither an empty utopian gesture of liberal humanism nor a merely "pessimistic" annihilation, the Fanonian "new man" offers a radical challenge to Western humanism and its constitutive grounds of antiblackness.

Combat Literature as a Revolutionary Aesthetic

During his discussion of national culture in *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon introduces “a literature of combat” as that which emerges when the native writer ceases “to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor” and begins to address “his own people” (240). At this moment, Fanon argues, “we can speak of a national literature” that takes national consciousness as its object of representation. Because this literature addresses the people in the decolonial struggle, it may be properly called a literature of combat, in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat because it molds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space. (240)

Combat literature therefore functions not merely as a critique, but also as “a political catalyst to help give those who are colonized a viable direction to liberation” (Perkins 228). The force of this catalyst can be seen more clearly in the French text. Constance Farrington’s translation of combat literature as “the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space” elides Fanon’s more existential designation of combat literature as “temporalized will” (“*volonté temporalisée*” [228]).¹⁶ While Farrington’s translation potentially suggests that this will takes place “in” a pre-existing spatio-temporal order, “*volonté temporalisée*” emphasizes that the will expressed in combat literature is “temporalized,” that is, combat literature constructs—or causes the construction of—a new temporality. Combat literature’s address to the people—an address that constitutes the very people to whom it speaks—also stresses that for Fanon, revolutionary violence “becomes legitimate through its precipitation from a spontaneous uprising into a *national* struggle for liberation” (Seshadri-Crooks 85). If “such a moment of precipitation” in fact “constitutes the nation, the people,” then combat literature can be understood as that which enables or supports this moment of

transition (Seshadri-Crooks 85). An essential temporal dimension determines combat literature as such. If Alice Cherki is correct in her claim that Fanon speaks “directly to the colonized” in *Wretched of the Earth* (170), then Fanon’s text can also be said to perform this very demand of combat literature.

Following his introduction of combat literature, Fanon discusses examples of the change from the oral tradition and plastic arts under colonization to emphasize how artists address themselves to the present and to the national struggle. “[T]he new movement” in politics and art “gives rise to a new rhythm of life and to forgotten muscular tensions, and develops the imagination” (241). Combat literature reveals “[t]he existence of a new type of man,” so that “[t]he present is no longer turned in upon itself but spread out for all to see” (241). Here Fanon writes, “*Le présent n’est plus fermé sur lui-même mais écartelé*” (229). The present is not simply “spread out for all to see” but “dismembered” (*écartelé*) or “torn apart.” *Écartelé* might also be translated as “quartered,” which connotes both a revolutionary and a juridical discourse. The present under colonial domination must be brought to task and put to death. My turn to the French is not meant to undermine Farrington’s translation; instead, I want to emphasize the way in which Fanon’s linguistic constructions appear saturated with violence.¹⁷ Fanon’s insistence on decolonizing violence occurs at the level of both content and style.

The “dismembering” effects of combat literature—which Fanon generalizes to include non-literary artistic practices—can be registered in the colonizer’s reactions. During the transitional period in the struggle, Fanon argues that the colonizer will become the most obsessed with preserving “tradition” because the colonizer cannot recognize the “new forms” that address the colonized and a national consciousness (242). Fanon then offers an analogy between, on the one hand, the combat literature that responds to Algerian and African colonialization and, on the other hand, the American jazz that responds to the oppressive racism of the U.S. This is one of many

references to the U.S. that encourages the kind of translation of Fanon's theories to the U.S. context by later thinkers, such as Huey P. Newton and Stokely Carmichael.¹⁸ Fanon cites American be-bop, an example that stresses antiblackness as a global phenomenon and suggests that the colonized proceeds through increasingly more radical phases of artistic production. Yet this example also emphasizes the essential characteristics of combat art, including its turn away from the colonizer to address the colonized directly. According to Fanon, "white jazz specialists" after World War II reacted negatively to "new styles" such as be-bop, for they believed "jazz should only be the despairing, broken-down nostalgia of an old Negro who is trapped between five glasses of whiskey, the curse of his race, and the racial hatred of the white men" (243). The colonizer desires to prevent "the Negro" from coming "to an understanding of himself" in which he "understands the rest of the world differently, when he gives birth to hope and forces back the racist universe" (243). With his turn to new forms, "his trumpet sounds more clearly and his voice less hoarsely" (243). Fanon then somewhat optimistically claims, "The new fashions in jazz are not simply born of economic competition. We must without any doubt see in them one of the consequences of the defeat, slow but sure, of the southern world of the United States" (243). Rather than try to justify the teleological and perhaps overly-optimistic implications of Fanon's comments, I want to highlight that the revolutionary potential of jazz in this example stems from its refusal to play into the colonizer's desires.¹⁹

As I will emphasize in the following sections, both *Blind Man with a Pistol* and *Plan B* depend on blues and jazz traditions at the levels of content and form for their development of "a literature of combat." According to Himes, "Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition" (*My Life of Absurdity* 1). A key characteristic of blues related to its potential as (or its potential use for) combat literature is its presentation of absurdity from a position of irony.²⁰ Such absurdity and irony in blues speak to lived experience rather than an abstracted concept. James H. Cone, for example,

distinguishes the absurdity in blues from a philosophical existentialism: “[A]bsurdity in the blues is factual, not conceptual. The blues, while not denying that the world was strange, described its strangeness in more concrete and vivid terms” (112). For Cone, “[t]he blues are a state of mind that affirms the essential worth of black humanity” and “have to do with the structure and meaning of existence itself” by focusing “on concrete events of everyday existence” (117-18). In this sense, the blues represent “living reality” (Cone 122). Himes was well aware of the “living reality” produced by “the absurdity of white society” (Cone 117). As was Fanon, who, in the face of “that crushing objecthood” of racism, reflects on his existence in a space of “nonbeing” (*Black Skin* 109). The blues that emerges from the black position of ontological negation insists not only on an existence, but also on an ontological status denied by white society.²¹ In *Blind Man with a Pistol* and *Plan B*, Himes attempts to channel the corrosive negativity of irony into the constructive project of decolonization. Crucially, however, the subversive force of blues for Himes—or be-bop for Fanon—cannot be guaranteed. Instead, it remains potential or latent. As LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka argues, the history of black music moves through a dialectical opposition between assimilation and rebellion.²² The performance of a given piece of music, which must account for both performer and audience, determines its specific effects. The status of a text as combat literature therefore depends on its legibility.

An example of this problem of legibility appears when Himes strategically occupies and discusses a position of blues irony in a 1983 interview with Michel Fabre, and this exchange helps articulate the irony I will discuss in his two final texts of the Harlem series. When responding to Fabre’s question of whether he might be called a surrealist writer, Himes emphasizes the absurd disjunctions of black experience and points to the value of a blues aesthetic over a surrealist aesthetic.²³ Himes insists, “I have no literary relationship with what is called the surrealist school. It just so happens that in the lives of black people, there are so many absurd situations, made that way

by racism, that black life could sometimes be described as surrealistic” (*Conversations* 140). “[B]lues musicians,” according to Himes, achieve “[t]he best expression of surrealism by black people” (*Conversations* 140). Himes thus links the absurdity of the lived experience of black people with its expression in blues. Earlier in this interview, Himes states of the Harlem represented in his domestic fiction, “I’ve sometimes been reproached for providing an exaggerated picture [...]. You only have to go there to realize that reality is often stranger than fiction” (*Conversations* 129). Part of Himes’s point is that what Fabre and others call “surreal” is only surreal because it does not align with their sense of reality. Himes suggests, however, that what white hegemony defines as surreal is in fact the reality of the lived black experience given the surrealism or “absurdity of white society” from the black point of view. The irony of Himes’s position is that by pointing to such a disjunction between conceptions of reality, Himes critiques Fabre’s position without, apparently, Fabre being aware of the critique.²⁴ Fabre cannot get outside his point of view to see that of the black position. For Tony Bolden, such an inability indicates a critic’s failure to “question traditional Western culture as the axis of human development” (13).

The difference in Himes’s tone in conversation with Fabre (a white, French critic) compared to his conversations with Williams (a black, American critic and writer), stresses Himes’s ability to shift his positions. In the 1983 discussion with Fabre, for example, Himes claims he never read Fanon, which contradicts what he tells Williams in 1970.²⁵ There is a further irony to Himes’s interaction with Fabre, given that Fabre edited *Plan B* after Himes’s death and championed his work. As I will elaborate in the next section with the redeployment of the French radio in the service of the Algerian revolution, Himes can be understood in this encounter to be redeploying his relationship to French critics, like Fabre, as well as to his French publishers and audiences for ulterior, political motives. Given Himes’s discussion of blues and absurdity—along with his own performance during the interview—it follows that his engagement with blues and irony expresses a

lived condition and introduces into his texts a forceful critique addressed in part to the people oppressed by racist domination.²⁶

Blues is a mode of language borne out of the devastating convergence of white and black traditions under colonization.²⁷ It appears “in the wake” of the ontological negation of black subjects by white society as an articulation of the lived experience within such a culture (Sharpe 13).²⁸ Fanon points to this emergence of the blues in “Racism and Culture” (1956): “the blues—‘the black slave lament’—was offered up for the admiration of the oppressors. This modicum of stylized oppression is the exploiter’s and the racist’s rightful due. Without oppression and without racism you have no blues. The end of racism would sound the knell of great Negro music” (*Toward* 37). Fanon thus ties blues to its emergence out of slavery and its appropriation by white society. Yet his discussion of combat literature in *Wretched of the Earth* offers the potential to reread certain iterations of blues as refutations of the colonizer’s enjoyment. Himes’s work in *Blind Man with a Pistol* and *Plan B* realizes this potential to argue that the blues and its central tropes, such as irony, can be used to “dismember” the present constituted by colonizing violence and its incessant (re)production of an antiblack “zone of nonbeing.” Where Fanon focuses on formal innovation in the revolutionary aesthetic of combat art—as is clear in his example of be-bop—Himes emphasizes in his two late novels the revolutionary content of the work that must be communicated to the appropriate audience. Legibility, then, becomes the key for Himes’s own revolutionary aesthetic.

Fanon’s revolutionary thinking of combat literature and decolonization also enables a more thorough understanding of the stakes of Himes’s aesthetic project. Given the ambiguity over genre categorization of Himes’s novels, for instance, combat literature offers one way to understand Himes’s project in the later novels of his Harlem series.²⁹ Himes began writing “protest” literature in the United States, such as *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), followed by the transitional novel, *The End of a Primitive* (1956), which foregrounds psycho-sexual racism. After emigrating to France, Himes

wrote the Harlem series (1957-1969, 1983) for Gallimard's *Série noire*, which reconfigured the genre of detective fiction. This genre provides Himes the means of rendering his revolutionary aesthetic legible. Combat literature re-describes Himes's desire to find a literary form that refuses to provide "another image" of American black people as "just victims" of racism (Himes, *My Life of Absurdity* 36). Himes's Harlem novels—sometimes referred to as his "domestic fiction"—present a trajectory that culminates in an explosion of the "revolutionary potential inscribed within" blues (Bolden 143).³⁰ Far from signaling a turn to the "frivolous" (Higginson 5-6), then, Himes's domestic fiction marks another way of representing and resisting antiblackness. Mobilizing blues strategies, Himes follows Fanon's project of challenging the antiblack foundations of Western society through decolonizing violence.

Riots and Spontaneous Violence

While Himes's investment in resistance and revolution can be seen throughout his oeuvre, the penultimate novel of the Harlem Cycle, *Blind Man with a Pistol*, concludes with a spontaneous riot that anticipates the work to come in *Plan B*. Rather than merely reflect processes of assimilation and internalized oppression, Himes uses blues tropes and citations to articulate his critique of antiblack violence. This becomes apparent in the novel's representation of blues and jazz spaces, especially The Five Spot (131).³¹ As Cheryl Clarke explains, "The jazz club, while regarded as a secular venue, is also a sacred space of black culture" (102-3). Much of the action of *Blind Man with a Pistol* occurs in or around The Five Spot, and Himes's narrative also references Thelonious Monk's band at The Five Spot, which more specifically situates the events in a particular historical and social milieu (147). Against Clarke, however, Himes seems to relish profaning the so-called "sacred space of black culture." Himes's description of The Five Spot reminds the reader—in line with the insights of Fanon's "Racism and Culture"—that the jazz club cannot be detached from the oppressive system from which it emerges: "it was soundproof. Not a dribble of noise leaked in from the street unless

the door was opened. And no one outside could hear the expensive sounds that were being made within. Which was the point. Those sounds were too expensive to waste” (142). The soundproofing emphasizes a Manichean division of the interior space of The Five Spot from the exterior space of New York City, and this division serves a white audience, which prefers to listen to jazz “in utter silence” (142). Like Fanon, Himes reiterates that black traditions cannot be conceived as detached from white hegemonic structures of oppression.³² White society in Himes’s narrative attempts to co-opt blues traditions and inoculate elements of blackness and subversion. Himes’s representation of The Five Spot thus foregrounds black music traditions as being “offered up for the admiration of the oppressors” (Fanon, *Toward* 37).

The jazz club in *Blind Man with a Pistol*, however, also offers black people the opportunity to re-explode the revolutionary force that is sublimated when white society co-opts black traditions. To destabilize such control, one needs, for example, to eradicate the “utter silence” white listeners prefer. Himes’s representation of a striptease and violence within and around The Five Spot in *Blind Man with a Pistol* gestures to this potential for resistance to white suppression. During the striptease, in which Himes draws on the eroticism inherent in many blues motifs, The Five Spot becomes “a madhouse,” and this anticipates the chaos that ensues (144).³³ A door thrown open breaks the barrier between the club and its exterior, as “loud urgent screams of police sirens poured into the room” (145). Grave Digger and Coffin Ed then find that a murder has taken place in the alley outside of the club (145). The jazz music in the background throughout this scene serves as a kind of contrapuntal pulse for the narrative’s events and the disruption of the “utter silence” of the club. Bolden argues that even when “blues songs are not overtly political, [...] the music is nonetheless an art of confrontation” (51). By foregrounding and disrupting the Manichean division of urban and cultural spaces, *Blind Man with a Pistol* points to the absurdity of life under racism, and the blues songs and motifs in fact help render visible what hegemonic racism attempts to conceal as

normative. Blues and jazz point to racist oppression as racist oppression. Himes's music allusions aim to go beyond the simple deployment of culture and sublimation by white oppression that Fanon sees occurring in folk traditions. These allusions instead work to redeploy a cultural tradition to offer some kind of resistance, even if isolated.

Blind Man with a Pistol therefore includes the paradigm of redeployment that appears in Fanon's discussion of the radio during the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962) in *A Dying Colonialism*. Here Fanon shifts from a conception of language as merely the deployment of a culture (evident in *Black Skin, White Masks*) to a conception of language that admits the potential for redeployment to resist cultural impositions. Fanon begins his discussion of the "new attitudes" he will address by recapitulating what is effectively his viewpoint on language in earlier work: "Radio-Alger, the French broadcasting station which has been established in Algeria for decades, [...] is essentially the instrument of colonial society and its values" (*Dying* 69). According to Fanon, Radio-Alger "*was the voice of the occupier*. Tuning in Radio-Alger amounted to accepting domination [...]. It meant giving in to the enemy" (*Dying* 94). Here Fanon echoes his earlier writing on language in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he claims that to speak a language "means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (*Black Skin* 17-8).

Yet Fanon then describes a change that emerges from the need to spread non-French information to the masses, one that offers a strategy of redeployment: "Since 1956 the purchase of a radio in Algeria has meant, not the adoption of a modern technique for getting news, but the obtaining of access to the only means of entering into communication with the Revolution, of living with it" (*Dying* 82-3). Such a move departs from *Black Skin, White Masks* and "Racism and Culture" by gesturing to the kind of revolutionary counter-move—an ironic redirection—that Himes himself represents in his blues and jazz citations, as well as in his relationship to Fabre and his French audiences, which potentially mutate the white hegemonic order that attempts to co-opt them.³⁴

Fanon now envisions a way in which redeployment becomes an essential tactic of revolutionary action, one that leads to “the nation’s new life” (*Dying* 85). By listening to the radio, the Algerian could hear “the voice of the combatants” and hear “the story of Liberation” from those engaged in it directly (85). Fanon thus recounts the way in which a revolutionary cause appropriates a colonial instrument for use against the colonial oppressor.

Fanon’s discussion in *A Dying Colonialism* also anticipates his notion of combat literature when he argues that colonial occupation of both the territory and the individual psyche produces “a combat breathing” (65). Under colonization, “[i]t is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction” (65). In such a context, “the individual’s breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing” (65). The shift from “occupied breathing” to “combat breathing” parallels the shift that takes place with the redeployment of the radio and later with combat literature. Through the redeployment of the radio and the turn to combat, “[t]he French language lost its accursed character, revealing itself to be capable also of transmitting, for the benefit of the nation, the messages of truth that the latter awaited” (*Dying* 89). Subversively, French “becomes an instrument of liberation” (*Dying* 90). Through the liberation struggle and its “process of exorcizing the French language,” “[t]he ‘native’ can almost be said to assume responsibility for the language of the occupier” and take control of the authority it presumes (*Dying* 90).³⁵ Fanon thus offers a model in which the mutation of an oppressive tool leads to that tool’s redeployment against the oppressor. In other words, Fanon describes “a dialectical development where something that was viewed as part of the colonial system of oppression is taken over by the colonized and used by them in the struggle” (Gibson, “Jammin’ the Airwaves” 275). We might now reread the revolutionary potential latent in Fanon’s earlier approach to language in which “[t]o speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (*Black Skin* 38).

Following *A Dying Colonialism*, “to take on a world” potentially describes a revolutionary force that counters the oppressor.

An exemplary instance of Fanonian redeployment occurs in the closing scenes of *Blind Man with a Pistol*, in which the titular blind man appears. The blind man points to the blues explicitly, recalling artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie McTell, and Blind Willie Johnson, to name a few examples. On the New York subway, the blind man gets into an argument with a white man, which a “yellow preacher” attempts to subdue: “‘Brothers! Brothers! [...] You can settle your differences without resorting to violence’” (184). Yet after the white man slaps the blind man, the latter pulls out his gun and shoots. The bullet, “as sightless as its shooter,” kills the preacher rather than the white man (185). In this exemplary allegory of race relations, in which black counter-violence responds to white violence, the “missed” shot in fact hits its mark: the “yellow preacher.” The representation of the preacher, “playing peacemaker” (185), satirizes a position of nonviolence, as he fails to recognize “that violence is in the atmosphere” (Fanon, *Wretched* 70). The preacher’s fantasmatic post-racial world—“Peace, man, God don’t know no color” (185)—disavows violence in favor of compromise and thus, implicitly, the continued oppression of black people. In contrast, the blind man’s breathing is “a combat breathing.” Shortly after this scene, the blind man follows the white man out of the subway and again shoots. He “misses” again, but he hits a white police officer who “was taking aim” at him (190-91). Like the tropological movement of blues irony, the blind man’s bullets hit their mark, even if they move circuitously or unexpectedly. Several other police officers appear and kill the blind man, but this then starts a race riot, with Grave Digger and Coffin Ed looking on as the novel ends.³⁶

Though *Blind Man with a Pistol* concludes with a riot, Himes elsewhere argues, “Riots are not revolutions” (Himes, *Black on Black* 233). For Fanon, riots similarly do not constitute revolutions, though the “spontaneous” violence of riots potentially prefigures revolution in its proper sense of

total decolonization.³⁷ The main problem at the end of *Blind Man with a Pistol*, from this point of view, has to do with directing violence in order to convert isolated, reactionary race riots into a full-scale revolution, in which liberating violence emerges. In *Plan B*, Himes will attempt to organize spontaneous, disorganized, and isolated violence into organized, revolutionary violence. As Thomas succinctly puts it, “The thesis of *Blind Man with a Pistol* is that ‘all unorganized violence is like a blind man with a pistol’” (“On Psycho-Sexual Racism” 227). In contrast, “[i]n *Plan B*, Himes imagines how violence could be organized by Black people, theoretically, for cataclysmic revolution in the settler-colony/super-empire of the United States” (Thomas 227). A central task, for both Himes and Fanon, thus involves actualizing the potential for revolution.

From Riots to Revolution: A Literature of Combat

In theorizing such a revolution, Fanon describes a literature of combat as the aesthetic of a political act that announces the people who have been negated by colonialism. This combat literature figures the decolonial project that extends the “combat breathing” of *A Dying Colonialism*. In this final section, I argue that *Plan B* can be understood as a literature of combat because it aims to call forth a people and a national consciousness through decolonizing violence. In Himes’s oeuvre, the emergence of revolutionary violence gets its most elaborate treatment in *Plan B* and its central figure, Tomsson Black. *Plan B* narrates a series of events in which black civilians receive assault weapons from an anonymous sender (Tomsson Black). Acts of violence and counter-violence follow, becoming increasingly more violent and widespread throughout the narrative. After a mock-turned-actual lynching and a series of police murders of black men, an unnamed black man shoots at a police parade with an assault rifle from a church tower.³⁸ Himes’s narrative here actualizes June Jordan’s thought experiment in “Poem about Police Violence”: “what you think would happen if / everytime they kill a black boy / then we kill a cop / everytime they kill a black man / then we kill a cop // you think the accident rate would lower / subsequently?” (330). *Plan B*

offers one answer: an economic crash follows the violence, and “[t]he very structure of capitalism [begins] to crumble” (182). Alongside these events, we find Tomsson Black ostensibly engaged in a humanitarian effort funded by white liberals to end racial oppression. Coffin Ed and Grave Digger eventually realize, however, that Black has been responsible for shipping the guns to black people across the country. Black reveals to the two detectives his “plan B” for black liberation: arm black civilians, train them in guerilla warfare, and obliterate the system of oppression by means of a revolutionary counter-violence that will end in either the liberation or the death of black civilians (199-200). Like Fanonian decolonization, Black’s plan B is an all-or-nothing proposal.

Tomsson Black represents Himes’s most fully realized, and most revolutionary, deployment of blues due to Black’s ironic position that irrupts against the fundamental absurdity of black life under an oppressive white society. An ironic gap emerges in Tomsson Black’s very name, for Tomsson, spelled with a double s, implies Uncle Tom’s son. Tomsson Black’s real name is George Washington Lincoln, but he acquires the appellation Tomsson Black from his schoolmates, who “wrongly charged that his father did anything [his boss] wished, and called him an Uncle Tom’s son” (*Plan B* 87).³⁹ Black subverts this motif in a later discussion with a representative of the white liberal position, Henry Hopkins, to which I will soon turn. With echoes of Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), Tomsson Black’s name in the logic of *Plan B* comes to suggest that the son of Tom is Black, both the individual character and a collective identity. Like the blues for Angela Davis, Tomsson Black figuratively synthesizes the individual and collective, and Black—both in his name and with his “plan B”—affirms or instantiates black (collective) identity.⁴⁰

As I mentioned, the funds for Black’s “plan B” come from “humanitarian” donors and from Black’s factory, Chitterlings, Inc., which extends the novel’s ironic disruption of racist oppression. For his factory, Black purchases the property of a former plantation, run by “an incompetent English slave owner, named Albert Harrison” (21). Himes’s narrative offers what may seem to be a

two-chapter digression, going through the explicitly perverse psycho-sexual violence and racism of Harrison's plantation and the history of Harrison's orphaned children, who engage in acts of increasing sexual depravity. Though the narrator claims Black bought this property "because he had heard stories about the razorback hogs with piquant chitterlings" (39), the reader can recognize here a subversive irony. Black reclaims land that was formerly in the service of racial oppression, and this reclamation emphasizes the way in which "[f]or the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler" (Fanon, *Wretched* 93). Himes's narrative of degenerative white society and the former plantation land on which Black grounds his revolutionary project emphasizes the way in which Black subverts the foundations of white society by developing a black revolutionary project from those foundations. In *Plan B*, Himes's narrative ironically turns the haunting force of racist oppression against itself. Himes, like Fanon, shifts from representing and analyzing the colonized subject to representing and theorizing decolonization.

Since it emerges "out of the rotting corpse of the settler" and since it involves the people themselves, Tomsson Black's "plan B" puts into practice Fanon's conception of a national consciousness in *Wretched of the Earth*. Here Fanon continues to rewrite his earlier statements on language and culture in an effort to think through a revolutionary devaluation that opens a space for a new value system. Put differently, in *Wretched of the Earth*, the mutation described in *A Dying Colonialism* with the French language and Radio-Alger has metastasized. For Fanon, "[a] national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism" but instead "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (233).⁴¹ The shift between *A Dying Colonialism* and *Wretched of the Earth* is at once subtle and essential. While in *A Dying Colonialism* a redeployment of the radio and language speaks to the specific historical moment of resisting French colonialism in Algeria, in *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon considers the next stage of revolutionary action, in which the

people form a culture based on themselves rather than on a mutated French culture. This is what Fanon means at the outset of *Wretched of the Earth* when he describes decolonization as the process of “replacing a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men” (35). Decolonization introduces “a new language and a new humanity” (*Wretched* 36). The oppressive hierarchy, colonizer/colonized, gets dismantled—or dismembered—by decolonization’s anarchic egalitarianism.

In what seems counter to Himes’s reliance on blues, however, Fanon dismisses “songs, poems, or folklore” and emphasizes instead the basis of an emergent national culture in the lived experience of a people and their “struggles” (*Wretched* 235). “African-Negro culture” can only appear in this view “by upholding unconditionally the people’s struggles for freedom” (*Wretched* 235). For Fanon, “the conditions necessary to the existence of that culture” include, primarily, “the liberation of the whole continent,” which entails “a continual struggle against colonialism in its new forms” (*Wretched* 235). True “liberation of the national territory” entails an absolute break from colonial oppression. Powerfully, Fanon restates the necessity of founding a national culture in the lived experience of a people at the close to *Wretched of the Earth*: “So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from her” (315). To “pay tribute to Europe,” Fanon suggests, leads to neocolonialism and a failure to achieve the autonomy of national liberation for the people, thereby betraying their struggle.

In his emphasis on “the national territory,” Fanon addresses the specific context of Algeria and Africa. Its relevance for Himes, then, depends partly on an imprecise analogy, though the analogy has a longstanding history in the rhetoric of American black power movements. Discussing the relation between Fanon’s theory and the political ideologies of the Black Panther Party, Mumia Abu-Jamal notes, “every Panther was told it was his/her duty to read *The Wretched of the Earth*” (7). Fanon’s work allowed members of the Black Panther Party to conceptualize “Black communities as colonies of an external, repressive White state power” (Abu-Jamal 7).⁴² Kathleen Cleaver argues that

the Black Panther Party's "uniqueness derived, in part, from its practical adaptation of the colonial analogy to America's reality" (213).⁴³ Black Americans recognized "a striking resemblance" between "the African colonial world Fanon wrote about" and the world of the U.S. (Clever 215).⁴⁴ Fanon provided an analysis of psycho-social racism, as well as a reasoned defense of the necessity of violence to restore "human dignity" to the oppressed (Clever 214). Fanon also helped demonstrate the international scale of antiblackness and the struggle against it.

Another complication in reading Himes with Fanon stems from the fact that while Fanon's dismissal of "songs, poems, or folklore" perhaps includes blues, Tomsson Black suggests that the means of liberation might be found, at least in a U.S. context, in the revolutionary use of blues tropes and strategies if they contribute to a literature of combat. Himes's work suggests, then, that Fanon's insistence on the aesthetics of combat art prevents him from recognizing the potentially subversive and revolutionary ends of "songs, poems, or folklore." In *Plan B*, Black outlines a plan for a revolution that aims to achieve the liberation of which Fanon writes in *Wretched of the Earth*, in part by exploding the forceful and revolutionary potential of blues irony. Through its irony, blues can be taken out of its integrationist position within the mainstream and redeployed as a tool for black liberation, as the Radio-Alger of the people's struggles in the U.S. Black's dialogue with—or interrogation by—Henry Hopkins of the Hull foundation, to which I earlier alluded, portrays Black's ability to ventriloquize those black positions familiar to the ruling white hegemonic class (153-71). During their dialogue, Hopkins revealingly asks Black for his opinion on Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, and Malcolm X (167-68). In doing so, Hopkins attempts to fit Black into a position of blackness established and understood by white hegemony. Black ostensibly obliges with "correct" answers—in a move that parallels Himes's own navigation of Fabre's 1983 interview—and he concludes by stating, "I would say that both [Malcolm X] and Dr. King had arrived at the ultimate point in their love for humanity, although by quite different roads" (169). In his approval of Black's

responses, Hopkins fails to read the subversive irony of Black's statements on "humanity." Black's understanding of "humanity," one of literal equality that includes the oppressed black population, is by no means equivalent to Hopkins's abstracted understanding of "humanity" under a racist society. Hopkins's conception of the human depends on "the systemic inducing of Black self-alienation, together with the securing of the correlated powerlessness of its African-descended population group at all levels of our contemporary global order or system-ensemble" (Wynter 115). Hopkins cannot conceive of identities outside those established by the white oppressive system of which he is a part; he cannot "question traditional Western culture" (Bolden 13). While Hopkins offers liberal humanism and reform, Black intends to destroy this humanist project and its antiblackness through violent revolution.

Black's comments at the novel's conclusion suggest that his ironic ventriloquism is in fact part of an effort toward a more radical devaluation and revaluation of society. As ventriloquism, or what Henry Louis Gates Jr. might call "Signifyin(g)," Black's expressions redeploy a position similar to the way in which Fanon describes subversive redeployment in *A Dying Colonialism*; however, Black's comments at the novel's conclusion suggest that this redeployment aims for a more radical devaluation and revaluation of society in line with *Wretched of the Earth*. Speaking to Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, Black states, "I never tried to keep anything a secret" (201).⁴⁵ Black therefore suggests that the white population—represented by Hopkins in the earlier chapter—simply misconstrues his statements, such as his claim regarding "love for humanity" (169). Indeed, Black's subversive irony exists "on the surface" of the text, but it is not equally legible to all audiences. After Hopkins prompts Black to comment on Roy Wilkins, for example, the text reads, "For an instant the name did not register in Tomsson Black's memory. It was as though, unconsciously, he suffered from a block. But suddenly his memory cleared and he smiled with relief. 'I grew up with the feeling that Mr. Wilkins, as the head of the NAACP, was the titular leader of our race'" (167). This

statement's literality carefully evades a value judgment, though this evasion implies Black's critical attitude toward Wilkins's liberal project. If we read Black literally in the final chapter, then the earlier statement on ultimately gaining a "love for humanity" to Hopkins can be read as sincere. Of course, Black's "humanity" radically differs from Hopkins's contradictory "humanity," in which the white population oppresses the black population. Black implicitly advocates, then, a new humanity akin to Fanon's, in which racial oppression would cease to structure society.

Again, Black performs the subtle but essential shift between Fanon's redeployment and the revolutionary option put forth in *Wretched of the Earth*. Initially, Black's ventriloquism performs what Fanon refers to as "nauseating mimicry" to replicate those positions comprehensible by the white population in order to use such positions against those very oppressors (*Wretched* 311). Yet inscribed in such redeployment is a more revolutionary potential that metastasizes, exceeding the limits imposed by the system of oppression. Black is uninterested in mutating the structure of society and redeploying it to serve black people, or at least, he is uninterested in this mutation as a goal unto itself. Black instead aims to serve black people by completely eradicating the system of oppression and destroying the racism in society by bringing that society itself down, by provoking the mutation to metastasize: "His plan was to arm all American black males, instruct them in guerilla warfare, and have them wait until he gave the order to begin waging war against the whites" (199-200). If read against its gendered language, this passage represents how Black's plan B and his ironic position inaugurate, but are then exceeded by, the people's struggles.⁴⁶ Throughout *Plan B*, Black strives for Fanon's notion of a national culture (*Wretched* 233). Interestingly, in its translation of Fanonian ideas, *Plan B* both gestures to and evades the different implications "national culture" has for an American context. In the aforementioned reclamation of plantation land for Chitterlings, Inc., the narrative foregrounds white/black relations without fully engaging issues related to indigenous sovereignty and land.⁴⁷

Black's blueprint for revolution in *Plan B* offers an organized attempt based on a "calculated risk" to found an egalitarian national culture grounded in the people's struggles, and it foregrounds the relationship between the oppressed black population and oppressive white society (Himes, *Conversations* 57). Although Black notes that he failed to anticipate black men acting independently—thereby not heeding his instructions to wait for the guerilla training and coordinated uprising—there remains a chance that the disorganized, spontaneous violence transforms into an organized movement (199-200). The economic crisis caused by the counter-violence at the police parade marks this potential. In his discussion of U.S. society's ontological negation of black subjects, Calvin Warren argues that "neither progressive legislation nor political movements have been able to transform black ~~being~~ into human being" (48). Given the failures of such liberal projects, revolutionary counter-violence offers an alternative means to overturn the ontological negation of an antiblack social order.

At the controversial close to *Plan B*, Grave Digger shoots and kills his partner, Coffin Ed, precisely over the commitment to the possibility of such a revolution that would interrupt, fundamentally, the orders of domination.⁴⁸ When confronting Tomsson Black, Coffin Ed sides with the law, while Grave Digger aligns himself with Black: "You can't kill, Black, man," Grave Digger explained. "He might be our last chance, despite the risk. I'd rather be dead than a subhuman in this world" (202). Grave Digger recognizes, in other words, what Huey Newton names "revolutionary suicide"; that is, the notion that "it is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them. Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions" (5). After Grave Digger kills Coffin Ed, Black shoots and kills Grave Digger, stating that keeping him alive would be too great a risk (202-3). *Plan B*, like *Wretched of the Earth*, represents revolutionary counter-violence as a logical necessity in the

process of decolonization, both despite and because of its annihilating consequences (*Wretched* 35-7).⁴⁹

Regardless of how “incomplete” one considers the end of *Plan B*, the fact that the novel ends with the death of the two detectives and with a gesture to the impending revolutionary violence rather than a representation of that revolution suggests that Himes’s novel articulates what David Marriott names “Fanon’s future imperfect” (53). This “future imperfect” refers to “a moment of inventiveness 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 future at all” (Marriott 53-4). It seems to be no accident that *Plan B* can only end with a gesture to decolonization; the event of revolution itself cannot be represented in part because it remains unknowable.⁵⁰ More specifically, *Plan B* concludes with a series of “expressive acts of (political) dislocation” that have not yet been recuperated discursively by a revolutionary national consciousness (Seshadri-Crooks 85).⁵¹ As Fanon clarifies, “National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension” (*Wretched* 247). Combat literature can provide direction and can develop this national consciousness, but it cannot provide ready-made solutions.⁵²

The closing passages of Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* offer a useful counterpoint to the close of *Plan B*. After warning of the dangers of a neocolonial reproduction of the structures of Europe, Fanon insists that a new humanity requires the revolutionaries to “invent” and “make discoveries” (315). Fanon then concludes by affirming, “For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man” (316). This reaffirms the book’s initial discussion of violent decolonization, which “is the veritable creation of new men” (36).⁵³ The “new man” proposed by Fanon should not be understood simply as a naïve utopian image. This “new man” names, at the same time, a figure in excess of current

conceptions of the human. Fanon's "new man" figures the structural antagonist to Western humanism's racial conceptions of the human, in which the human emerges through the antiblackness of an ontological negation of the colonized. The new humanity announced by Fanon promises nothing less than the annihilation of the current system; however, beyond destruction and substitution, one cannot know what this "new man" will bring. Fanon posits "a future that is not always already contained in the past, a future that will not (always) have been" (Marriott 53). Partly for this reason, Fanon stresses the value of political education for the people (*Wretched* 180). For Fanon, "everything," including the "new man," "depends on [the masses]" (*Wretched* 197). The "new man" thus names the need for constant reinvention, as well as the dynamism of the ideological constructions needed during and after the revolution. Such a "new man," which promises "dignity to all citizens" (*Wretched* 205), proposes a radical challenge to the antiblack Western humanist tradition by offering an open, "nonprescriptive" move toward the human against its racialized conceptions (Butler 193).⁵⁴

Fanon's "new man" can thus be read either as a utopian impulse or as an excessive figure, that is, as an ironizing force that reawakens to destabilize any position by continually reinventing itself. Because the former offers an image of totality or synthesis, while the latter offers a figure of anti-synthesis, "a way of thinking about the human beyond humanism" (Butler 182), the former seems to be a reductive misreading. For Fanon, "stagnation" and "ossification" always "demand" "new concepts" (Gordon 86). Fanon's closing utopian gesture must therefore be read both as a formal project and as a figurative dynamic of a conception of the human not determined in advance. Fanon's "new man" aims to account for the "rights of peoples" (*Toward* 74), rather than merely the rights of "individuals," as granted by liberal conceptions of humanism, in which "human" signifies "whiteness," and this abandonment of liberalism reveals another quality of Fanon's later thought. His emphasis on invention speaks to the crucial role of the aesthetic—such as a literature of

combat—in the construction of a “new man.” By characterizing “invention as a political act,” Fanon designates invention as “ongoing” rather than “constitutional” (Makalani 18). That is, invention—as that which occurs in combat literature—names “an orientation” for politics rather than a utopian goal (Makalani 18).⁵⁵

Plan B's radical politics, exemplified by Tomsson Black's ironic articulations and the death of Himes's two black detectives, figure this Fanonian project of reinvention, and might therefore be thought of as a response to Fanon's critical remark and challenge in *Wretched of the Earth*: “It is always easier to proclaim rejection than actually to reject” (219). One might argue, for example, that Himes's earlier domestic fiction rejects the racist system of oppression, but it does not always gesture to a way in which characters and isolated actions might exceed their particularity. Because such acts of resistance are limited, they fail to reject with revolutionary force. In *Plan B*, however, Himes depicts a revolutionary counter-violence that rejects the system of oppression by imagining the conditions “to launch a violent uprising” (Himes, *Conversations* 57). In doing so, Himes's *Plan B* realizes what Fanon outlines as a literature of combat. Both Himes and Fanon agree that “armed struggle, by itself, can never bring about a revolution”; revolution requires “the support of the masses” (Shakur 242). *Plan B* addresses the people to develop this support and its requisite national consciousness. Himes, following Fanon, attempts to think politics outside of a liberal “integrationist” worldview (Hartman 185). *Plan B* does not simply represent a means of overthrowing a racist system of oppression, but also directs itself toward that overthrow by imagining the conditions for organizing a people. Here Himes most clearly shifts from a revolutionary writer to a writer of revolution.

Notes

¹ For a precedent to this conjunction of Fanon and Himes, see Greg Thomas's “On Psycho-Sexual Racism & Pan-African Revolt.” Though Fanon focuses on Algeria and Himes focuses on the United States, both stress antiblack repression as a global phenomenon. For a discussion of how Algeria

and the U.S. function as reflective metonyms of each other in Himes's work, see Christopher Raczkowski's "Chester Himes, Frantz Fanon and the Literary Decolonization of Harlem."

² For examples of readings that pair Himes and Fanon, see Greg Thomas, Wendy W. Walters, and the special section on Chester Himes in a 2009 issue of the *African American Review*. In their introduction, Jonathan P. Eburne and Kevin Bell state the section's aim to "confront the critical tendency to particularize Chester Himes, viewing his work from the perspective of only one of his many writerly incarnations" (226). The included essays also "pay particular heed to Himes's significance as a political thinker" (229), which my approach to Himes and Fanon aims to extend.

³ In a letter to John Williams, Himes clarifies that Fanon's "article" on violence in his work "was in reality a lecture, but it was mimeographed and distributed to some extent" (*Dear Chester, Dear John* 99).

⁴ See Thomas for a discussion of the "parallel discourse" in Fanon and Himes ("On Psycho-Sexual Racism" 219).

⁵ Himes distinguishes between riots and revolution in "Negro Martyrs are Needed" (*Black on Black* 233).

⁶ In this way, Fanon forcefully criticizes a politics of recognition. For an insightful extension of Fanon's critique of recognition and reconciliation, see Glen Sean Coulthard.

⁷ Lewis R. Gordon charges many of Fanon's readers with reducing Fanon's corpus to his discussions of violence (68). While I do not think Fanon's work is reducible to violence, I disagree with Gordon's claim that violence is not part of "the center of his philosophical concerns" (68). In contrast, I find violence to be essential to Fanon's conception of revolution, just as shock treatment is essential to his clinical practice (Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom* 73-74).

⁸ One exception to this is Eugene Perkins's discussion of literature of combat in relation to poetry of African liberation movements.

⁹ Higginson argues instead for what he names the "frivolous literary" (13). According to Higginson, the concept of the frivolous literary "seeks to account for the work of a number of African authors who have responded to the constraints of the hierarchical ordering of writerly aesthetics with a previously unvalorized emphasis on pleasure, entertainment, humor, and profit" (4).

¹⁰ Fluet continues to write, "In place of a narrative of individual struggle and advancement wedded to racial identity, we find instead narratives depicting the effects of the systemic failure of collective economic advancement across races" (267).

¹¹ While other texts might be understood as combat literature, including Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969), June Jordan's "Poem about Police Violence" (1980), and Assata Shakur's autobiography (1988), I focus on Himes because of the proximity of his thinking with that of Fanon. See Elizabeth Reich's discussion of *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, both the novel and film adaptation, for a treatment of revolutionary aesthetics parallel to mine.

¹² For a discussion of this restriction of black radical thought, see Amna A. Akbar's "Policing Black Radicalism."

¹³ There are nine novels in the Harlem cycle that feature Himes's two black detectives, Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson: *A Rage in Harlem/For the Love of Imabelle*, *The Real Cool Killers*, *The Crazy Kill*, *The Big Gold Dream*, *All Shot Up*, *The Heat's On*, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Blind Man with a Pistol*, and *Plan B*. Wendy W. Walters argues that "Himes's political philosophizing moves from an assertion of defensive violence to an aggressive violence," with his later novels, such as *Blind Man with a Pistol*, representing large-scale, revolutionary violence (620).

¹⁴ By reading across Fanon's body of work, I aim to avoid the pitfalls of selectively reading Fanon in a way that undermines his project. Greg Thomas criticizes certain trends in the academy's selective reception of Fanon's work in "Wynter with Fanon in the FLN" and "Afro-Blue Notes."

¹⁵ Fanon's work has been subject to a number of critiques of misogyny. While an engagement with gender in Fanon exceeds the limits of this essay, counters to these feminist critiques have been developed by T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Greg Thomas's "On Psycho-Sexual Racism," and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks.

¹⁶ In the newer English translation of *Wretched of the Earth*, Richard Philcox writes that combat literature "is resolve situated in historical time" (174), which seems to emphasize Fanon's Hegelian influences. Each translation therefore stresses different aspects of Fanon's text and thought.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the different English translations of *Les damnés de la terre*, see Nigel C. Gibson's "Relative Opacity."

¹⁸ Carmichael writes of revolutionary violence, for example, but he often changes or removes Fanon's language of "national consciousness" and the "national territory": "Revolutionary violence is that violence that seeks to overthrow an established system that serves a few people, to establish a new system that serves the masses of our people" (157).

¹⁹ *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* affirms this Fanonian logic concisely when a character notes that a U.S. film on race relations in the South would not hesitate to include a black character singing a spiritual. Another character agrees and elaborates: "Never no blues in the movies; white folks scared of that, but a spiritual talkin' 'bout how good it going to be when they dead" (115). In this example, the spiritual reassures the colonizer of their power, while the blues potentially subverts it.

²⁰ Irony "is among the most common forms of" what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls "signifyin(g)" (90). According to Gates, "Motivated Signifyin(g) [...] functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically" (124). Gates's discussion of signifyin(g) is another way of conceptualizing what I describe as blues irony.

²¹ The concreteness of the blues also resembles the later Fanon's insistence on the concrete reality of the people: "they do not *say* that they represent the truth, for they *are* the truth" (*Wretched* 49).

²² Versions of this dialectic repeat throughout *Blues People*. For example, when discussing "classic blues," Jones/Baraka argues, "The professionalism of classic blues moved it to a certain extent out of the lives of Negroes. It became the stylized response, even though a great many of the social and emotional preoccupations of primitive blues remained" (87). Later in his history, Jones/Baraka locates in rhythm & blues a certain rebelliousness to assimilation: "It was performed almost exclusively for, and had to satisfy, a Negro audience. For this reason, it could not suffer the ultimate sterility that would have resulted from total immersion in the mainstream of American culture. It, too, was a music that was hated by the middle-class Negro and not even understood by the white man" (169). From our contemporary vantage, we can see how this moment in the dialectic gives way to assimilation, as R&B became a mainstream form of musical expression.

²³ While I distance Himes's sense of absurdity from surrealism in Fabre's sense of the term, see Jonathan P. Eburne for a careful discussion of Himes's engagement with surrealism.

²⁴ For discussions of the ways in which Himes responds to Fabre differently from other critics, such as John A. Williams, see Walters and Raczkowski.

²⁵ Lawrence Jackson's biographical discussion of Himes and his failing health later in life could offer another explanation for Himes's claim to Fabre that he had never read Fanon (Jackson 493).

²⁶ Stephen F. Soitos recognizes that "Himes blends vernacular music references into the narrative so successfully that music and dance are understood as integral parts of the Harlem community," yet Soitos concludes, "it is quite clear that Himes's conscious use of various African American vernaculars was an attempt to differentiate his detective fiction by grounding the narrative in the experience of black people" (161). I argue, however, that blues is not merely an attempt to differentiate his work from a white literary tradition of "detective fiction" but instead functions as an integral part of Himes's critique of racist practices and their effects on the black experience.

²⁷ According to Fanon, the black man's "metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him" (*Black Skin* 110).

²⁸ According to Sharpe, "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13-4).

²⁹ For a discussion of the problems of classifying Himes according to traditional genres, see Raczkowski.

³⁰ "Domestic fiction" has the benefit of differentiating Himes's novels from "detective fiction." Though the series follows two black detectives, the novels consistently critique the psycho-social—and psycho-sexual—racism perpetuated in the name of "the law," with which the two detectives maintain a complex relation. Many misinterpretations of Himes stem from associating his novels too simply with (white) detective fiction. At stake in Himes's domestic fiction is in fact how to survive and counter "domestic colonialism" (Thomas, "On Psycho-Sexual Racism" 227).

³¹ For a discussion on the imbrications of blues and jazz, see LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. Baraka claims that "jazz should not be thought of as a *successor* to blues, but as a very original music that developed out of, and was concomitant with, blues and moved off into its own path of development. One interesting point is that although jazz developed out of a kind of blues, blues in its later popular connotation came to mean *a way of playing jazz*, and by the swing era the widespread popularity of the blues singer had already been replaced by the jazz player's. By then, blues was for a great many people no longer a separate music" (71).

³² As Cone remarks, "The origin and definition of the blues cannot be understood independent of the suffering that black people endured in the context of white racism and hate" (123).

³³ Although Himes's writing (like Fanon's) has been criticized for its representations of women, many of his novels, such as *The Real Cool Killers* (1958), reveal a profound awareness of psycho-sexual racism and violence.

³⁴ My reading offers a different meaning to Higginson's suggestion that Himes "knew that his French audience would barely understand the context he described," since it reveals—contra Higginson's claim that he was writing the Harlem series merely for money and pleasure—that Himes took advantage of the differences in his transatlantic audience for his own ironic play (26).

³⁵ This self-conscious, decolonizing redeployment of the radio leads to a mutation in the French language itself, for "[t]he occupier's voice was stripped of its authority" (*Dying* 95). Anticipating combat literature, which also "assumes responsibility," the colonized "can almost be said" to take responsibility for their redeployment of the colonizer's language.

³⁶ This reading of the novel's conclusion counters Higginson, who claims, "With this outrageous series of violent and twisted intertextual references, Himes closes the door on protest fiction with the self-conscious noir laughter of his Harlem cops; they are thoroughly aware of the pointless universe they inhabit and turn it into the only thing available: a game" (9). I suggest, however, that the novel offers a serious allegory of race relations in its representation of the blind man, and in the comparatively minor role accorded to Grave Digger and Coffin Ed, Himes can be said to be anticipating their deaths in *Plan B*.

³⁷ For this discussion, see Fanon (*Wretched* 72-81). In Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, the protagonist, Dan Freeman, uses a riot in Chicago as the catalyst for his black revolution.

³⁸ This scene might have been inspired by the machine-gunning of two police officers on 19 May 1971 (Malcolm X's birthday) on Riverside Drive in Manhattan. See Marvin Howe's reference to this and other related events. Assata Shakur also alludes to this event in her autobiography (235).

³⁹ Elsewhere, *Plan B* characterizes Tomsson Black as a confidence-man, which further contributes to his ironic position in the text (147).

⁴⁰ See Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* for this interpretation of the blues.

⁴¹ See Gordon for a discussion of Fanon's theories in terms of existentialism and phenomenology.

⁴² The Panther founders, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, were well-known readers of Fanon. See Newton's account of the founding of the Black Panther Party in *Revolutionary Suicide* for a brief discussion of Fanon's importance (111-113). Similarly, Stokely Carmichael repeatedly returns to Fanon's influence in his essays, characterizing Fanon as a figure who lent "ideological strength" to black power movements ("The Black American and Palestinian Revolutions"), which is clear in his Fanonian essay, "A New World to Build." Here Carmichael develops Fanon's gestures toward a "new man" and his insistence on counterviolence.

⁴³ Cleaver continues to write, "Fanon's analysis seemed to explain and to justify the spontaneous violence ravaging Black ghettos across the country, and linked the incipient insurrections to the rise of a revolutionary movement" (214).

⁴⁴ In Cleaver's account, "The condition of Blacks in the United States, in the perspective of the Black Panther Party, was analogous to that of a colonized people—a captive nation dispersed throughout the White population. [...] Adapting Fanon's analysis helped to clarify the historical relationship between subjugated Blacks and dominant Whites that conventional terms obscured" (215).

⁴⁵ This marks a difference from *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, for Dan Freeman does aim to conceal his intentions by performing stereotypes of blackness.

⁴⁶ The complex opening scene of *Plan B* lends justification to this reading. In that scene, Tang, a black woman, exemplifies the revolutionary figure rather than her lover, T-Bone Smith, who remains "whitey's slave" (11).

⁴⁷ We are only given a brief allusion to the local indigenous populations when Himes writes that many of Harrison's slaves "joined the tribes of native Indians who gave the river its name" (21-22).

⁴⁸ Following Michel Fabre's editorial comments at the end of *Plan B*, many readers insist on the incomplete nature of *Plan B*, especially its closing chapter. While I do not want to get involved in the complexities of this editorial discussion, I do want to read the text as it stands. Readings that qualify the end of *Plan B* often troublingly use that qualification to undo the violent and revolutionary implications of Himes's work.

⁴⁹ Higginson characterizes *Plan B*'s turn "away from the humor and ideological disengagement" in the previous novels of the Harlem series as a weakness (81). While my reading of *Blind Man with a Pistol* should make clear that I disagree with the premise of a turn in Himes's work, I consider *Plan B*'s serious engagement with revolutionary violence its strength.

⁵⁰ A similar claim can be made regarding *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, which concludes with the irruption of revolutionary activity across the U.S. Both the novel and film end with this gesture to mass uprising.

⁵¹ *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* does show this violence to be recuperated by Dan Freeman's cultivation of a national consciousness throughout the novel.

⁵² With this generic classification in mind, we might reread *Plan B* as a "successful" narrative, one that recodes the meaning of "success" to imagine the possibility of "collective action" (Fluet 266).

⁵³ The close of *Wretched* also echoes the conclusion to *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Fanon argues "that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence" (179). *Wretched of the Earth* returns to this notion of invention without, however, the same liberal investment in the individual that characterizes *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁵⁴ Despite the ostensible "purity" of decolonization as "a total, complete, and absolute substitution" of one species of man for another (*Wretched* 35), Fanon's thought still retains ties to a dialectical tradition of Western philosophy. As Gordon suggests, "Fanon's thought emerges as a form of critical philosophy, a philosophy critical of the West within the West" (35). These Western influences merge with Pan-African influences, such that Fanon's critical position appears similar to

Himes's blues position, in which blues marks a convergence of cultures and ironically disturbs the inequalities perpetuated by this convergence.

⁵⁵ Makalani argues, "What follows from Fanon's thinking about any new, unknowable future is a refusal of any utopia, of any pursuit of a specific vision of the future" (21).

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