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"Cops, the harbingers of the enemy": Discussing the Relevance of Fanon's Literatures of Combat in N.K. Jemisin's "The City Born Great"

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ABSTRACT

Frantz Fanon's rebound book *Wretched of the Earth* discusses his theories and understandings of de-colonization, specifically the role of art and culture and how it is affected by a colonizer. In this essay, I analyze to what extent his theories can be applied to N.K. Jemisin's short story "The City Born Great," from her collection of short stories *How Long 'Til Black Future Month?*, which considers the diaspora, not the colonized nations that Fanon considers in his own writings. Through her reflection of the realities of a people, and her portrayal of an "awakener" of the people, I conclude that although Jemisin does write literature of combat, a term coined by Fanon to include anti-colonial writing and art, she does so in a way that uniquely reflects the African-American diaspora that "The City Born Great" considers and reflects.

Despite the fifty-three years since the publication of Frantz Fanon's book *Wretched of the Earth* in 1967, his theories and understandings of decolonization remain fundamental in contemporary theories of postcolonial writing and critique. One chapter in particular, "On National Culture," which explains the relationship between the native intellectual and his culture in the revolt against colonial control, continues to offer valuable insight into the role of art and writing in decolonization. In contemporary postcolonial theory and politics, the conversation has shifted to include discussions around diaspora. Fanon's essay does not consider diaspora, as his essay focuses on Algeria's revolt against French colonialism. Though Fanon's theory was not written with diaspora in mind, many aspects of his understanding of literatures of combat as foundations of a revolutionary culture apply to contemporary diasporic writing. Of course, there are significant exceptions due to the cultural and historical differences between diasporic and colonized nations. By applying Fanon's theories to N.K. Jemisin's short story "The City Born Great," it is possible to determine how contemporary African-American writing, despite the complication of the diaspora's relationship with the English language, fulfills the role of what Fanon calls a "literature of combat."

What, according to Fanon, defines a literature of combat? Must it be a revolutionary manifesto written with a spirit of revolt and artistic violence, or can it be a simple short story? Fanon discusses decolonized (and decolonizing) literature, culture, and art in detail in "On National Culture." He begins with the assertion that

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literatures of combat must be written by "an awakener of the people" (Fanon 41), though he does not provide any kind of precise definition of who or what this awakener may be. The awakener—a role fulfilled by the native intellectual, a member of a colonized nation who takes up arms against the colonizer—begins to "shake the people" (Fanon 41), and this spirit of movement is key to Fanon's understanding of the revolutionary culture that can decolonize in order to realize its own nationalism. Fanon goes on to explain that the native intellectual must evoke a certain rhythm in their writing. He explains that "art without internal rhythms" and art that is "evocative not of life but of death" (Fanon 42) cannot be true literatures of combat, as both the "rhythm of life" and "innovation" are necessary components of such revolutionary writing. Without these components, the author has done nothing more than remained firmly planted in the thoughts and understandings of the colonizer, not of the dynamic national culture born of revolt.

In addition to being a forward-thinking, forward-moving individual, the native intellectual who awakens their own people must also *know* their own people. The awakener who seeks to create authentic works of art and writing must realize that "the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities" (Fanon 42). It is impossible to represent, motivate, and spark the will of a people without knowing the truth of their quotidian lives. The French poet Charles Baudelaire shares Fanon's understanding of the role of the artist, though he does not apply it to revolution or revolt. In his 1863 essay, "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire urges modernist artists of the time (primarily the Impressionists) to represent "present-day beauty" (13) in their art, not to avoid the grit and grime of modern life, but to represent it fully and without adornment. By doing so, artists shape and represent their reality simultaneously, using their art to create the "present-day beauty" they wish to see in their cultures. Thus, if the awakener follows Baudelaire's instructions, they are able to shape the reality of their national culture, a reality that moves beyond colonization. Fanon argues that knowing and conveying truth are crucial roles of the artist, roles that become exponentially more necessary when a nation is in the throes of a revolution.

In what ways can Fanon's requirements for a literature of combat in colonial-controlled Algeria be applied to the contemporary literature of the African-American diaspora? N.K. Jemisin, the critically acclaimed author of nine novels and a collection of short stories, is an excellent lens through which this theory can be considered and discussed. In 2016, Jemisin became the first African-American author to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel, a prestigious prize in the science-fiction-writing community. She won the prize again in 2017 and 2018, making her the first Black author ever to win the award and the only author ever to win the prize three times consecutively. Her writing is praised in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *NPR*, and *The Paris Review*. This recognition of Jemisin's work certainly fulfills Fanon's requirement for the "shaking" of a people, forcing their attention from traditional science-fiction that rarely depicts Black people, people of colour, and queer people outside of stereotype and onto her fresh, innovative writing. It is also possible to examine the ways in which Jemisin's writing embodies the "rhythm of life" (Fanon 42) and aspects of the realities of the African-American diaspora in the United States, through her short story "The City Born Great" from her 2018 collection *How Long Til Black Future Month?*.

Firstly, "The City Born Great" literally depicts the birth of New York City. In the story, New York City fights to join the other great cities of the world, as young São Paulo, disinterested Paris, and exalted Lagos watch (Jemisin 30). Jemisin's writing is also rich with rhythm, most notably where she considers the life of cities, including the following passage:

> This city will die [i]f you do not learn the things I have to teach you. If you do not help. The time will come and you will fail, and this city will join Pompeii and Atlantis and a dozen others whose names no one remembers, even

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> though hundreds of thousands of people died with them. Or perhaps there will be a stillbirth—the shell of the city surviving to possibly grow again in the future but its vital spark snuffed for now, like New Orleans (19).

There is a movement, an urgency articulated in Jemisin's word choice and flow in the above paragraph. Jemisin is creating a narrative and a mythology, creating an alternate version of the world that sparks with life. Later in the short story, when New York City gives birth, the narrator *feels* city's water breaks, describing it as rupturing "[w]ater mains. Terrible mess, gonna fuck up the evening commute" (Jemisin 29). As the first contractions begin to ripple throughout the city he feels "the flex and rhythm of reality, the contractions of possibility" (Jemisin 29). This is a story about birth and the creation of life, where the personification of this great city—the centre of the AIDs epidemic of the late 20th century, where Black communities make up 26% of the population (The Furman Centre for Research and Urban Policy), and the number of homeless adults has risen 120% in the past 10 years (Coalition for the Homeless)—is a queer, homeless Black man, a man who represents some of the realities of life in New York City. Jemisin represents three other contemporary realities, as well. The first is the over-policing of Black Americans, as the narrator leaves restaurants when cops come in (16), and the primary antagonist is a "Mega Cop" (26), a monstrous conglomerate of two police officers. The second is the realities of poverty—the protagonist mentions his stained, ripped clothes, the luxury of real cheese in a sandwich (15), and considers prostituting himself for a place to sleep (19). Jemisin also represents homophobia, as the narrator discusses his mother kicking him out of his home for being gay (19). The combination of these elements indicates that Jemisin fulfills Fanon's requirements for a literature of combat by evoking the "rhythms of life" and articulating "the truths of a nation" (42).

Though Jemisin has the innovation, the creativity, and she knows her people well, Fanon's theory of the literature of combat is still written within the context of colonized Algeria. He—and other theorists and writers—prioritizes the use of African languages in order to reaffirm the process of decolonization, because the language of the colonizer and the world (including the politics, culture, and history) of the colonizer are unequivocally linked (Drabinski). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer and professor, is a particularly powerful voice surrounding the importance of the use of native African languages in literature and education. In his book *Decolonising the Mind*, he explains that "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (Thiong'o 15). If language is to represent culture it must represent the culture of the people, not of the colonizer, in the same way that art and literature must represent the reality and truth of the people. Jemisin's work is written entirely in English. Does writing in English signify that Jemisin's work cannot be considered a literature of combat? As an African-American woman, and a member of a diaspora that is nearly four-hundred years old[1], Jemisin and other African-Americans have an entirely different relationship with African languages than Thiong'o or Fanon. Jemisin did not grow up speaking Swahili, Xhosa, or Gĩkũyũ only to be taught English in school, and was not harassed or belittled if she attempted to speak in her native language, unlike Thiong'o's experience in Kenya. In fact, the African-American diaspora has its own dialect known as African-American English (AAE), which has its own linguistic characteristics, context, and lexicon (Green 4). According to theories of Fanon and Thiong'o, African peoples speak their native languages, and Jemisin must also be expected to speak her native language in order for her writing to be considered a literature of combat. Jemisin can and does write in her native language, which is English, but doing so does not bear the same pro-colonial significance that it does for Fanon, Thiong'o and other anti-colonial writers. This is an issue that is highly complex and reaches far beyond the scope of this paper. In terms of Fanon and his theories, Jemisin's use of English problematizes the

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consideration of her work as a literature of combat but does not prevent it from being such a literature.

Fanon's expectations of a literature of combat are complex and rooted in the experience of an academic living in an African country during direct colonial rule. Jemisin, as a Black woman and a member of the African-American diaspora, cannot share all of these experiences, which prevents her literature from being rooted in the same cultural growth that literatures of combat cultivate. "The City Born Great" is rhythmic, lively, innovative, and creative, and Jemisin's work centres around the truth of her people. It is, of course, important to note that Jemisin's experience and writing is not the universal experience of all African-Americans in the United States. In terms of both the form and content of her writing, Jemisin writes literatures of combat. Though her writing in English complicates this conclusion, because of its rhythms of life and the true, gritty portrayal of African-American life and culture, Jemisin's short story "The City Born Great" is a literature of combat.

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Notes

1. Within the scope of this paper, "African-American diaspora" refers to the descendants of enslaved peoples who were abducted from Africa, and not to recent migrants from Africa.

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