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Imagination Run Riot: Apocalyptic Race-War Novels of the Late 1960s

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W. E. B. Du Bois's 1920 short story, "The Comet," describes a spiritual communion between a white woman and a black man, an event so scandalous that it first requires the apparent annihilation of the rest of humanity in a comet's crash.¹ Du Bois's story suggests the monumental difficulty of overcoming racism in the early twentieth century. Over forty-five years later, after the victories of the Civil Rights movement, one might expect a different sentiment; yet, several American novels from the late 1960s have such trouble projecting an end to racial inequality that, as in "The Comet," the struggle to produce it reaches apocalyptic proportions.

The three novels that this essay examines — John A. Williams's *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light: A Novel of Some Probability* (1969), Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969), and Chester Himes's *Plan B* (begun in 1968 but never completed) — are part of a remarkable proliferation of novels by African-American authors projecting the possibility of large-scale, catastrophic race war from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s.² Depicting planned black revolts against white-dominant, capitalist society, these authors display exasperation with the unfulfilled promise of the Civil Rights movement — in particular, the inability of civil rights legislation to address persisting social and economic inequality. They dramatize the anger and frustration expressed in more than 400 violent disturbances, mostly in Northern cities, from 1965 through 1969, as well as in the birth of the Black Power movement in the mid-1960s.³ Some of the later novels also critique the limitations of Black Power leadership. Among these novels, the three I have chosen are notable for their particular narrations of apocalyptic race war, and for commonalities of form and political critique on which I will elaborate throughout this essay.

Despite their striking historical and narrative resonance with each other and their importance for understanding this turbulent period, these three novels have received relatively sparse critical attention. Early work relating these texts to each other considers literature as reflective of history: Charles Peavy asserts that the novels

mirror a contemporaneous feeling of racial battle's inevitability, and Jerry Bryant critiques them as derivative of an overblown Black Power rhetoric.⁴ Kali Tal and Mark Bould more usefully emphasize the novels' imaginative power, tied to their use of science fiction subgenres — for Tal, “black militant near-future” fiction, and for Bould, “Black Power SF.”⁵ Despite their different approach, Tal and Bould also stress the novels' inability to, as Bould puts it, “picture the future for which [they yearn].”⁶

I agree with prior critics that the novels place into question the viability of black revolution. This questioning, however, is more than a reflection of historical circumstances; I assert that these authors use the speculative mode to produce an imaginative *testing* of late-1960s notions of black revolution. Further, although the novels do not represent a better future, their narrative limits and the authors' aesthetic choices should not be considered disabling. Rather, I argue, they enable the novels to reveal the constraints and contradictions of contemporaneous black-white binary discourse, including its elisions of intraracial class difference and black-white interdependence. This revelation takes place through a shift in the novels from various forms of the thriller to apocalyptic fiction. Thus, while I agree with Tal's and Bould's broad assessments of these novels as speculative fiction, we must analyze the authors' more specific generic choices to understand the dimensions of the political impasse with which these novels grapple, and how they grapple with it.

I will begin by discussing the literary representation and historical conditions of the urban rebellions and responses to them; I link this to binary racial discourse, which can be seen during this period in political stances as dissimilar and oppositional as white racist notions of black inferiority and varieties of black nationalism. I will then describe and problematize the spatial reinforcement of this racial discourse in representations of the black ghetto. I follow this with an analysis of how the novels test late-1960s notions of black revolution — in particular, how these novels fulfill political needs and desires of the period by enacting Black Power conceptions of black leadership and organization, and by adopting violence as a political tactic. Finally, I will explore how the novels' ultimate shift into apocalyptic fiction elucidates the contradictions of contemporaneous racial discourse, even if the novels cannot resolve them. Because two overarching concerns of this essay — the political and the formal — are embodied in social regulation and aesthetic representation of space, spatial relations will receive particular attention.

Rebellions and Racial Discourse

In *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, protagonist Dan Freeman surveys a grisly scene:

Smoke filled the street, there was broken glass everywhere, overturned cars, empty cartridge cases, discarded loot, an abandoned pair of handcuffs, a pair of nylon stockings lying in a pool of congealing blood. [...] In the broken window of an electrical appliance store stood a color

television console...cops on the screen fired at an unseen sniper on a rooftop, the deep voice of the narrator sounding as if he were commenting on a high-budget Hollywood film about the Normandy invasion.⁷

In this fictional rendering of the aftermath of urban rebellion, Greenlee suggests the racial tension and violence that rocked urban centers, particularly in the North, during the mid- to late 1960s. Strewn about this scene curiously devoid of people are artifacts pointing to these rebellions' social context: the discarded loot displays persisting economic disparity; the abandoned handcuffs indicate the police repression one-sidedly depicted on the glowing television screen; the pool of congealing blood reflects the human cost of ghetto conditions. What this scene portrays above all is the racial battlefield that the urban ghetto had become, a battlefield suggestive of race relations nationwide, as famously characterized in the Kerner Commission's 1968 report: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal."⁸

This sense of black and white as two distinct and irreconcilable groups, long a feature of U.S. race relations, was driven home by the rebellions and reactions to them, in turn further deepening the sense of division.⁹ The rebellions — or "riots," as they were typically called — demonstrated that despite the abstract, legal equality established in *Brown v. Board* (1954), the Civil Rights Act (1964), and the Voting Rights Act (1965), as well as the expectations that the larger movement had raised, the lives of black Americans had not appreciably improved.¹⁰ In fact, as Bayard Rustin wrote in 1965, conditions had in many ways worsened since 1954: black employment was even more endangered; schools were still segregated; and black youth were trapped in urban ghettos that bred "unimaginable demoralization."¹¹ The rebellions were intensely discussed and studied by black and white journalists, social scientists, and political figures. Most joined Rustin in attributing them to underlying social and economic problems. For instance, the Kerner Commission cites continued racial prejudice and discrimination; insufficient employment, education, and social services; poor and overcrowded housing; frustrated hopes and a sense of powerlessness; and the legitimation of racial violence.¹²

The novels respond to these conditions by presenting individual black leaders and their networks of conspirators, who attempt to harness or channel the energy of urban rebellion into what they consider to be more constructive tactics for black revolt. In *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*, protagonist Eugene Browning, a former professor turned reformer for an organization modeled on the NAACP or Urban League, grows frustrated with the slow pace of change. Gaining funds through his network of black political contacts, he hires a mob hit on a white police officer who has murdered a black youth. This assassination, meant to bypass the aimless violence of urban rebellion, unexpectedly sparks further assassinations, street violence, and guerrilla warfare. In *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, Dan Freeman, the first black CIA

agent, uses his CIA know-how and experience as a social worker to train a network of street gangs in guerrilla warfare; this guerrilla campaign is catalyzed by urban rebellion. In *Plan B*, black entrepreneur Tomsson Black uses white liberal funding and the commodity distribution network to deliver guns to black males in urban centers. His plan to later lead a well-equipped black army in revolt against whites is disrupted when blacks prematurely turn the guns against the white power establishment. In all three novels, tactical violence results at some point in all-out race war.

This ultimate descent into race war notwithstanding, these novels mobilize the sentiment among some black radicals of that time that the rebellions were not just spontaneous expressions of anger, but nascent revolutionary impulses. Charles V. Hamilton writes, “We cannot term these events riots. [...] They are, in fact, revolts. [...] The entire value structure which supports property rights over human rights, which *sanctions* the intolerable conditions in which the black people have been *forced* to live is questioned.”¹³ Few whites seemed to share this hope in the rebellions’ political potential; as a 1967 *Newsweek* article recounts, many expressed heightened concern that was also “vitally lacking in affection. Fear and resentment have apparently displaced their weight in sympathy, and the white man’s endorsement of massive aid to the ghettos may seem to him an imperative more pragmatic than moral.”¹⁴ Self-interest prevailed, as the government sent to the ghetto not only aid, but also massive police and military force.

These differing responses to urban rebellion illustrate how, on both sides of the color line, the rebellions brought into stark contrast the views and lives of whites and blacks in the U.S. This contrast was one of perceived and actual separation, tied to economic disparity.¹⁵ In turn, the sense of absolute racial difference continued to play an important role in maintaining economic differences, even beyond the death of Jim Crow. The end of Jim Crow made blue-collar laborers much more available to capital during a period when technological innovation had reduced such positions in urban centers. These seemingly contradictory trends, both outcomes of the laws of capitalist competition, increasingly pushed black workers into an always-ready, low-wage, surplus labor army — last hired, first fired.¹⁶ Black workers’ employment continued to be partially conditioned by their particularity: racial discourse about the intractable nature of the “hard-core unemployed,” continuing *de facto* hiring discrimination, and persisting black educational and economic disadvantage helped to manage this population. The common identification of “the man” against whom the black man struggled as the *white* man, “whitey,” “Chuck,” thus identified how class and racial oppression overlapped in the consolidation of blacks on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder.

Black Space or Racial Battleground: The Black Ghetto

As I have indicated, the economic underpinnings of the black-white binary take on a spatial dimension in the black ghetto; the racialization of this space helped, in turn,

to reinforce the binary. While racial segregation in the South had been the focus of the Civil Rights movement, in the mid- to late 1960s political agitation shifted to the Northern ghetto. The black urban ghetto developed during the Great Migration to the North and West that began around World War I and was further encouraged by the spatial concentration of production under Fordism.¹⁷ By 1966, twenty-six percent of the urban population was black, and as of 1968, the twelve largest central cities contained over two-thirds of blacks outside the South.¹⁸ Within these urban centers, blacks were spatially constricted first by restrictive housing covenants and then, in the 1950s and 1960s, by race-biased FHA lending practices. During this latter period, black residential encroachment on white areas, housing agents' predatory practice of buying up white urban property to sell at higher prices on contract to blacks, and employers' relocation to suburban locales sent whites to urban peripheries. This outward movement — beyond the reach of impoverished, immobile inner-city blacks — contributed to falling black employment and reduced funding for public services. The black ghetto's continued circumscription by steadily receding white residential areas yielded economic advantages for landowners, as a former New York City official explains: “[t]he all-white sections are essential to successful slum development...until we decide to turn *them* into slums. [...] With a ‘whites only’ barricade...there will be no escape for our selected [minority] tenants.”¹⁹ As a result, the urban ghetto became an increasingly neglected, isolated, and entrapping space.

Spatial entrapment is clearly portrayed both in contemporaneous social scientific writing and in the novels. In *Dark Ghetto* (1965), psychologist Kenneth Clark confides, “Harlem had been my home. My family moved from house to house, from neighborhood to neighborhood within the walls of the ghetto in a desperate attempt to escape its creeping blight.”²⁰ Urban blight is conveyed in excessively vivid detail in Himes's *Plan B*.²¹ Himes's thoroughly unromantic depiction of Harlem presents ghetto residents living hard, desperate lives in squalid, stiflingly hot environs:

It stank from the yearly accumulations of thousands of unlisted odors embedded in the crumbling walls, the rotting linoleum, the decayed wall paper, the sweaty garments, the incredible perfumes. [...] It stank from gangrenous sores, maggoty wounds, untended gonorrhea, body tissue rotten from cancer or syphilis.²²

Himes's grotesque catalogue links stink, decay, and disease, and characterizes both humans and their environment as objects of profound neglect. The motif of disease is also prevalent in Clark's work, which, rather than attributing the “pathology of the ghetto” to black cultural inadequacy, portrays its “symptoms” as externally imposed and exacerbated by spatial entrapment.²³

The enclosed and concentrated nature of the ghetto heightened the sense of its blackness, in contradistinction to the space around it; responding to the intensely

negative portrayals of this space, some attempted to reimagine it. Most significant to the novels is the view of the ghetto as a physical manifestation of black Americans as an internal colony. The three novels' protagonists are exposed to Third World anticolonial struggle, and in *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* and *Plan B*, the Northern black ghetto is described as an occupied territory regulated by an alien police force. In response, individuals and militant groups in all three novels adopt guerrilla tactics and affect the language of anticolonial revolutionaries; for instance, Freeman's secret organization calls itself the "Chicago chapter of the Mau Mau."²⁴ Such appropriations demonstrate the inspiration that African American intellectuals and political figures of the time gathered from anticolonial struggles, and the parallel that they drew between these struggles and those of blacks at home.²⁵ Reviving ideas from the Black Belt Thesis of the 1930s, many blacks saw the race as a nation within a nation, with the Northern ghetto — rather than the Southern Black Belt — now the most visible site of colonial oppression within the United States.²⁶ Harold Cruse argues in "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American" (1962) that "[t]he American Negro shares with colonial peoples many of the socioeconomic factors which form the material basis for present-day revolutionary nationalism."²⁷ These factors included not only cultural starvation and psychological oppression, but also economic exploitation and political subjugation.²⁸ Exploitative white merchants and landlords and brutal police tactics in the black ghetto were seen as local evidence of economic and political control by white society.

The notion of the ghetto as colonial space was a means for black Americans to imagine their struggles as connected to a larger, international political phenomenon, and to conceive of black America as a political entity in its own right. Black political identity was therefore expressed as black liberation, and separation was taken as the necessary outcome of colonial relations rather than a mark of inferiority — thus the need, for instance, to "defend the ghetto," as articulated in a Black Panther Party flyer (see Figure 1).²⁹ Yet, as both the novels and other writings of the period reveal, the notion of the American ghetto as colony has limitations. First, while the concept of internal colonialism refutes the attribution of black inferiority to a culture of poverty and, unlike some aspects of black nationalism, has the virtue of casting racial oppression in political and economic terms, it nevertheless takes as its model a political situation — imperial administrations, ruling over majority native populations, being ousted through guerrilla tactics — that is less practical for a minority population in a highly-developed United States.³⁰ Second, the dominant notion of the ghetto as isolated and separate from the rest of American society, while powerful, is only partially true, as illustrated by the importance of black surplus labor and by the policing and economic exploitation of the ghetto, as well as the physical incorporation of ghettos into larger cities. In truth, the ghetto is part of a greater American society in need of change; thus, national liberation is an awkward fit in the American context (putting the claims of territorial nationalists aside). The view

Defend the Ghetto



DEFEND THE GHETTO

IN OUR STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL LIBERATION, we are now in the phase of community liberation, to free our black communities from the imperialistic control exercised over them by the racist exploiting cliques within white communities, to free our people, locked up as they are in Urban Dungeons, from the imperialism of the white suburbs.

OURS IS A STRUGGLE against Community Imperialism. Our black communities are colonized and controlled from outside, and it is this control that has to be smashed, broken, shattered, by whatever means necessary.

THE POLITICS IN OUR COMMUNITIES are controlled from outside, the economics of our communities are controlled from outside, and we ourselves are controlled by the racist police who come into our communities from outside and occupy them, patrolling, terrorizing, and brutalizing our people like a foreign army in a conquered land.

THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY IS THE REVOLUTIONARY ORGANIZATION STRUGGLING TO FREE OUR PEOPLE FROM OPPRESSION, BY POLITICAL AND PHYSICAL MEANS. WE HAVE TO GET ORGANIZED, AND WE HAVE TO DEFEND OURSELVES. --- JOIN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY ---

BLACK PANTHER PARTY

1808A Fulton Street, Brooklyn

Figure 1. Defend the Ghetto, *The Black Panthers Speak*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Da Capo, 1995) 180

of the ghetto as separate black space might be considered a repression by blacks of their incorporation into an American economic and political system, and by whites of American society's complicity in and dependence on the ghetto.³¹

This repression becomes clearer when we further examine the characterization of

the ghetto as war zone in both the novels and contemporaneous public discourse.³² On a literal level, the destruction of urban rebellions sometimes resembled actual war zones, and police and military units at times used great force and high-powered weaponry to put down rebellions.³³ Guerrilla warfare was threatened by more militant blacks and openly speculated upon by white writers.³⁴ While, as I have indicated, this kind of warfare is suggested by the colonial analogy, the use of war rhetoric crystallizes the high-stakes, specifically *American* political and social conflict erupting in the urban ghetto. Conceived of as a battlefield where antagonisms between the races were increasingly played out, the ghetto — generally designated as marginal black space — was actually quite central to American race relations.

Testing Black Revolution: Organization and Tactics

These novels take the idea of racial warfare and literalize it in their speculative visions. Their fictional revolts assume forms that fulfill certain political desires held by Black Power advocates, while simultaneously testing late-1960s notions of black revolution. Particularly noteworthy are 1) their enactment of common Black Power conceptions of black leadership and constituency in their production of black organization to channel the energy of urban rebellion; and 2) their use of violence as a tactic. As I will show in the subsequent section, what comes to be tested through the novels' narrative fulfillment of Black Power desires is not only the idea of black revolution but, more generally, the racial binary in which it originates.

All of these novels make blacks the primary planners and agents of revolt. As epitomized famously in Stokely Carmichael's 1966 declaration at the James Meredith march, Black Power largely spurned the Civil Rights movement's cross-racial organizing; Carmichael and Hamilton claim in *Black Power* that because white and black interests conflict long-term, Black Power means eliminating black dependence on whites.³⁵ To be sure, black independence — ideological, financial, and institutional — was to a fair degree rhetorical and aspirational, yet the novels' black leaders take up this aspiration by establishing their independence from and actively working against a white power structure.³⁶ In *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* and *Plan B*, their constituencies are all black. Himes's *Plan B* makes this most blatant: Tomsson Black's college-educated recruits revere him for his revolutionary politics and because "he was black, black as a man can be, black as any of them, and even his name was 'Black'."³⁷ Himes perhaps pokes a bit of fun at black militants' racial loyalty, but his protagonist undertakes the monochromatic model of organizing in all seriousness.

In addition to enacting independent black action, the novels' forms of organization fulfill contemporaneous desires to channel the energy of rebellion into revolt. Each novel presents a structure for this: an anonymous agent ordering a targeted political assassination; street gangs using CIA training and government weapons; a black-run corporation and its network of gun-delivery men. These structures fill a need for political leadership displayed in the rebellions and acknowledged by Black Power

advocates; for instance, Bobby Seale urged in 1968,

Don't sit down and let a spontaneous riot happen in the streets where we get corralled and a lot of us are shot up. [...] I'm only trying to contribute to the leadership. [...] The man doesn't have us outnumbered, he has us *out organized!*³⁸

Organization here is presented as self-defense, as making blacks' numbers count.

Self-defense is important to the second aspect of black revolution tested in these novels: the tactic of violence. The growth of self-defense and paramilitary groups and of references to guerrilla warfare and self-defense in Black Power writings indicates desires for which the novels' revolts provide a kind of fantasy fulfillment.³⁹ The novels' protagonists are at times reluctant to use violence, but they feel compelled to it by the violence endemic in American society. *Plan B* depicts this vividly; as Bould asserts, the novel moves "into the past, telling the history of the rape-, sodomy-, and incest-prone white southern family who originally owned the land on which Black establishes his headquarters; and into the future, as a race war engulfs the U.S."⁴⁰ This temporal shuttling establishes the history of the U.S. — past, present, and future — as excessively, even absurdly violent. For Tomsson Black, black violence is the natural solution to the violence of the nation.⁴¹ The novels distill and transform the common sentiment among Black Power advocates that white violence could *only* be met with black violence, as argued in *The Black Panther*: "the white ruling class, through its occupation police forces, agents and dope-peddlers, institutionally terrorizes the Black community. [...] Black people picking up the gun for self-defense is the only basis in America for a revolutionary offensive."⁴² Here the Panthers rhetorically transform self-defense into a revolutionary offensive, turning a weapon of the white aggressor into a weapon for resistance.

This turning is crucial to enabling violent revolt in the novels. Responding to the violence perpetrated through the racialization of space, the protagonists all navigate and re-purpose space — the sites and networks of the existing system — to subvert it. Henri Lefebvre asserts that "[a] revolution that does not produce a new space has...failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses"; the protagonists' re-purposing nevertheless disrupts the operations of the current system and might be considered a preliminary step.⁴³ In *Sons of Darkness*, Browning re-purposes his national network of black reformist and radical contacts to fund the mob hit. In *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, Freeman transforms CIA headquarters into a site to be spied upon, the streets of Chicago into a training ground, and gang organization and networks into a revolutionary army. In *Plan B*, Black converts a former plantation into a site for producing revolution and re-purposes the commodity distribution network to distribute weapons in cities nationwide. Black revolution's requirement

of spatial navigation and transformation to enable tactical violence displays the deep connections among spatial regulation, violence, and power in capitalist American society. These connections are made even clearer in the novels' shift to apocalyptic fiction.

The Shift to Apocalyptic Fiction

Of course, important to these novels' testing of black revolution is not only black revolt's organization and tactics, but also its outcome. While these revolts satisfy certain political desires of the period, they do not bring resolution; this breaks forth narratively in the novels' apocalyptic turn. Apocalypse deals above all with the demise of the current world, often through large-scale catastrophe, a struggle between good and evil, and final judgment.⁴⁴ Of particular note are apocalypses' imminent end of an old time and transition into a new, as well as the destruction of old space that often accompanies it.

Spatial destruction, more than the end of time, is what is actually narrated in the novels. In *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, typical urban rebellion explodes into large-scale revolt: "Oakland blew first, then Los Angeles, then, leap-frogging the continent, Harlem and South Philadelphia. [...] Every city with a ghetto wondered if they might be next. The most powerful nation in history stood on the brink of panic and chaos."⁴⁵ At the end of the novel, Freeman is shot and, after offering his gang some final instructions, bleeds to death "to the rapid crackle of automatic weapons, the spit of rifles, the explosion of grenades."⁴⁶

The aesthetics of disaster, Susan Sontag asserts, are achieved partly through their grand scale.⁴⁷ This is especially true in *Plan B*, in which the level of destruction grows ludicrous after blacks turn their guns on the police. The weapons the police and military bring into the city to "keep the peace" obliterate entire buildings and cause what Himes appropriately calls "over-kill" of blacks and whites alike.⁴⁸ The apocalyptic mode is signaled both by the sheer magnitude of violence and by features reminiscent of catastrophe science fiction. Police cruisers bear "red eyes blinking like Martian space ships," and a tank resembles "some kind of strange insect from outer space."⁴⁹ These descriptions highlight the alien nature of occupying police forces; the feeling of horror grows with the invention of new methods to quell the rebellion, including paralyzing gas and electronic devices to locate blacks with guns.⁵⁰ The final, catastrophic stage of race war is the survivors' descent into savagery: black males driven underground are said to kill hapless whites by biting their throats out, and whites hunt them for sport.⁵¹ By the end of the novel, the end, indeed, seems near.

In *Sons of Darkness*, the sense of apocalypse is found less in the level of narration than in its tone. Browning's mob hit unexpectedly causes the assassination of a number of white cops by random blacks, and then, in as many as fifty cities, the ominously-described invasion of black neighborhoods by members of a police conspiracy:

The raids began at midnight. [...] The cops proceeded to walk from block to block, sapping, punching and kicking anything black within their reach. They moved silently; they might have been on parade, so lined were their ranks; they spoke no words.⁵²

The tone becomes more menacing as the scale and reach of violence grows. Guerrilla violence destroys bridges and tunnels connecting Manhattan to the rest of New York. In the midst of this destruction and continuing street violence, Browning flees the rapidly disintegrating city. Reaching the Hamptons, he and his family listen to radio broadcasts of the growing death toll in cities across the country; they hear rumors of whites planning to shoot up black neighborhoods in their area. "It sounds like the end of the world," Browning's wife remarks.⁵³

During the late 1960s, it was generally agreed upon that, one way or another, the space of the ghetto had to change; in the novels, it changes through destruction. But it should be noted that destruction is not limited to the ghetto, as it was during the actual rebellions; rather, it reaches outward into the symbolic and infrastructural underpinnings of white capitalist society. In *Sons of Darkness*, bridges and tunnels are destroyed. In *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, the mayor's office is bombed. And in *Plan B*, possibly the most violent scene takes place in a major shopping district. These violent acts are clearly calculated to strike at the heart of white capitalist society, at the nexus of what Williams refers to as "political power and big business."⁵⁴ As such, they strongly intensify the feeling of the period that in the charred remains of burned-out ghetto buildings lay the larger society in miniature. We can see this in a *Chicago Tribune* piece on the destruction of Chicago's Westside corridor in the 1968 rebellion:

It was the crucifixion of a city, with Madison St. the blackened, still smoldering nail that had been driven into its heart. [...] It was as tho [sic] a flamethrower had played up and down the street, burning our roofs and crumpling walls until they arched inward to meet the heat-blackened, twisted steel structural members that hung into the ruins.⁵⁵

This quotation has the ring of the apocalyptic, of imminent ending; what ends, here and in the novels, is the submersion of racial antagonism. The article indicates that what has been let loose is black aggression, burning and bending the flesh and skeleton of a great city. In the novels, what is let loose above all is whites' hold on their moral reins, as they respond to black revolt with excessive violence. Disaster brings, Sontag remarks, a starting over that entails a release from one's normal obligations and moral responsibilities; it is an end of what one recognizes as society and its manifestations.⁵⁶ Ultimately at an end in these novels are the tenuous structures of civilization that had kept race relations from descending into total savagery.

In these novels, the apocalyptic mode is signaled by the level of destruction and sense of imminent ending; this ending, of course, entails not only space, but also time. As Max Page points out, stories of apocalypse proliferate during periods of crisis and historical transition; their teleological “not yet” is always really about contemporaneous fears and hopes.⁵⁷ David Leigh asserts that African-American history comprises a series of crises; these crises inform African-American typology, which often adopts the model of the Israelites held captive in Egypt.⁵⁸ Apocalyptic African-American folklore and literature at once focuses on the resolution of current conflict and attempts to transcend it via a history of a grander scale.⁵⁹ It typically connects judgment with redemption and freedom.⁶⁰ Apocalypse in the African-American tradition, therefore, while sharing many of the concerns of apocalypse in the Anglo-American tradition, also presents a kind of counter-history, one typically looking forward to a liberatory moment.⁶¹

The 1960s was a period of intense hope, but also, as we have seen, intense concern about the future. Apocalypse in these novels is part not only of literary traditions of apocalypse, but also of contemporaneous black political writings by figures like Malcolm X and Robert F. Williams that attempt to assign meaning to this volatile period.⁶² In 1960s black nationalist rhetoric, apocalypse offers the possibility of a liberatory moment within the context of a long-reaching, monumental struggle. As Arthur L. Smith points out, this renders the black rhetor’s work “sanctioned by history,” which helps define his/her specific group to the exclusion of others.⁶³ Yet those who share this generalized group identity do not necessarily agree on the form of the apocalypse, or its political potential, as we see in the contrast between the apocalyptic political writings of James Baldwin and Imamu Amiri Baraka.⁶⁴ Both Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* and Baraka’s “The Last Days of the American Empire” express a desire for radical change, but whereas Baraka sees the necessity of violently destroying the old society, Baldwin hopes that change can come instead through fulfilling its promise.⁶⁵ Common to all of these apocalyptic texts of the 1960s is the emphasis on blacks and whites as pitched in a battle that will likely have a drastic and violent conclusion. The possibility of black liberation — or alternatively, black extermination — is considered as a radical break from the pre-existing nation; as I have suggested, this historical break is represented in both spatial and temporal terms.

These terms are both relevant to the generic *shift* in the novels. They all begin in one genre — hard-boiled/film noir-style detective fiction in *Plan B*, spy fiction in *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, and the thriller (with aspects of both of these subgenres) in *Sons of Darkness* — before transitioning to apocalyptic fiction. In all three novels, the shift occurs at the moment when the planned revolt begins. This shift, which is to some extent more of a layering, signals several changes, including a movement from the reinforcement of national space to the destruction of that space, and a related movement from a temporality associated with realist forms to the more messianic time of the apocalyptic mode.

The novels' opening genres reinforce national space, despite the authors' questioning of that space. While this is true of all three novels, I will limit my focus here to *Plan B* and *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. Himes's *Plan B* begins in the mode of hard-boiled detective fiction, which shares many traits with film noir. Hard-boiled and noir display anxieties about a changing economic, political, and social order as fears of observation and diffused, pervasive power within the strictly regimented space of the city and, more broadly, the nation; through this lens, these genres reinforce the unassailable quality of national space.⁶⁶ While this aspect of hard-boiled/noir holds true in Himes's detective fiction, in his work the lurking, faceless power of modern society is supplemented by a critique of the nation-state's power to shape, constrict, and/or exclude its racialized subjects. He intensifies the milieu Raymond Chandler describes in his landmark essay, "The Simple Art of Murder" — a degraded world of absurd injustice, without comfort or escape — through the more degraded and circumscribed world of the black ghetto.⁶⁷ As I have suggested, this intensification is enhanced by Himes's use of absurdist humor, which Bould appropriately refers to as "vengefully carnivalesque," and which in *Plan B* reaches manically profuse heights.⁶⁸ Himes's variation on his genre thereby joins a questioning of the nation's ethical fortitude to a display of its power to oppress racial minorities.

Like detective fiction, the spy fiction employed in *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* reinforces national space, but it does so in relation to other national spaces. As Michael Denning explains, the spy thriller, born during increased rivalry between imperial powers at the turn of the twentieth century, helps to reinforce national and cultural boundaries, as "the spy acts as a defender or subverter of the nation in the face of the other, the alien."⁶⁹ American spy fictions both expand the spatial imaginary into the international arena and carefully regulate the national arena, allowing readers to imaginatively gauge others' loyalties and eliminate unwanted groups.⁷⁰ Like Himes, Greenlee intensifies and satirically signifies upon his genre, but his satire tends less toward grim farce than toward parody and irony. Greenlee mocks the system, pointing out the absurdity, for instance, of a CIA training operation intent on whittling down a crew of black middle-class recruits to the single black man needed to confirm government integration. After Freeman is selected, his function is made comically plain by his conspicuous display in a "glass-enclosed office in the director's suite."⁷¹ Thus, while the conventions of the spy genre prop up national space, as Freeman's token black presence is intended to do, Greenlee's satirical variation also undermines it, as Freeman's spying on the CIA undermines the nation.

In addition to their spatial attributes, the realist genres of detective and spy fiction reinforce the nation through their notion of time. This temporality is associated with Benedict Anderson's "homogeneous, empty time," a term borrowed from Walter Benjamin.⁷² According to Anderson, within the modern "imagined community," time is conceived as happening horizontally, simultaneously across the space of the nation.⁷³ This time's "steady onward clocking," "[ambling] sturdily ahead," replaces the grander

scale of dynastic/sacred/messianic time that preceded it; it also coincides with the development of capitalism and print culture, both of which, in their proliferation, tie the nation together.⁷⁴ This modern notion of time and the carefully-regulated national space that are strengthened in detective and spy fictions contribute to a sense of national coherence, however spurious; this sense of coherence is seriously disrupted by the transition into the apocalyptic mode.

We have seen how apocalypse is signaled by the narration of spatial destruction; annihilating the old order, the shift to the apocalyptic mode tears through regulated national space as established in the genres of detective and spy fiction. It similarly initiates a temporal change. John Hall describes apocalypse's disruption of realist literature as a destabilizing of everyday existence, an interruption of "unfolding history."⁷⁵ He likens this time to what Benjamin refers to as "chips of messianic time." To restate, within the larger frame of the messianic, which is a diachronic conception of time, apocalypse is imminent, happening in a moment, in the synchronic — it is therefore a chip of messianic time happening in the now.⁷⁶ Distinct from Anderson's empty, homogeneous time, the notion of national community "[ambling] sturdily ahead," apocalypse is an abrupt break, an end of both that place and that time. It therefore presents a narrative problem: while the destruction of space can be narrated, and is narrated in great detail in these novels, the end of time cannot. This may perhaps explain why the novels end with their battles still in progress, without resolution. It is as if there is an unimaginable gap across which the narration dare not step.⁷⁷

So what is the ultimate political import of the emergence of the apocalyptic mode — and its narrative break — in these novels? It might, perhaps, indicate political paralysis in the face of an insoluble dilemma. It might, as Tal and Bould suggest, display a desire for a future that cannot be represented. It might, as Gilbert Muller asserts in his analysis of apocalypse in *Sons of Darkness*, demonstrate "the ability of a single man...and urban minorities to make the American landscape shudder."⁷⁸ All of these are plausible explanations.

In my view, though, we gain a more useful understanding of the import of apocalypse here, and of the novels as a whole, if we revisit the meaning of the term "apocalypse." It derives from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, or "a disclosure of something previously hidden or unknown"; a related word is "revelation," deriving from the Latin *revelatio*, from which the apocalyptic book of the New Testament draws its name.⁷⁹ This meaning demands a consideration of exactly what these novels in their apocalyptic moments are disclosing and revealing. If we review the novels' narration of spatial destruction, their transition into a high-stakes race war, the stripping away of the remnants of civilization that daily prevent the descent into savagery, we find that the apocalyptic battle that spawns from black revolt and its violent white backlash puts the viability of the U.S. as nation into question. It does this by revealing the thinness of white civilization's veneer, how dangerously transparent is its notion of

freedom and democracy — a humanist dream linked to a capitalist system that it helps reinforce. When the dream is compromised, so is the system, as in *Plan B* when white violence causes the stock market to crash, and confidence in capitalism to falter.⁸⁰ On the one hand, the apparent frailty of the system is encouraging, suggesting the liberatory potential of black revolt; on the other hand, black survival seems to depend on the morality that, however weakly, buttresses it. In these novels, the danger of white ethical collapse becomes dramatically real — particularly in Williams's and Himes's enactment of a genocide that many feared during this period — even as such protection of white America compromises the very ideals whites purport to uphold.⁸¹

In this way, despite the revolts' probable failure, the apocalyptic mode brings American brutality fully into view, restoring to a routinized racial violence its sensational and spectacular nature.⁸² It also reveals the contradictions of contemporaneous racial discourse. While the novels in general embrace — or in any case, indulge — a black nationalist perspective, they also point out the contradictions in the idea of blacks and whites as oppositional monoliths. We have seen this in relation to the artificially cordoned-off black ghetto. While the ghetto is black residential space, it is in the novels neither a romantic site of cultural authenticity, nor purely black: whites in the novels continually intrude upon and are heavily invested in the ghetto and in blackness economically, politically, and psychologically.⁸³ Williams perhaps goes the furthest in troubling the opposition of white and black in his sympathetic portrayals of Browning's daughter's white boyfriend and the Italian mob boss Browning hires.

The notion of racial binaries also falters on the attempt to view blacks as a homogeneous body with a coherent set of political interests. Recent political scientists have seen this as a major pitfall of black politics. Adolph Reed, Jr., points out that the much-touted gains of the 1960s went disproportionately to middle-class blacks, whose leadership have generalized those gains because “their legitimacy and integrity are tied to a monolithic conceptualization of black life” that “neatly concealed the system of hierarchy which mediated the relation of the ‘leaders’ and the ‘led’.”⁸⁴ This notion of the collective subject was quite commonly held and is clearly presented in the novels; the actual difference between black working-class/lumpenproletariat and middle-class interests becomes clearer as the novels progress.⁸⁵

In all of the novels, the protagonists' access to the spaces and other tools that they use to foment revolt is afforded them by their middle-class status. They are never secure in this class identity, betraying anxieties about the middle-class black American as a kind of race traitor, yet they are still deluded into believing that they can work in the interests and predict the behavior of working-class and/or lumpen blacks.⁸⁶ Browning's targeted assassination causes unexpectedly far-reaching violence; Black's arrogant assumption that poor blacks await his direction is disproved when his revolt starts without him; and Freeman must maintain a cover identity not only to “the man,” but to his gang. Browning identifies the problem in *Sons of*

Darkness: “if you’re working inside the system then you’re not working at all.”⁸⁷ The problem, ultimately, is the limitation inherent in trying to change a system with its own, already-adulterated tools.

This sense of limitation is seen in the actual demands put forth by the novels’ militant groups. Like most Black Power proponents, they adopt the colonial analogy but do not seek total territorial separation. Freeman’s short-term goal is military withdrawal from the black ghetto. Browning wants acknowledgment of the value of black life, with the hope that afterwards, “things would improve.”⁸⁸ They both require not total black autonomy or system change, but a reformed nation of racial coexistence. The demands of a radical guerrilla organization in *Sons of Darkness* include full Negro enfranchisement; ten acres, a car, and \$5,000 for every black household; and withdrawal of U.S. forces from Asia.⁸⁹ These demands sound like a combination of those found in James Forman’s pluralist Black Manifesto and the Black Panther Party’s Platform; while Forman and the Panthers differed politically, their and the fictional radicals’ demands seek not an end to capitalism, but fulfillment of Constitutional rights and what they consider a more fair society.⁹⁰ In Himes’s *Plan B*, Black’s ultimatum is a bit more extreme — “grant us equality or kill us as a race” — but it still only insists upon equality within the system.⁹¹ In some ways, the reform-mindedness of these real and fictional groups’ demands is surprising; after all, the Panthers did elsewhere call for international socialism, and the novels do identify or at least suggest racism as inextricably tied to capitalism. This inability to break free from the system of which one is already so much a part reveals a limit on revolution organized solely on the basis of race in the context of the actual conditions of American life.

Indeed, all of the novels, despite identifying and employing binary racial discourse, simultaneously display white-black interdependence. As I have indicated, whites depend upon blacks economically, politically, and psychologically. The black rebels’ inability to break free from whites is clear not only in their practical need to use the existing system as a tool, but also in their requirement of a white audience for their spectacular violence and demands. The power of black violent revolt to disrupt American life notwithstanding, in these novels, the agency of black actors is fundamentally limited to bringing their adversaries to a moral choice. The weight of this choice, however, reinforces white dependence on blacks, as Himes expresses in an interview with John A. Williams: to exterminate black Americans would “destroy America” and what it represents.⁹² In an iteration of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, whites depend on blacks to help constitute their self-image as just, merciful, and democratic, while blacks depend on whites to not exterminate them.⁹³ The novels’ demonstration of the intertwinement of whites and blacks in the U.S. thus exposes the impossibility of separatist political rhetoric.

Another important aspect of black-white interdependence is identified early on in *Sons of Darkness*: “In New York, as in no other place, black and white needed

each other.”⁹⁴ While this quotation refers to the white ruling class’s dependence on black labor, it is nevertheless true that black labor also needs white labor — or, more precisely, the cooperation of the white working class — to achieve revolutionary change. This was argued to varying degrees by many black radicals in the mid- to late 1960s, including the Black Panthers, C. L. R. James, James Boggs, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.⁹⁵ White radicals also saw the need for cooperation; for instance, Thomas Hayden and Carl Wittman advocated an interracial movement of the poor. However, both whites and blacks acknowledged the vast gulf separating white workers from black due to long-term alienation of these groups by the ruling class, white-only labor union policies, union de-radicalization, and white fears of job displacement.⁹⁶ During this time, the conditions, reinforced by the discourse of racial binaries, simply did not exist for class unity across racial lines.

Conclusion

If the ghetto is a battlefield where racial antagonisms surface and explode, one might say that these speculative novels are imaginative, conceptual battlefields on which are played out the contradictions of their times. These novels, as well as the contemporaneous discourse with which they interact, demonstrate the impossibility of resolving the need for system change within the period’s dominant paradigm of white-black race relations. This is because the problem was not prejudice only, but structural inequality and worker exploitation. In the context of class struggle, exploitation was perpetuated by the black-white binary, which helped to maintain a black surplus labor supply and to divide white worker from black. This binary was reinforced through discussions of black pathology and the blighted ghetto as black space. In the public imagination, race to a large degree continued to obscure class differences through the prevalence of white dominance and black subordination and the assumption of the coherence of each of these two poles.

In the novels, the protagonists turn the tables on the dominant power structure by taking up the spaces and the tools — in particular, racial separatism and violence — of capitalist domination and fashioning them to their own purposes; however, this tactic binds the middle-class leader to the system he is attempting to radically change. The unruly persistence of class antagonism thus emerges unmistakably in the novels, both in the dilemma of actual black political heterogeneity, and also in the fact of black-white interdependence in a capitalist system.

The problem of turning the system’s tools to one’s own purposes in the novels is connected to the real-life problem of Black Power advocates’ re-tooling of the racial binary: black nationalist rhetoric, while by no means a mere reversal of white racism, nevertheless became an unwieldy tool for change. Confined by the terms of racial politics, struggling in the absence of cross-racial labor coalitions, and suffering under the gun of severe and violent political repression, many unsurprisingly turned to ethnic pluralism, electoral politics, and black capitalism as answers to black inequality,

rather than the elimination of capitalist exploitation. Ultimately, between the poles of Baraka's and Baldwin's calls to either destroy the white world or force it to fulfill its promise, the Black Power movement could fully accomplish neither.

While the novels satisfy certain political desires of their time — most notably, a kind of Black Power fantasy-fulfillment and imaginative production of leadership and organization, however limited — they cannot exceed their “semantic conditions of possibility” and overcome the historical impasse of late-1960s racial discourse.⁹⁷ To some degree, this dilemma explains the narrative excess, the absurdity and surrealism that break out in the novels: perhaps these aesthetic choices are means of compensating for frustrating limitations. Still, these novels are more than the sum of their limitations; these narrative features are also part of how the novels bear the residue of history, how they reveal the contradictions of that “absent cause” that is “inaccessible to us except in textual form.”⁹⁸ They do so partly by conducting an imaginative experiment, testing black revolution on its own terms.

This experiment is conducted most notably through the authors' formal choices. In the shift to the apocalyptic mode, the novels disrupt the viability of the national space and time that their initial genres reinforce; they thereby push beyond the racialized spaces and social and economic boundaries that constitute the contemporaneous U.S. The narrative break that marks the conclusion of each of the novels, the authors' inability to narrate the apocalyptic end of time — that longed-for moment of liberation — as they do the destruction of the spaces of racial and capitalist domination, is in part a formal problem presented by apocalyptic literature. It also reveals the political problem of the impossibility of narratively reconciling the contradictions of class division and binary racial discourse. The apparent failure to narrate this ending and resolve contradictions is inextricably tied to the novels' bringing these contradictions to a head, as they erupt in the explosiveness of the apocalyptic moment; this eruption importantly reveals not only the brutality and hypocrisy of white-dominant capitalist society, but also the inconsistencies of the racial discourse that reinforces it. Ultimately, then, the novels show that revolution organized along racial lines cannot succeed, but in doing so, *the novels themselves do not fail*.⁹⁹ In 1970, Sondra Silverman wrote that “[o]ne need not argue that riots are part of a revolutionary movement. [...] They are signals for action, not programs or panaceas.”¹⁰⁰ In this manner, one might say that these narrative apocalypses that flash from the violent spark of urban rebellion parallel the urban rebellions themselves; revealing to their readers the conditions of the present moment, they are a kind of clarion call, signaling a need for change that is not yet forthcoming.

Notes

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Comet," *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Washington Square P, 2004) 195-210.
2. John A. Williams, *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light: A Novel of Some Probability* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1969); Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1969); and Chester Himes, *Plan B* (Jackson: U Mississippi P, 2000). Other examples include Julian Moreau/Denis Jackson's *The Black Commandos* (1967), John Oliver Killens's *'Sippi* (1967), Chuck Stone's *King Strut* (1970), John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967) and *Captain Blackman* (1972), Barry Beckham's *Runner Mack* (1972), Blyden Jackson's *Operation Burning Candle* (1973), John Edgar Wideman's *The Lynchers* (1973), and Nivi-Kofi Easley's *The Militants* (1974). In some of these novels, race war, while projected, is either prevented or not very fully narrated/still to come.
3. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976) 301. Major urban rebellions included Philadelphia in 1964; Watts in 1965; Detroit and Newark in 1967; and Chicago, Washington D.C., and Baltimore in 1968.
4. Charles D. Peavy, "The Black Revolutionary Novel: 1899-1969," *Studies in the Novel* 3 (Summer 1971) 180-89, and Jerry H. Bryant, *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997).
5. Kali Tal, "'That Just Kills Me': Black Militant Near-Future Fiction," *Social Text* 20.2 (2002) 66.
6. Mark Bould, "Come Alive by Saying No: An Introduction to Black Power SF" in *Science Fiction Studies* 34 (2007) 221.
7. Greenlee, *Spook* 167-68.
8. Kerner Commission, *The Kerner Report: The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) 1.
9. In some sense the modern notion of the black-white binary formed around the turn of the twentieth century, as seen in the rise of radical racism, the development of the idea of racial "blood," the investment of whiteness with property value (see Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 [June 1993] 1707-91), and the advent of Jim Crow. Racial divisions were further solidified in a somewhat different form in the 1920s, with a move away from blood and to culture (see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* [New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1988] 10, and Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, Pluralism* [Durham: Duke UP, 1995]).
10. The rebellions have been referred to with terms carrying various political weight, including "riot," "rebellion," "revolt," "uprising," and "disturbance." In the remainder of this essay, I use "rebellion" to refer to these incidents to avoid common connotations of "riot" as not only unplanned or spontaneous, but also senseless and even apolitical. Conversely, "revolt" and "uprising" suggest a level of political organization or scale that seems absent in individual urban rebellions of the 1960s; I do, however, use "revolt" to refer to the planned violence in the novels.
11. Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *The Black Revolt and Democratic Politics*, ed. Sondra Silverman (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1970) 16.
12. Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report* 203-6.
13. Charles V. Hamilton, "Riots, Revolts, and Relevant Response," *The Black Power Revolt: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Floyd B. Barbour (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1968) 174.

14. "After the Riots: A Survey," *The City in Crisis*, ed. Irwin Isenberg (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1968) 76. While some whites dismissed the rebellions as frivolous, Russell Sackett's fear-mongering 1966 *Life* article indicates more prevalent concerns: "the real prospect for rebellion developing from riots...is something more than the wild hallucinations of a relatively few angry black Napoleons. Indeed, some knowledgeable observers say that the extremists number among them some of the best minds of the Negro community" ("Plotting a War on Whitey: Extremists Set for Violence," *Life* 60:23 [10 June 1966] 100B).
15. This sense of white-black separation is exemplified in the popular and in many ways problematic *Black Rage* (1968), in which psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs assert that "[t]he worst slum and the best slum are very close together compared with the distance separating the world of black men and the world of whites" (*Black Rage* [New York: Basic Books, 1968] 71). Similarly, in a parody of the Kerner Commission's statement, Greenlee's Freeman expresses, "there will always be two countries here: one white, rich, fat and smug; the other black, poor, lean and striving" (128).
16. William K. Tabb, *The Political Economy of the Black Ghetto* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970) 27. As Adolph Reed, Jr., explains, Taylorization required a workforce of interchangeable laborers; ultimately, this demand conflicted with Jim Crow's insistence on racial differentiation, as well as its brutality and potential instability (see "The 'Black Revolution' and the Reconstitution of Domination," *Race, Politics, and Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s*, ed. Adolph Reed, Jr. [Westport: Greenwood, 1986] 66). Meanwhile, the elimination of blue-collar jobs by mechanization and computerization disproportionately affected black workers who traditionally held those jobs (See Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1969] 190). During the 1960s, the national black unemployment rate was consistently twice that of whites; with underemployment, the disparity was even greater (Tabb, *Political Economy* 107). See Tabb, Chapter 6 for a fuller discussion of the position of the black worker in the American labor market during this time.
17. Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2007) 7.
18. Tabb 8, and *Kerner Report* 243.
19. quoted in *Political Economy* 14.
20. Kenneth E. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) xv.
21. All three novels are satirical but vary in their use of humor, as I will later elaborate on in relation to Himes and Greenlee. Williams, whose work tends more toward literary realism, is the lightest touch; Greenlee's popular spy novel is more overtly satirical and parodic; and Himes's novel is by far the most heavy-handed in its absurdism.
22. Himes, *Plan B* 51.
23. Clark, *Dark Ghetto* 27.
24. *Spook* 207.
25. This phenomenon can be seen in the popularity among black American radicals of texts like Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966).
26. The Black Belt Thesis was a resolution of the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern (1928) that identified black Americans of the South as an oppressed nation within the U.S., thereby framing the struggle for black rights as a national liberation struggle. This thesis, while certainly not the opinion of all black Americans, strongly influenced CPUSA policy on race relations and anti-racist activism during the late

- 1920s and 1930s (Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* [Urbana: U Illinois P, 2005] 17-20).
27. Harold Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," *Rebellion or Revolution?* Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2009) 75.
 28. Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism" 76, and Political Economy" 23.
 29. The notion of black spatial separation took a more extreme form in the territorial separatism of the Republic of New Afrika and the Nation of Islam. The desire to protect black space in some form is expressed in the novels; in *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, the initial militant demand is the withdrawal of the National Guard from the ghetto, and in *Sons of Darkness*, the novel ends on the protection of the black domestic sphere.
 30. For an analysis of how black nationalism failed in some ways to diverge from the shortcomings of contemporaneous white politics, see Dean Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).
 31. The extent of white society's repression of their complicity in the ghetto is blatant in Tom Wicker's claim that it took validation by "bona fide moderates" for the Kerner Report to "be heard in white, moderate, responsible America" ("Introduction," *The Kerner Report: The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* [New York: Pantheon, 1988] xv).
 32. For instance, a 1967 *Newsweek* article characterizes a brick's breaking a police car window as "a direct hit that turned out to be the declaration of war" ("American Tragedy" 15). In *Plan B*, tanks "cannonading, in the scorched-earth tradition of the U.S. Army" are immediately brought into the ghetto to take down a lone black gunman (64).
 33. For example, more than 22,000 Army troops were deployed to quell the 1968 rebellions after King's assassination (Allen, *Black Awakening* 169). Tanks, helicopters, and advanced weaponry were available to anti-riot units (167).
 34. See Louis H. Masotti and Don R. Bowen, "Civil Violence: A Theoretical Overview," *Riots and Rebellion: Civil Violence in the Urban Community*, ed. Louis H. Masotti and Don R. Bowen (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1968) 21, and Robert F. Williams's "Revolution Without Violence?" (*The Crusader* 5.2 [Feb. 1964] 1-8) and "USA: The Potential of a Minority Revolution" (*The Crusader* 5.4 [May-June 1964] 1-7).
 35. Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage, 1992) 79-81.
 36. One example of the limit on black independence is seen in the government-funded Ford grants that supported CORE in 1967 (*Black Awakening* 122). Also see Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: Quill, 1984) 559.
 37. *Plan B* 148.
 38. Bobby Seale, "Free Huey," *Rhetoric of Black Revolution*, ed. Arthur L. Smith (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969) 185-86.
 39. Black self-defense and paramilitary groups of the mid- to late 1960s include the Deacons for Defense, the Black Panther Party, the Defenders, the Black Liberation Army, and the Black Liberators.
 40. Bould, "Come Alive" 222.
 41. The decision to use violence is much more agonizing for Browning, for whom organized, targeted violence is the only logical response when it is "open season on Negroes" (11).

42. "On Violence," *The Black Panthers Speak*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: De Capo, 1995) 19-20.
43. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell, 1991) 54.
44. David Leigh, *Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Notre Dame: U Notre Dame P, 2008) 5.
45. *Spook* 236.
46. *Spook* 247-48.
47. Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966) 213.
48. *Plan B* 127. The following is a sample of "over-kill": "The concussion was devastating. Splintered plate glass filled the air like a sand storm. Faces were split open and lacerated by flying glass splinters" (181).
49. *Plan B* 56, 63
50. *Plan B* 138.
51. *Plan B* 187-88.
52. *Sons* 232-33.
53. *Sons* 273.
54. *Sons* 10. A fuller quotation illustrates the interconnection between economic and political power through spatial proximity: "[a]head of [Browning], a thick slab of glass, concrete and steel, was the Chase Manhattan Building. [...] There was the enemy: wherever there was money and in too many places where there wasn't. And the Woolworth Building, the five-and-dime empire. [...] Down here at City Hall Park was the perfect merging: political power and big business. And just a few blocks away, Wall Street" (9-10).
55. Quoted in Clay Risen, *A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination* (Hoboken: Wiley and Sons, 2009) 194.
56. Sontag, "Imagination" 215.
57. Max Page, *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008) 12. We may look, for instance, to a strand of apocalyptic Anglo-American literature at the turn of the twentieth century that forecasts racial Armageddon, in which whites' projected dominance or elimination both betray anxiety about their continuing power during this turbulent period. Examples include John Ames Mitchell's *The Last American* (1889), Agnes Bond Yourell's *A Manless World* (1891), Frona Eunice Colburn's *Yermah the Dorado* (1897), and Stanley Waterloo's *Armageddon* (1898).
58. Leigh, *Apocalyptic Patterns* 184, and Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville: UP Virginia, 1972) 46.
59. *Apocalyptic Patterns* 184.
60. Baker, *Long Black Song* 47.
61. Examples of apocalypse in African-American folklore and literature can be found in the spirituals and folk tales (see *Long Black Song* 47-49), and in the work of David Walker, Sutton Griggs, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, among others. While I make some necessary distinctions between the white and black apocalyptic literary traditions, I do not claim their independence from each other (see Montgomery for this kind of argument).
62. The Nation of Islam viewed itself as the instrument of separation between white and black that would precede the ultimate destruction of the white world and the creation of a new (*Apocalyptic Patterns* 197-203). The outcome of apocalypse is conceived as less certain, but the stakes as high, in Robert F. Williams's writings ("USA" 7). *Right On!*, a 1968 film by the Last Poets, similarly urges blacks to "get it

together” so that in the apocalyptic moment, “[t]here will be no more white Christmas — there will be life” (Dir. Herbert Danska [Concept East New York, 1968]).

63. Arthur L. Smith, *Rhetoric of Black Revolution* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969) 36, 40.
64. *Long Black Song* 55-56.
65. As Baker points out (55-56), Baldwin prefers a peaceful collaboration of the races to the fearful possibility of racial warfare, “*the fire next time*” (*The Fire Next Time* [New York: Dial Press, 1963]), while Baraka instead hopes that young blacks will “erupt like Mt. Vesuvius to crush in hot lava these willful maniacs who call themselves white Americans” (LeRoi Jones, “The Last Days of the American Empire (Including Some Instructions for Black People),” *Home: Social Essays* [Hopewell: Echo, 1998] 208-9).
66. Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004) 14.
67. Raymond Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder,” *The American Literature Archive* <<http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/chandlerart.html>>. Consider the following, from Himes’s *A Rage in Harlem*: “Looking eastward from the towers of Riverside Church, perched among the university buildings on the high banks of the Hudson River, in a valley far below, waves of gray rooftops distort the perspective like the surface of a sea. Below the surface, in the murky waters of fetid tenements, a city of black people who are convulsed in desperate living, like the voracious churning of millions of hungry cannibal fish” (Chester Himes, *A Rage in Harlem* [New York: Random House, 1989] 93). The spatial contrast here between the lofty towers of the church and white university and the submerged, dangerous ghetto starkly depicts the difference between black and white experience. For further discussion of Himes’s intensification of the social critique of hard-boiled detective fiction, see Robert E. Skinner, *Two Guns From Harlem: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State UP, 1989) 38-41.
68. “Come Alive” 222.
69. Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (London: Routledge, 1987) 14.
70. Much American spy fiction around World War II imaginatively cleansed the nation of unruly ethnic or racial elements; speculative examples include Solomon Cruso’s *The Last of the Japs and Jews* (1933); Albert Nelson’s *America Betrayed: Save the Nation* (1936); and William Twiford’s *Sown in the Darkness A.D. 2000* (1941).
71. *Spook* 47.
72. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006) 24, and Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 2007) 253-64.
73. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 7, 24.
74. *Imagined Communities* 33.
75. John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009) 3.
76. Hall, *Apocalypse* 263. Here I use “imminent” as distinct from “immanent,” as Frank Kermode refers to that term: “although for us the End has perhaps lost its naïve *imminence*, its shadow still lies on the crisis of our fictions; we may speak of it as *immanent*” (Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968] 6). In these novels, the end is more than just present, or intrinsic; it is also *impending*.
77. This narrative gap is in some ways similar to the excision in utopian novels of the *passage* to utopia (e.g.,

the shift from Edward Bellamy's flawed Gilded Age to his ideal twentieth century in *Looking Backward* [1888]). One of the differences between this kind of apocalyptic fiction and Bellamy's novel, however, is that on the other side of Bellamy's break lies a description of an idealized nation that critiques current society by comparison; in this apocalyptic fiction, it is the breaking apart of the current society that produces its critique.

78. Gilbert H. Muller, *John A. Williams* (Boston: Twayne, 1984) 96.
79. Maxine Lavon Montgomery, *The Apocalypse in African-American Fiction* (Gainesville: UP Florida, 1996) 5.
80. *Plan B* 182.
81. This fear of genocide is exhibited in John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), in which the discovery of a government plot to exterminate blacks unfolds at the end of a largely realist novel. The suitability of realism as a backdrop for this shocking realization is evident in sociologist Robert Allen's claim that, "The term genocide expresses the gut-level response of many blacks to what they perceive as a growing threat of violent repression. This is no idle fear" (164). Allen cites the death and wounding of "rioters"; Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley's instructions to police to kill arsonists; the stockpiling of arms for riot control; the networking of anti-riot governmental bodies; and the revival of McCarran Act-era detention centers (164-71). Hamilton similarly speculated that violent black revolution would incur repression akin to South Africa's Sharpeville ("An Advocate of Black Power Defines It," *The Black Revolt and Democratic Politics*, ed. Sondra Silverman [Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1970] 60).
82. Lefebvre identifies the visible eruption of violence in capitalist society as consistent with the spatial logic of the state. To produce consensus, the abstract space of bourgeois capitalism serves to conceal the violence that, along with the market, are constitutive of the state; yet, Lefebvre asserts, "violence does not always remain latent or hidden" (57).
83. This view of the ghetto, advanced by some cultural nationalists, is exemplified in Hoyt Fuller, "Introduction: Towards a Black Aesthetic," *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) 8-10. Economic dependence is made clear in the long history of black labor exploitation, especially in *Plan B*. Political dependence is exhibited at the opening of *Spook* when a senator must seek the black vote by accusing the CIA of failing to integrate. White psychological dependence is shown in all three novels in white obsession with black sexuality.
84. Reed, "Black Revolution" 64.
85. For instance, while the Black Panther Party was invested in the power of the lumpenproletariat as a revolutionary force (see James A. Geschwender and Judson L. Jeffries, "The League of Revolutionary Black Workers," *Black Power in the Belly of the Beast*, ed. Judson L. Jeffries [Urbana: U Illinois P, 2006] 145), Cedric Johnson asserts that this kind of view "[downplays] the ideological and political diversity among 'the wretched of the earth'" (18). More insidious was the effect of ethnic pluralism, which often involved community control and investment in black business. Ethnic pluralist demands seek not a change in the capitalist system, but proportional inclusion in it; as such, this ideology supports middle- or ruling-class interests, as Reed indicates (62-64).
86. In *Plan B* and *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* in particular, middle-class identity is accepted only provisionally; for instance, Freeman, who assumes the covers of class-climbing Uncle Tom and middle class playboy, expresses his scorn for "Negro firsters," who sell their souls for "a mess of materialistic pottage" (*Spook* 13-14). Even Browning, who is more thoroughly middle-class, rejects the tactics of middle-

class respectability (*Sons* 11-12).

87. *Sons* 258.
88. *Sons* 23.
89. *Sons* 178-80.
90. National Black Economic Development Conference, "The Black Manifesto," *The Black Revolt and Democratic Politics*, ed. Sondra Silverman (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1970) 75-79, and "What We Want, What We Believe: October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program," *The Black Panthers Speak*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: De Capo, 1995) 2-4.
91. *Plan B* 200.
92. John A. Williams, "My Man Himes: An Interview with Chester Himes," *Conversations with Chester Himes*, ed. Michel Fabre and Robert E. Skinner (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1995) 57.
93. In *Plan B*, Himes states: "Paradoxically, it was the whites' guilt and fear that eventually saved [blacks] from extermination. The whites had the means, but they did not have the will. [...] They were more afraid of their own moral condemnation than they were of the dangers blacks posed to them" (143).
94. *Sons* 12.
95. James Boggs (see *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook* [New York: Monthly Review P, 1963]) and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) (see the film *Finally Got the News*, by the LRBW [First Run Icarus Films, 1970]) assert the commonly held notion of blacks as a revolutionary vanguard for the working class. The Panthers and the LRBW in particular saw the utility of cooperating with friendly whites (see Huey Newton, "Huey Newton Talks to the Movement About the Black Panther Party, Cultural Nationalism, SNCC, Liberals and White Revolutionaries," in *The Black Panthers Speak* 53-55). Also see C. L. R. James, "Revolution and the Negro" (*New Internationalist* 5 [December 1939] 339-43) and "The American Working Class" (*Marxism and the Intellectuals* [Detroit: Facing Reality Publishing Committee, 1962]).
96. Carl Wittman and Thomas Hayden, "An Interracial Movement of the Poor?" *The Black Revolt and Democratic Politics*, ed. Sondra Silverman (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1970) 43, 50. For an extended study of union deradicalization in this period, see Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New P, 2010).
97. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 57.
98. Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 35.
99. As such, these novels differ widely from *The Black Commandos*, which produces a much more optimistic (although no less destructive) outcome involving super-humans, unheard-of inventions, and flying saucers. This example shows that at that time, the only way to really produce a "happy ending" was through a *total* break with reality, one that readers might enjoy, but would not believe.
100. Sondra Silverman, "Epilogue: The Phenomenon of Ghetto Life," *The Black Revolt and Democratic Politics*, ed. Sondra Silverman (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1970) 93.

