Bloody Knives:
Political Violence in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*

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Two of the central concerns of Frank Herbert's 1965 science fiction novel *Dune* are played out in a confrontation between its protagonist, Paul, and the leader of his adopted Fremen tribe, Stilgar:

“Do you think you could lift your hand against me?” Paul asked. Stilgar began to tremble. “It’s the way,” he muttered.

“It’s the way to kill offworld strangers found in the desert and take their water as a gift to Shai-Hulud,” Paul said. “Yet you permitted two such to live one night, my mother and myself.”

As Stilgar remained silent, trembling, staring at him, Paul said: “Ways change, Stil. You have changed them yourself.”

Stilgar looked down at the yellow emblem on the knife he held. “When I am Duke in Arakeen with Chani by my side, do you think I’ll have time to concern myself with every detail of governing Tabr sietch?” Paul asked. “Do you concern yourself with the internal problems of every family?”

Stilgar continued staring at his knife. “Do you think I wish to cut off my right arm?” Paul demanded. Slowly, Stilgar looked up at him.

“You!” Paul said. “Do you think I wish to deprive myself or the tribe of your wisdom and strength?”

In a low voice, Stilgar said: “The young man of my tribe whose name is known to me, this young man I could kill on the challenge floor, Shai-Hulud willing. The Lisan al-Gaib, him I could not harm. You knew this when you handed me this knife.”

“I knew it,” Paul agreed.

Stilgar opened his hand. The knife clattered against the stone of the floor. “Ways change,” he said. (Herbert, 422-423)

This passage shows a clash between the Fremen tradition of succession by single combat to the death, and a cooperative approach to leadership being presented by Paul. Paul convinces Stilgar to forgo the traditional process of succession, demonstrating a degree of flexibility in political processes. The moment is richly meaningful in relation to the text because it encapsulates seemingly contradictory elements of the novel's meaning. Stilgar perceives the necessity to decide the leadership of the tribe through combat, which demonstrates the intertwined nature of politics and violence that Herbert criticizes in his novel. Paul's victory in convincing Stilgar that both men can stay alive and remain leaders, however, puts forward the idea that the intimacy
between violence and politics is not inevitable, that alternatives to such a relationship are possible.

A brief background on the events of the novel will help to ground an argument about its interplay of politics and violence. *Dune* follows the story of Paul Atreides, the heir to the Duke Atreides, the head of a Great Family in a feudal empire. The Atreides house takes over Arrakis, a desert planet with one immensely valuable crop, the geriatric and mind-altering drug melange. The Atreides, however, lose a war for control of the planet with their enemy house, the Harkonnens. Paul and his mother Jessica are forced to seek asylum with the natives of the planet, the Fremen. The refugees are quickly incorporated into Fremen culture, where melange activates prescient powers born into Paul. His abilities allow him to lead the Fremen to a victory over the Harkonnens and the emperor, whose throne he takes.

The politics of the novel are unavoidably violent; the Fremen rule of succession is just one of many examples of physical violence playing an integral role in political decisions. Outside of the near omnipresence of violence in political spheres, however, the novel tends to avoid absolutes. The flexibility which prevails in Paul and Stilgar's exchange exemplifies a pattern of representation which appears throughout *Dune*; Herbert’s novel shies away from rigid representation. The characterization of the planet Arrakis, for instance, is less absolute than it at first appears. Superficially, Arrakis appears to be a hell planet; the chief substance needed to maintain life, water, is supremely scarce. The sand storms will literally disintegrate a man. Sandworms prey on any life on the surface of the desert, and make shields, a device and symbol of personal protection, useless. All of these intimidating facets of the planet are explained to Paul and the Duke by the Imperial Planetologist Kynes on their survey of spice mining (109-117). From this description, Arrakis appears to fit Raymond Williams’ label “the hell,” a dystopic
world which is innately miserable and unredeemable (Williams, 52). The complexity which is later introduced to description of *Dune*’s desert makes such an attempt at classifying the environment Herbert creates inadequate. Kynes complicates his initial characterization of the planet by hinting at the potential for Arrakis to be changed into a hospitable planet (Herbert, 139). The other side of Arrakis is partially revealed before Paul and Jessica are found by Stilgar. The scene of desert beauty described in the text paints a wholly different picture of the planet than the description of brutality and sparseness that common knowledge offered. “Like a fairyland” is Paul’s comment on the scenes that Jessica takes in: “Spreading away in front of her stretched desert growth—bushes, cacti, tiny clumps of leaves—all trembling in the moonlight” (269). The word trembling evokes the fragility of life in the desert, simultaneously asserting the harsh nature of the planet and its apparent ability to support life.

The flexibility or complexity of representation demonstrated by the two faces of Arrakis’ desert parallel tensions within Herbert’s fictional society. The society is characterized by tension between primitive and advanced technology, a tension which is neatly contained within Herbert’s imagined shields. Personal protective devices, shields deflect projectiles and other fast-moving objects; Paul states the consequences of the invention for combat: “The shield turns the fast blow, admits the slow kindjal!” (34). Shields have the effect of rendering projectile weapons essentially obsolete – the cannons that the Harkonnens use to trap the Atreides forces in caves on Arrakis are effective because of the surprise that such obsolete weapons represent. Thufir Hawat, the Atreides master of spies, muses bitterly after the Atreides defeat: “Who could have guessed they’d use artillery in the day of shields?” (212). With projectile weapons made obsolete, *Dune*’s society returns to sword and knife fighting as the main form of combat. Those are the weapons with which Paul is trained to fight, and knife fights are the main moments of physical violence in
the novel. Another artifact of critical importance in Herbert's novel is the crysknife, the main weapon of the Fremen. The weapons are made from the tooth of a sandworm, the monstrous creatures that patrol Arrakis' desert (94). Additionally, crysknives hold a deep religious significance for the Fremen (92); the organic, mystic nature of these weapons contrasts sharply with the advanced technology of shields. _Dune's_ combat presents a clash of modern and primitive; the shield and other technological advances mark the society as an advanced one. The significance of the crysknife and the necessity for bloody, intimate knife fights, however, introduces an element of the primitive. Such a combination confounds attempts at simple characterization, and corroborates the complexity of representation in Herbert's novel. Similar to the way forms of violence mark the tension between primitive and modern in _Dune_, the novel's attitude towards political violence (or violent politics!) is difficult to pin down. Moments such as the confrontation between Paul and Stilgar suggest that the text wants to be able to separate violence from politics, but an effort to read the novel in such a way is complicated by text's insistence on the connection between them.

One particularly productive way to examine the relationship between violence and politics in Herbert's novel is to read the novel as a comment on colonial violence. There are definite parallels between the structures of colonialism being destroyed in the mid-twentieth century and the political structures of _Dune_. One of the simplest terms related to colonization, empire, occupies a prominent role in Herbert's text. The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of the word suggests the colonial energy it contains: "Supreme and extensive political dominion; esp. that exercised by an 'emperor', or by a sovereign state over its dependencies." The control of a state "over its dependencies" is an allusion to the usage of the terms during the height of the colonial period, when the phrase "The British Empire" was commonly used. In the 1960's, with
global awareness focused on the ongoing process of decolonization, both violent and nonviolent, the term “empire” undoubtedly carried the baggage of colonialism with it.

The evidence which suggests a connection between real world politics and those of the novel is considerable and compelling. Take, for instance, the process by which the Fremen of Herbert’s novel gain their independence – the unification of many tribes into one cohesive political and military unit behind the leadership of one man echoes the creation of nations out of colonies. “Nationalism,” according to historians Wayne C. McWilliams and Harry Piotrowski, “[was] the primary ingredient in all independence movements” (McWilliams, 113). The parallel between the primary process of gaining independence during the period of global decolonization and the way that the Fremen establish themselves as an independent political entity is more than coincidence. The cultural moment in which Herbert wrote Dune defined the terms he uses and processes he describes as intimately related to colonialism. Herbert produced a text during the 1960’s that narrates the unification of a group of tribes to escape the oppression of an empire; such a text undeniably functions as allegory for decolonization.

Patrick Parrinder’s essay on modes of science fiction entitled “SF: Metaphor, Myth or Prophecy?” authorizes a reading of Herbert’s novel as a comment on contemporary politics. Parrinder describes an arc in the function of science fiction from roughly the beginning of the twentieth century. The first science fiction, he writes, was predictive or prophetic in nature; the purpose of such writing was not to accurately predict the future, but rather to raise contemporary awareness of future dangers (Parrinder, 24-25). In the 1920s and 1930s science fiction began to change into what Parrinder refers to as mythology. Such literature is less grounded in specific times – past, future etc. – and more concerned with the characteristics of humanity (26-27). Both of these modes apply acceptably as guides to reading Dune, but have significant weaknesses; the
novel functions as an ecological prophecy, warning readers of the danger of neglecting the environment. The institution of an obsolete political structure, however, weakens a case made to read the novel as a vision of our future. Reading Herbert’s novel as myth also has potential, largely because of its substantial spiritual concerns. In my opinion, despite its focus on religion, the novel cannot function as myth because of its intellectual, analytical approach to the spiritual world. One of the cults in the novel, the Bene Geserit, is centrally concerned with manipulating populations through religion. Their cynical view of spirituality makes it difficult to view the novel’s meaning as a mystic one.

Parrinder’s third approach to reading science fiction serves most aptly as a model for the way that Dune functions. Parrinder refers to a shift in the function of the genre around the time that Herbert’s novel was published: “then in the 1960s, as Brian Aldiss claimed, ‘SF discovered the Present,’ and the future was increasingly regarded as a metaphor for the present” (27). While the previous two modes of science fiction offered commentary on the real world – either on potential futures or on human nature and spirituality – the new mode commented on contemporary events. Parrinder paraphrases one of the giants of science fiction criticism: “Darko Suvin rejects talk of the artist as mythmaker and offers a fully-worked out theory of sf as a metaphorical mode: its stories, he says, are not prophecies but analogies or parables” (28). Suvin’s theory suggests that all science fiction can be read as metaphor or analogy; his position in rejecting the modes of prophecy and myth entirely may be too extreme, but his school of thought does permit a metaphorical reading of Herbert’s novel.

Dune functions as a lament for the violence inherent in all politics, particularly those of colonialism and decolonization. Its metaphorical mode exaggerates this violence, making it unavoidable in the novel. Dune is a product of a cultural moment when the process of
decolonization was at the forefront of global politics, and falls at a point in the history of science fiction when the genre began to be used as metaphor or allegory. Like most allegory, Herbert's novel exaggerates the element of the text it is commenting on, drawing attention to something in the contemporary world that the text chooses to highlight. The unrelenting violence contained within *Dune's* politics allows the novel to point squarely at the violent process of the colonial and other political systems.

Frantz Fanon, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, addresses the process of decolonization. Decolonization, in Fanon's language, is singularly violent. "In its bare reality," he states, "decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives" (Fanon, 3). His characterization emphasizes the violence he sees as pervasive in decolonization by appealing to the sensation of smell, closely linked with emotion. He makes the violence of the process universal by including both large- and small-scale weapons in his description. The cannonball evokes images of carnage caused by organized battle, whereas the knife speaks to the violence which occurs on an intimate, personal scale. The cannon also evokes open, declared warfare, while the knife suggests covert violence, such as assassination. Both types of violence, and all those in between, are fundamental to the process of decolonization in Fanon's discourse.

Violence, according to Fanon, is not something unique to the process of decolonization. The entire colonial system which is removed during decolonization is built on violence, he writes:

> The violence which governed the ordering of the colonial world, which tirelessly punctuated the destruction of the indigenous social fabric, and demolished unchecked the systems of reference of the country's economy, lifestyles, and modes of dress, this same violence will be vindicated and appropriated when, taking history in their own hands, the colonized swarm into the forbidden cities. (6).
Fanon is not limiting his definition of violence to include only the physical destruction he alludes to with the “red-hot cannonball” and the “bloody knife.” By describing the oppression of colonization – the “[demolition] ...of the systems of reference of the country's economy, lifestyles...” – as a form of violence, Fanon reads colonization as a fundamentally violent structure. It is important to note, however, that Fanon does not see this systemic violence as a possible stopping point. He cannot envision a situation in which the violence of colonialism limits itself to oppression by the colonist. “The colonized [swarming] into the forbidden cities” and enacting real violence on their oppressors is an inevitable outcome of the colonial system, his definite and emphatic “will be vindicated” asserts. Fanon’s view of colonialism is particularly distinct in this certainty of real, revolutionary violence. Postcolonial texts are frequently, perhaps always, focused on violence, but often in that they draw attention to the violence concealed within the political structures of colonization. The unavoidability of vivid, physical violence in Fanon’s perspective makes him both a valuable and a potentially dangerous companion to a text such as Herbert’s *Dune*. The obsession of his text with violence speaks strongly to the fundamentally violent nature of the Fremen political structure. The danger, of course, is that his obsession with violence will encourage a myopic reading, oversimplifying issues to matters of pure violence when they truly demand more nuanced reading.

The single-minded focus on physical violence that I have attributed to Fanon is demonstrated by a comparison of a common device in two different texts. The line which I quoted earlier – “In its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives” – makes powerful use of an appeal to the reader’s sensation of smell. The implicit demand that the reader imagine the sulfurous, acrid smell of heated metal or the tangy aroma of blood strengthens the impact of the violence Fanon feels will erupt out of colonization. Derek
Walcott also makes use of the sensation of smell in his poem “Ruins of a Great House,” but uses it to different effect. Walcott twice mentions the smell of rotting limes; the first time he likens the decaying fruit to a decaying empire: “A smell of dead limes quickens in the nose/The leprosy of empire” (Walcott, 9-10). Walcott is undeniably aware of the violence contained within empire, referring to it as “the abuse/Of ignorance by Bible and by sword” (28-29). Nonetheless, he evokes the sensation of smell to draw attention to the lasting impact of colonial oppression on the West Indies, but not to actual physical violence. He again refers to the smell of decaying limes when he says “The world’s green age then was a rotting lime/Whose stench became the charnel galleon’s text” (35-36). Once again Walcott uses the power of smell to intensify his assertion that the abuses of empire linger after the fact, pointing out the damage done by the systemic violence contained with colonialism. While violence is an integral part of his poem, its presence is buffered by the type of violence Walcott refers to. In “Ruins of a Great House,” he concerns himself more with the economic abuse of the West Indies than with the physical clash of oppressed and oppressor. That is not to say that Walcott takes a softer stance on colonialism than Fanon does: “I thought next/Of men like Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, Drake,/Ancestral murderers and poets, more perplexed/In memory now by every ulcerous crime” (31-34). His diction in “ulcerous crime” does not suggest that he finds the actions endorsed by empire any more appealing than does Fanon. Rather, their divergent use of the device of smell suggests that Walcott is better able to balance the diverse effects of colonialism than is Fanon, with his emphasis on the inevitably bloody nature of decolonization.

My desire in comparing Fanon to Walcott is not to portray Fanon as a mindless fanatic intent on destruction, nor is it to undermine the utility of his text. I do, however, want to be very aware of the dangers that working intimately with his text entails. Chief among these dangers is
the possibility of losing perspective, a shortcoming I think that Fanon himself sometimes was afflicted by. In the final section of his book, Fanon introduces several case studies of Algerian psychological patients by briefly commenting on the mental damage done to the country as a whole: "for many years we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted on our people by the colonial onslaught" (Fanon, 181). Even ignoring his tendency to read every effect of colonialism as emblematic of physical violence, the language of this comment is problematic. As a psychologist presenting casework, it is important for Fanon to be able to analyze his subject dispassionately if his conclusions are to be accepted without serious reservations. He groups himself with his patients by using the first-person plural, suggesting that whatever wounds were inflicted on them by colonization are present in him as well. Such closeness with his patients makes it difficult, if not impossible for Fanon's readings of their symptoms to be accepted fully at face value.

Fanon is prone to emphasizing the physical violence of colonialism, and is not always able to be as objective in his analysis as would be ideal, but is still an undeniably provocative thinker. His lurid language accentuates the violence of decolonization and provides a link to *Dune*. The exaggeration of colonial violence in Fanon's writing parallels Herbert's exaggeration of political violence in his fictional society. The two texts are also meaningfully connected by the way they imagine the colonized subconscious. The insight Fanon has into the minds of his patients is an immeasurably valuable tool in reading between *Wretched of the Earth* and *Dune*.

The subconscious is one area in which the colonized people of Fanon's text and the fictional Fremen of *Dune* have striking common ground. The commonalities are played out in the way that Fanon discusses dreaming, specifically the "muscular dreams" of the colonized man. "The dreams of the colonial subject," he writes, "are muscular dreams, dreams of action,
dreams of aggressive vitality…. During colonization the colonized subject frees himself night after night” (15). Fanon here attributes to dreaming the expression of desires for freedom which are suppressed during the day. In the colonized subject, these dreams take the form of “aggressive vitality” because he believes violence to be necessary in gaining that freedom.

“Dreams of action” are central to Dune, maybe most obviously in the form of the Fremen dream of turning Arrakis into a lush paradise. This idea is dismissed at the formal dinner hosted by the Atreides family near the beginning of the novel. Lingar Bewt, engaged in an argument with the ecologist Kynes, sneers “Our planetologist has many interesting dreams; he dreams with the Fremen – of prophecies and messiahs” (Herbert, 140). The dream to which Bewt refers is undoubtedly one of action; seeking to change the entire face of a planet represents the kind of frustrated energy that Fanon sees expressed in the dreams of the colonial subject. It is not only opponents of the Fremen who refer to their plan as a dream either. When Paul and Jessica are shown the Fremen process water-measuring, Jessica realizes the import of such an obsession with water. “This is the scientist’s dream,” she thinks; “This was a dream to capture men’s souls” (319). Her diction is striking; by suggesting that the Fremen dream can “capture” imaginations and hearts, Jessica is attributing Fanon’s “aggressive vitality” or “muscular” nature to a dream of the colonized. Attempting to explain the importance of the long-term plan to his companion Gurney Halleck, a non-Fremen, Paul says “you haven’t lived the Fremen dream” (450). The persistent characterization of this plan as a dream, by members and non-members of the Fremen culture, suggests that it shares an important characteristic with other dreams. The aspect of dreaming that Fanon focuses on is the dream as an outlet for subconscious motivations, particularly the desire to gain independence; reading the Fremen plan to turn Arrakis into a hospitable planet as a dream casts it as the desire of a population for a change from their
oppressed state.

Dreams take a central role in other places in *Dune*. Aside from the Fremen dream of changing the planet, the text’s foremost dreaming is that of Paul-Muad-Dib, both pre- and post-arrival on Arrakis. The dreams that he has as a child are an important part of why the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam comes to Caladan to examine him. The night before his interview, Paul dreams of Arrakis: “Paul fell asleep to dream of an Arrakeen cavern, silent people all around him moving in the dim light of glowglobes. It was solemn there and like a cathedral as he listened to a faint sound – the drip-drip-drip of water” (4). The language used to describe this dream is sedate, calm – “silent,” “solemn,” “like a cathedral.” The sound of dripping suggests undisturbed bodies of water and tranquility. As Paul recalls that and other dreams for the Reverend Mother the next day, he remembers dreaming of a poem. The poem is about nature and the ocean, a subdued poem describing a moment of solitude (26). These two dreams are the only examples of dreaming from Paul’s pre-Arrakis childhood in the text, and thus suggest that the dreams of his youth were of such a kind, in that they were not particularly active or violent.

The two examples of dreams from Paul’s time on Caladan contrast sharply with his dreams, or what pass for them, after going to ground on Arrakis. The cavern which Paul dreamed of the night before his test with Mohiam serves as a location intimately linked with dreaming in the novel. It is the subject of the novel’s first dream, and when Paul and Jessica are taken there after the fight with Jamis, the text becomes preoccupied with dreams. “I have seen this place in a dream” is Paul’s reaction to the space; whereas the cavern was presented as a tranquil place in his dream on Caladan, its influence is far from peaceful in reality (317). Paul’s feeling of familiarity prompts the recollection of one of his prescient visions: “Somewhere ahead of him on this path, the fanatic hordes cut their gory path across the universe in his name. The green and
black Atreides banner would become a symbol of terror. Wild legions would charge into battle screaming their war cry: ‘Muad‘Dib!’” (317). The vision, while not explicitly called a dream, operates in much the same way. The predictive nature of his dreams early in life is enhanced by the introduction of mélange into his diet, but both the early dream and the later vision are prescient. Reading the violent vision stirred by entering the cavern as a dream demonstrates a change in the nature of Paul’s dreaming. Whereas the cavern was still and peaceful when he dreamed of it on Caladan, it sparks visions of “wild legions [charging] into battle” when he actually visits it on Arrakis. The change helps to show a transition in the nature of Paul’s dreams which coincides with his flight into the desert, and also with the beginning of the process of his ‘going native,’ a subject I will return to. Several more dreams or visions from the desert are more violent or imbued with, as Fanon puts it, “aggressive vitality.”

Before his fight with Jamis, Paul eats a piece of food heavily laced with melange; the drug induces one of his first prescient visions. The trance that Paul falls into is not under his own control – “He sank to the floor…giving himself up to it” (295). As such, its course demonstrates the flow of his subconscious mind, much like a dream. Furthermore, the fact that it is true in a prescient sense should not disqualify it from being read as a dream; the dreams Paul recalls early in the text are just as true, and are still comfortably located as dreams. If one reads the prescient visions as dreams, they provide further evidence of a shift in the nature of Paul’s dreaming through the novel. The vision prior to Paul’s fight with Jamis is full of violence and chaos, distinctly different from his tranquil dreams on Caladan. The flow of time in the vision is described as “a boiling of possibilities,” and violence is its subject:

He saw violence with the outcome subject to so many variables that his slightest movement created vast shiftings in its pattern…The countless consequences – lines fanned out from this cave, and along most of these consequence-lines he saw his own
dead body with blood flowing from a gaping knife wound. (296)

Such a vision highlights the vicissitude and violence which work their way into Paul’s entranced, or dreaming, mind on Arrakis. The awareness of the constantly shifting nature of time contrasts with the dreams he had on Caladan, which focused on a single moment, not on the sweep of events which the full blown visions take in.

Another such moment occurs after Paul drinks the changed Water of Life in the sietch orgy. The language used to describe his dreamlike vision demonstrates the violence and energy it contains: “A Harkonnen called Feyd-Rautha who flashed toward him like a deadly blade, the Sardaukar raging off their planet to spread pogrom on Arrakis…the sleeping giant Fremen poised for their wild crusade across the universe” (362). A vision with so much action and potential violence is drastically different from the “silent” and “solemn” cavern that Paul dreamed of on Caladan. Rather than simply repeating that such a difference exists, which is fairly obvious, I want to explore possible explanations for the intrusion of violence into Paul’s dreams, a change which seems linked to Arrakis. The explanation is rooted in Fanon’s discussion of dreams, and the characteristics he saw shared among dreams of the colonized. As I mentioned earlier, Fanon describes the “dreams of the colonial subject” as “muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality” (Fanon, 15). While he does not suggest a characterization for the dreams of colonizer, it is safe to assume that he views the action and vitality of the dreams of the colonized man as defining characteristics. The parallel between the dreams that Fanon attributes to his “colonial subject” and the dreams or visions that Paul has on Arrakis is not difficult to see. The addition of melange to Paul’s diet can explain the increased frequency and intensity of his visions, but perhaps not the shift to violence and action that goes on. Fanon’s description of the dreams of the colonized provides an interesting clue in examining Paul’s
visions. The idea that they closely resemble those of a colonized man is intriguing, because Paul, by joining the Fremen, has essentially become one.

Paul’s transformation from the colonizer – a royal member of the Empire – to the colonized – a desert refugee – is accentuated by the observations of Gurney Halleck during their reunion:

“You heard my father speak of desert power,” Paul said. “There it is. The surface of the planet is ours. No storm nor creature nor condition can stop us.”

Us, Gurney thought. *He means the Fremen. He speaks of himself as one of them.* Again, Gurney looked at the spice blue in Paul’s eyes… They spoke of “the touch of the spicebrush” to mean a man had gone too native. (Herbert, 415)

The surprised reaction of a close companion and mentor from his days on Caladan shows the profound change Paul has undergone in becoming Fremen. That his subconscious influences should change as a result of this shift in position in the colonial system is natural. This reading suggests that the movement from city to desert in *Dune* is accompanied by a movement from imperial culture to colonized culture, and the psychological changes that go along with such a shift.

The change from colonizer to colonized is not one that immediately occurs when Paul and Jessica take refuge with the Fremen. The transition from ‘civilized’ to Fremen culture is one which Paul and Jessica make during the course of the novel; they are therefore put in a position to compare the two cultures. Their observations about the Fremen – things that surprise them or are judged to be of note – can be read as places where the desert people are markedly different from the culture of the city. One such comment is on the smell of the sietch, the cavern home of the Fremen tribe, when Paul and Jessica arrive there for the first time. Even before Paul smells the air, he is aware of his companions doing so: “Paul saw the Fremen throwing back their
hoods, removing nose plugs, breathing deeply” (340-341). The actions of the Fremen suggest that they relish the odor of the sietch, a perception reinforced by the comment of one: “The smells of home” (341). The familiarity with the smell that the Fremen have, and their appreciation of it, is not something that comes immediately to Paul. His first reaction is that “the odor of the place assailed him” (341). He later directly contrasts his own reaction with that of one of the Fremen when he notes that “the man was enjoying the stink of this air” (341). The experience of entering the sietch overwhelms him; he feels “hemmed in by a press of robed bodies” and the air makes an “assault on his nostrils” (341). Although Jessica is able to quickly remind him to accept the smell, his initial reaction is a telling one. The odor of the sietch is totally unlike anything he has experienced before, and its intensity borders on violence. The language used to describe his perception of the smell – “[assail],” “assault” – is that of attack; such language suggests two things. First, the agency attributed to the smell of the sietch in its ability to attack Paul makes it a major part of the moment, giving it a position of unavoidable importance in the passage, and forcing the reader to take notice of the violence it seems to enact. The visceral, emotional qualities linked to the sensation of smell also gives it a measure of power over Paul, making him subject to its perceived violence.

Furthermore, the attribution of violent energy to something as simple as a smell recalls the omnipresence of violence in Fanon’s work. Fanon, in fact, makes a particularly relevant comment about the odors of the colonized sector. “When the colonist speaks of the colonized,” Fanon says, “he uses zoological terms. Allusion is made to...the odors from the ‘native’ quarters, to the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething” (Fanon, 7). As an outsider, but one with exquisite training in sensitivity to nuance, Paul is a fascinating lens through which to view the sietch, or “native quarters.” He is unable to escape the reaction which Fanon attributes to the
colonizer – he uses the same word, "stink," to describe the smell of the sietch, and the use of terms such as "press" and "crush" to describe the crowd of Fremen entering echo the "swarming" and "seething" that Fanon sees the colonizer using to talk about the colonized. The intense feeling of being overwhelmed by the stimuli of the sietch, and his immediate phrasing of the sensation thus, implicate Paul as one of Fanon’s colonizers. Such a characterization, however, while not surprising considering his origins, is also reductive. The quickness with which he accepts and adapts to the realities of sietch life are highlighted by the prologue to the chapter, where Paul’s process of adapting to life as a Fremen is described (Herbert, 339-340). Herbert’s text carefully acknowledges the culture shock that Paul undergoes upon entering the sietch, but also frustrates any attempt to cast him as an unredeemable colonizer by demonstrating his speedy acceptance of his new conditions. What the discussion of smell does do is continue the demarcation of Imperial culture from Fremen. Paul’s ability to rapidly adapt to the sietch does not detract from its strangeness at first. The smells, and his lack of preparation for such a wash of odors, highlights the vast distance between the life of the "colonizer" and that of the "colonized" in *Dune*.

Also worthy of mention is the sietch orgy, which presents a new challenge to Paul in his adaptation to life among the Fremen. His reluctance to drink the Water of Life stems from the knowledge that it will bring on a prescient trance; the pressure that he feels to partake, however, is not based on this consequence. As he prepares to drink, he “[feels] carnival excitement in the air” (360). The excitement is in anticipation of the orgy to come, unrelated to Paul’s reason for hesitation. Nonetheless, the ritual of the orgy scares him with its otherness; his otherness from the tribe also frightens the rest of the tribe. Chani, after removing him from the main cavern says that “there’s something frightening in you. When I took you away from the others… I did it
because I could feel what the others wanted” (361). The separation from Paul necessary for the ritual of the orgy to accomplish its function emphasizes the gap that remains between him and the rest of the Fremen. This separation now is no longer the product of distinct colonial cultures – the colonizer and the colonized – as Paul is now recognized as one of the colonized. Instead, the otherness is a distinction unique to him because of his powers of prescience. As Chani puts it, “You…press on people. You…make us see things” (361). Further highlighting Paul’s difference is the degree to which Jessica, previously another outsider, is incorporated into the ritual. Taking place of the dying Reverend Mother, she is expected to change the Water of Life to a safe form for the rest of the sietch to participate in the orgy. “Let them have their orgy,” the old Reverend Mother instructs Jessica. “They’ve little enough pleasure out of living” (358).

The degree of Jessica’s participation suggests that she has been truly incorporated into the Fremen culture; Fanon after all views the rituals of dance and orgy as critically important parts of the culture of the colonized. He writes that “the colonized’s way of relaxing is precisely this muscular orgy during which the most brutal aggressiveness and impulsive violence are channeled, transformed, and spirited away” (Fanon, 19). The sietch orgy of Dune serves a purpose very similar to the one Fanon attributes to dance, an important release of frightening energy within the tribe in an acceptable outlet. Jessica’s intimate role in such a central part of Fremen culture makes Paul’s inability to participate in it more jarring and obvious. It also suggests that he cannot participate, not because he still bears the stigma of the colonizer, which he shares with Jessica, but rather because of his unique abilities.

The exclusion of Paul from the orgy based on his own characteristics rather than his origins is an important part of a reading that moves between Wretched of the Earth and Dune., because of his success in crossing the divide between colonizer and colonized. The two texts
agree that violence is a central part of politics, and parallels between the Fremen and Fanon’s
“colonized” subjects help to frame the violence which pervades the culture of *Dune’s* desert
people. The successful incorporation of Paul and Jessica into this culture, however, is something
which, in his view of the colonial system, would not be possible. “The colonial world,” in
Fanon’s theory, “is a Manichean world” (6). In such a world, no reconciliation between the two
parties is possible; Fanon says that “the colonist is not content with stating that the colonized
world has lost its values or worse never possessed any. The ‘native’ is declared impervious to
ethics...He is, dare we say it, the enemy of values. In other words, absolute evil” (6). The
strength of Paul’s reaction to the unfamiliar Fremen environment demonstrates the distance
between colonizer and colonized, seemingly supporting Fanon’s idea of an absolute separation
between the two. Fanon’s unforgiving divide between the halves of the colonial world, however,
is dangerously simple. It has no way to account for the willing acceptance of ‘colonizer’ figures
like Paul and Jessica, as well as Kynes, into the Fremen culture. Herbert imagines the
relationship between colonizer and colonized in less absolute terms. The facility with which Paul
and Jessica find a place among the Fremen suggests that the divide between the two sides of the
colonial system is not too great to be bridged. The flexibility which Herbert imagines in this
relationship, and others such as the tension between hell and paradise in his characterization of
the planet Arrakis, suggest that he is perhaps more optimistic in how he views decolonization
than Fanon is. While Fanon sees no possibility of a reconciliation between colonizer and
colonized, Herbert is able to imagine a permeable boundary between them.

The difference in the ways *Dune* and *Wretched of the Earth* conceive of the colonizer-
colonized relationship is exemplified by the cases in which the Fremen bend their traditions to
allow outsiders entry into their culture. Paul points this out to Stilgar in the conversation I quoted
earlier: “It’s the way to kill offworld strangers found in the desert and take their water as a gift
to Shai-Hulud,’ Paul said. ‘Yet you permitted two such to live one night, my mother and
myself’” (Herbert, 422). Paul and Jessica are not the only outsiders to be incorporated into the
Fremen. The Planetologist Kynes, similarly a member of the Imperium, precedes Paul in
becoming a naturalized member of the Fremen. He has a Fremen child much as Paul does, and
both men achieve demi-god status among the desert people, Kynes because of his ecological
knowledge, Paul because of his prescient talent. Their transitions to Fremen life entail more than
simply being accepted into the desert culture. The text marks both Kynes and Paul as Fremen by
noting that they share the Fremen dream of turning Arrakis into a paradise. The comment about
Kynes – “He dreams with the Fremen” – marks the degree to which he believes in his adopted
cause; his marriage with Fremen culture surpasses one of convenience (140). He truly desires the
accomplishment of their dream. Paul is portrayed similarly by the text when he warns Gurney
about the ferocity with which the desert people desire the fulfillment of this dream. By saying
“You haven’t lived with the Fremen dream” Paul is suggesting that he himself has lived
intimately with the dream and identifies with it (450, emphasis mine). The earnestness with
which Kynes and Paul both identify with the Fremen suggests that they become true members of
Fremen culture, successfully breaking down the barrier between colonizer and colonized.

Although the divide between colonizer and colonized is more sharply delineated in
Fanon’s text than in Herbert’s, Wretched of the Earth does serve to focus an intertextual reading
of the two works on the violence they both contain. Fanon’s text characterizes decolonization
and the colonial system as unavoidably violent; reading between Wretched of the Earth and
Dune, the violence that permeates Fanon’s work naturally accentuates that contained in Herbert’s
text. More than simply a central piece of the colonial relationship between the Fremen and the
language and vocabulary to absolve the state of acts of violence is the process that Pandey attributes to all governments.

Pandey suggests that the ability of governments to control what is defined as violence is often abused. He asserts that "The fact is that violence has been endemic to the advance of the modern, it has reappeared in constantly new forms, and it has occurred on all sides" (Pandey, 7). His argument warns against the dangers of overlooking the control that states have over the definition of violence; in other words, he is encouraging his readers to look for the violence being concealed in the exertion of political control. Herbert's novel makes the violence inherent in government explicit and unavoidable. What Pandey defines as "routine violence" is the unnoticed oppression enacted by nations upon segments of their population, as an essential part of state-building (10). The analog for such violence is shown in Dune when the Baron Harkonnen instructs his nephew Rabban on the temporary rule of Arrakis: "I said squeeze, nephew, not exterminate. Don't waste the population, merely drive them into utter submission. You must be the carnivore, my boy" (Herbert, 239-240). The language of Herbert's novel clearly figures this oppression as violence. By instructing Rabban to "be the carnivore," the Baron is likening the tight fisted management of a planet — "I have only one requirement...income" — to an act of physical violence and consumption (237).

The Atreides family also demonstrates violence expressed through political control, albeit more subtly than do the Harkonnens. The actions of Thufir Hawat provide excellent examples of the violence endemic to politics in Dune. Jessica comments that "Where Thufir Hawat goes, death and deceit follow" (63). In response to the suggestion that she is maligning the assassin's character, she responds: "Malign? I praise him. Death and deceit are our only hopes now. I just do not fool myself about Thufir's methods" (63). Such a frank assessment of the system of
rest of the Empire, violence plays an absolutely essential role in all of the politics of the novel.

The intimate relationship between political power and violence in Herbert's is supported by recent work in political science, which suggests that violence is essential to any form of political control. Gyanendra Pandey, for instance, writes about what he calls "routine violence," a form of violence which is found in all governments. According to Pandey, the realms of government and violence have a complex relationship; "The state," he writes, "creates history, the subject matter and the prose of history. Everything that lies outside the state belongs to prehistory, and (I am suggesting) to the order of violence" (Pandey, 2). What he is suggesting is not that governments are incapable of committing acts of violence, but rather that when they do enact violence, their control over historical vocabulary allows them to define it otherwise.

The redefinition of violence by the government is visible in the fight between Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen and a slave gladiator in *Dune*. Prior to the fight, Caut Fenring, in attendance, downplays the violent spectacle of the event, instead remarking to the Baron Harkonnen that "The emperor wishes me to report on whether you've chosen a worthy successor. There's nothing like the arena to expose the true person from beneath the mask, eh?" (Herbert, 330). The ritual of the fight similarly evokes the idea that the combat has some significance which elevates it above violence. In dedicating the fight, Feyd-Rautha refers to it as a "truth," demonstrating the ability of the government to shape apparent meaning through vocabulary (331). The use of careful diction to mediate the definition of violence is also practiced by the Atreides; after Paul is nearly assassinated soon after moving to Arrakis, one of the house guards reports the death of the perpetrator: "We messed him up catching him. He died" (74). Rather than report that the man was killed, the guard is careful to attribute nothing worse than "[messing] him up" to the Atreides retainers, and figures the death as something that merely 'happened.' This purposeful use of
control the Atreides must employ in governing Arrakis corroborates the idea that violence is present in all politics. In an Atreides war council, Hawat reports casually that he has "eliminated two hundred and fifty-nine of their [Harkonnen] key people" (90). After the Duke tells him to conceal the murders within the imperial legal system, Hawat commends him, saying that such trickery is "a move worthy of your grandsire, my lord" (91). The capacity of the law to accommodate upwards of two hundred and fifty political murders and the approval for such a gambit demonstrate a political system which not only accepts but is built around violence. Such a system is not a product of the Harkonnens only, but permeates the imperial culture that Herbert imagines.

While violence is clearly an unavoidable aspect of Dune's politics, the converse also holds true. Political implications are completely inseparable from violence in the novel. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the individual knife fights which appear throughout the work. Issues of succession and dominance arise throughout the novel, and the outcome is not always obvious. The ambiguity about the Baron Harkonnen's heir is partially resolved by Feyd-Rautha’s arena combat, as the Count Fenring suggests. The station of Paul and Jessica among the Fremen, and the issue of whether or not they will be admitted, is determined by Paul’s combat with Jamis. These two instances of knife fights anticipate the novel’s final scene, the duel between Paul and Feyd-Rautha. This fight is the most overtly political of all. Both men can make a legitimate claim to the imperial throne, and the fruit of their ambitions will be determined by their fight. After defeating Feyd-Rautha, Paul says “Majesty, your force is reduced by one more. Shall we now shed sham and pretense? Shall we now discuss what must be? Your daughter wed to me and the way opened for an Atreides to sit on the throne” (486). The flatness of Paul’s request, almost an order, is facilitated by his victory, the outcome of the fight determining the necessary political
consequences. The way in which Herbert frames these moments of combat in his narrative clearly mark them as momentous political decisions; the simple fact that such decisions are made based on physical violence is a telling one. Herbert's novel is strikingly blunt in its insistence that violence is inseparable from politics.

Part of the link is based on the fact that in Herbert's world, the political leaders are the most skilled in individual combat; among the Fremen, for instance, the leader of a tribe is determined exclusively by duel. The leader remains the leader until he is defeated. Physical violence is a reality of life for members of the Great Houses in the novel as well. Hawat and Paul have a light-hearted exchange in which the young man makes light of his instructor's constant reminders not to sit with his back to a door (28). Hidden beneath this banter, however, is an awareness of the necessity of such precautions; violence can reach out to anyone at any time in *Dune*. Paul is among the finest fighters in Herbert's galaxy, a quality which is crucial in his education. Gurney Halleck, his weapons trainer, remarks that "the Duke'd punish me only if I failed to make a first-class fighting man out of you" (36). He finds his toughest test in his Harkonnen counterpart Feyd-Rautha, also groomed for a throne and exquisitely trained in fighting. Baron Harkonnen's statement that his nephew must rule as a "predator" expands the concept of what an effective ruler is. The ability to enact violence, be it immediate killing with a knife or brutal oppression writ large, is figured as a necessity for those with aspirations to power in *Dune*. This connection is continually highlighted by the language used to talk about political schemes. In explaining the process of taking over the fief of Arrakis to Paul, the Duke Atreides says that "This is like single combat, Son, only on a larger scale – a feint within a feint within a feint..." (43).

The language of the passages in which violence takes its strongest position of primacy,
these knife fights, functions in a way that undermines the basic fact of physical violence. Rather than lurid accounts with rich descriptions of blood and confusion, the language of the fights retains the same measured quality that characterizes Herbert’s prose. The third person narration privileges the reader to the mental processes of whatever fighter is being focused on (always the eventual victor); there is very little suggestion that the fighters ever lose control of their emotion or intellect. It is a departure from the norm when, during his fight with the gladiator, Feyd-Rautha “[feels] a moment of desperation” (335). For much of that fight in the arena, he is more concerned with the spectacle he is providing than with the outcome of the fight: “I’ll give them a show such as they’ve never had before, Feyd-Rautha thought….When I’m Baron they’ll remember this day and won’t be a one of them can escape fear of me because of this day” (334).

The description of Paul’s fight with Jamis is similarly broken up by Paul’s thoughts. He spends the fight thinking about lessons he received from his teachers, analyzing his opponent rather than getting caught up in the "hot blood of a knife fight" (303, 303-305). Perhaps the best example of this self-possession in a fight comes in the battle between Paul and Feyd-Rautha. Superficially wounded by the latter, Paul is able to “[realign] his own metabolism” to neutralize a soporific introduced into his blood (485). He cerebrally diagnoses the other trick Feyd-Rautha had prepared, a secret needle in his garment (484). These examples of coolness in the heat of battle match the tone with which the fights are presented. The register is one of analysis and carefully considered action, a tone which might seem out of place in a knife fight. The effect of such a tone is to remind that reader that the fights are more than simple violence, that they are inextricably linked to the carefully analytical politics of the novel.

That the politics of Dune are irreducibly – perhaps also irredeemably – violent is a telling observation; one can read the violence inherent in the politics of Herbert’s world as a comment
on the politics of the 1960's. The strong connections between Fanon's theory and the Fremen
culture are strongly suggestive of colonial energy influencing the political structures of *Dune*. All
of these connections and observations fit together to insinuate that the novel is a piece of political
commentary, but they do not bring one much closer to understanding what, if anything, *Dune*
actually has to say about real world politics. One can draw a basic conclusion about the text's
position on violence in politics from the characterization of the Harkonnens; as the group that
most readily espouses the use of force for political ends, their repulsive depiction makes the use
of political violence appear unappealing, to say the least. To confuse the issue, however, the
Atreides family, while they do not relish it in the same way, also use violence as an essential tool
of statecraft. Hawat's corps spends its time on Arrakis before war breaks out eliminating
Harkonnen agents. Violence is such an acknowledged fact of political life that the Duke Atreides
is able to make light of it: "Well, gentleman, our civilization appears to've fallen so deeply into
the habit of invasion that we cannot even obey a simple order of the Imperium without the old
ways cropping up" (84). Were the incorporation of violence into politics a trait particular to
some segment of the groups in *Dune*, it would be simpler to understand the perspective of the
text on the issue of political violence. The universality of their connection, however, suggests a
level of ambivalence; there is no comparison set up between a 'good' way to practice politics and
a 'bad' one. All the factions, be they Atreides, Corrino (the Great House of the emperor), or
Fremen employ significant violence in their politics.

An ambivalent view of decolonization, as well as of violence, can be distilled from
Herbert's work. The successful movement of Kynes and Paul from the city to the desert suggests
an optimistic flexibility in the way Herbert imagines the colonial relationship. A more
appropriate conclusion may be that Herbert imagines the *possibility* of such flexibility. To read
his text as an optimistic comment on colonialism, however, would be to overlook the complexities of post-decolonization, problems of which both Fanon and Herbert are very much aware. Fanon writes in *Wretched of the Earth* that “there is not one colonized subject who at least once a day does not dream of taking the place of the colonist” (Fanon, 5). Such a process is not followed to its conclusion in *Dune* itself, but its sequel *Dune Messiah* shows the aftereffects of the Fremen and Paul overthrowing the Empire. In a bitter moment of reflection, Paul compares himself and his empire to Genghis Khan and Hitler, saying “We’ll be a hundred generations recovering from Muad’Dib’s Jihad. I find it hard to imagine that anyone will ever surpass this” (Herbert, 135-136). The absolute reversal of roles that Herbert’s novels execute – taking Paul and the Fremen from being oppressed to a position of oppressive power – puts cruelly ironic meaning into Fanon’s psychological statement. The colonized subject has indeed taken the place of the colonist, far outstripping what was done before him. To say that the text is unsympathetic to Paul and his position is untrue; the role reversal simply demonstrates a textual awareness of the complexities of every situation. The tragic result of the decolonization narrated in *Dune* does not negate the optimism present in the flexible description of the colonizer-colonized relationship, but rather demonstrates the immeasurable complexity of politics. If there is one conclusion that can be confidently drawn from Herbert’s work, it is the certainty of change and uncertainty. As Paul and Stilgar eventually agree, “Ways change.”
Works Cited


