

Dionysus *Lyseus* Reborn:
The Revolutionary Philosophy Chorus

ABSTRACT:

Having elsewhere connected Walter Otto's interpretation of Dionysus as a politically progressive deity to Huey P. Newton's vision for the Black Panthers, I here expand this inquiry to a line of Otto-inspired scholarship. First, Alain Daniélou identifies Dionysus and Shiva as the dancing god of a democratic/decolonizing cult oppressed by tyrannical patriarchies. Arthur Evans sharpens this critique of sexism and heteronormativity, concluding that, as Dionysus' chorus is to Greek tragedy, so Socrates' circle is to Western philosophy. I thus call for the creation of hybrid Dionysian-Socratic revolutionary philosophical chorus, modeled on Dionysus *Lyseus* (from -*lysis*), wielding philosophical *analysis* to loosen injustice's bonds, as a vanguard of social justice. I find a handbook for this chorus' creation in Euripides' *Bacchae*, whose Dionysus is an ally of immigrant women, overthrower of Theban patriarchy, and international revolutionary. Finally, I offer a contemporary example of a such a chorus, namely the Birmingham Philosophy Guild.

KEYWORDS: Dionysus; Shiva; Euripides; feminism; democracy; decolonizing; social justice

In a previous article, I have explored how the most important Dionysus scholar since Nietzsche, Walter Otto, recovers a more politically-progressive vision of the god, a vision reflected in Huey P. Newton's Nietzschean-overcoming social justice vision for the Black Panthers.ⁱ More specifically, this Otto-Newtonian Dionysus is an androgynous figure who embraces the strength of femininity in both himself and his principal allies, mortal and immortal female dancing hunters. In short, this Dionysus is an aqueous-androgynous soul-hunter, like his closet animal familiar, the dancingly-graceful panther.

In the present article, I expand this inquiry, by tracing a line of scholarship inspired by Otto back to its wellspring in Euripides' tragedy about Dionysus, *The Bacchae*.ⁱⁱ To Otto's Nietzsche-overcoming recognition of Dionysus' androgyny and proto-feminism, this Otto-inspired line of scholarship restores Dionysus' democratic advocacy for women, queer people, the enslaved, the poor, as well as national and ethno-racial others.ⁱⁱⁱ My first section considers two representative scholars from this tradition, Alain Daniélou and Arthur Evans.

I. Dionysus as Queer Brown Dance Lord (Daniélou and Evans)

It is central to Daniélou's and Evans' interpretations of Dionysus that he descends prehistorically from ecstatic cults among the Dravidian people of southern India, which later developed into the Shivaism cult of Hinduism and the official religion of ancient Minoan Crete. Moreover, in both ancient Crete and India, these scholars argue, queer sexualities and gender identities and expression were more affirmed, and even celebrated as integral to their religion. In this way, in addition to Otto's attribution to Dionysus of androgyny and proto-feminism, Daniélou and Evans add a further identification of the god with brown and queer people. Thus, Dionysus emerges from their interpretations as an even more appropriate and empowering model for present-day advocates of social justice, including my proposed revolutionary philosophy chorus.

Beginning with Daniélou, he claims that Euripides' vision of Dionysus is derived from "the joyful and peaceable Cretan civilization and religion," and is strictly parallel to the vision of Shivaism, a form of Hinduism for which Shiva is the central deity (Daniélou 1992, 8). These parallels did not escape the Greeks, who "explained the similarities in the cults of Shiva and Dionysus by a journey of Dionysus to India" (38). More specifically, as Dionysus scholar Richard Seaford notes, they claimed he had "conquered India," which inspired Alexander the Great and other imperialist rulers to identify with Dionysus (Seaford 1993, 37).

I will now briefly indicate these parallels, on the strength of which Daniélou argues the two gods are identical. First, like Dionysus, "Shiva is also called Shringin (sic), the horned one, and wears a serpent necklace" (Daniélou 1992, 40). Second, both gods transgress repressive norms of gender and sexuality (40). Third, in both gods' cults, "erotic ecstasy is not a means of reproduction, but merely a seeking after pleasure" (57).^{iv} Fourth, both gods are "essentially

bisexual,” “androgynous” and transgender (63, 64).^v Finally, both gods are known as “Lord of the Dance” (Daniélou 1992, 199; Evans 1988, 56).^{vi}

Given the centrality of dance to my own project, I will now give two examples from Daniélou’s sustained consideration of this aspect. First, in an Indian context, he writes that “The Prime Cause may be conceived as a harmonic and rhythmic principle, symbolized by the beat of drums and the movements of dance” (Daniélou 1992, 199). For this reason, Daniélou adds, it is not said that Shiva “creates” the world, but more precisely that he “*dances*” the world (199, emphasis added). And in this creating dance, “the cosmic universe is his theatre” (199). Similarly, in a Greek context, dance was so important that “the theatre was considered a means of spreading the gospel of” Dionysus (Daniélou 1992, 204). The dancing actors “often appear as propagandists of the Dionysus cult,” forming “a class apart, of a semi-sacerdotal nature, on the fringe of society,” whose “cult-centre was a place under the open sky, called ‘the dance floor’” (Daniélou 1992, 205).

To emphasize this centrality of dance, and Daniélou’s identification of Dionysus and Shiva (and for simplicity’s sake), I will hereafter refer to the two gods interchangeably as “the dancing god.” This god, according to Daniélou, is “a god of vegetation, of trees and of the vine,” as well as “an animal god, a bull-god”; and his cult is “essentially a nature religion” (Daniélou 1992, 15). His allies “are called *bacchoi* (bacchants) in Greece and *bhaktas* (participants) in India,” and his enemies are the “anti-Dionysiac beliefs” that “are always at the basis of nomadic religions, whether Aryan, Hebrew, or Arab” (15, 16, 14).^{vii}

These religions accuse the dancing god, Daniélou claims, “of teaching the secrets of wisdom to the humble, and of being accompanied by bands of youthful delinquents who mock the institutions of society and the rule of old men” (Daniélou 1992, 16). Additionally, since

“persecution of sexuality,” for Daniélou, “is a characteristic technique of all patriarchal, political or religious tyrannies,” at each historical reappearance “the cult of Shiva or of Dionysus has been banished from the city” (17). No matter how severe the repression, however, Daniélou insists that this cult “remains essentially a religion of the people” (18). For a concrete historical example, Seaford notes that the “courtesan Phryne was prosecuted for forming thiasoi of men and women and introducing a new god called *Isodaites*, a name which means something like ‘Equal divider in the feast’ and reappears much later as a title of Dionysus” (Seaford 1993, 36). Thus, the dancing god is well-situated to advocate for the environment, queer people, the poor, and women, which makes him an even better fit for the social justice advocacy of my revolutionary philosophy chorus.

Turning to the dancing god’s prehistorical origins, Daniélou locates them among the Dravidians, a Neolithic Age people who “had brown skin, straight hair, and spoke an agglutinative language,” and whose descendants are “the population of Southern India” (Daniélou 1992, 20, 21). In his four-part typology of religions, Daniélou labels the Dravidian religion “animistic,” a type that “is opposed to the appropriation of land, to property, and to agriculture” (26). According to animistic religion, Daniélou elaborates, “life is a perpetual ritual,” hunting “is the basis for survival,” and “the cruelty of the gods and spirits require sacrifice” (26). Thus, the dancing god is also well-positioned to advocate for brown, indigenous, and tribal peoples, who should be (whenever possible) direct participants in the revolutionary philosophy chorus, which should (in any event) advocate on their behalf.

The influence of Daniélou is palpable on Richard Evans, whose *The God of Ecstasy: Sex Roles and the Madness of Dionysus*, sharpens Dionysus’ critique of sexism and heteronormativity. I begin with Evans’ analysis of Euripides, which concludes (citing Claire

Nancy) that “Pentheus’ misogyny is the underlying destructiveness at work in the play” (Evans 1988, 11). In this way, Euripides was justifiably critiquing the extreme sexism of ancient Athens, which Evans proceeds to outline in helpful detail. First, Evans notes that “A husband had the power to determine in his will who his wife’s next husband would be in case he should die,” since “the Athenian wife was considered as part of the patriarchal estate, or rather as a conduit for its transmission to a legitimate male heir” (16). Second, “If a married woman was raped, the act was viewed as an offence against the prerogatives of her husband and as a spoiling of his property” (16). Third, “Husbands were legally compelled to divorce wives who were raped, and the penalty for the rapist was only a monetary fine” (16). Fourth, wives “generally were not permitted to dine with their husbands” (17). And finally, “Athenian men also avoided the public mention of women by their own names” (17). Against this disturbing background, women’s freedom and empowerment through Dionysus is even more striking.^{viii}

This sexism has also, Evans notes, undermined modern interpretations of Euripides. For example, most assume that the titular *Bacchae* refers exclusively to the mad Theban women, unaware that the dancing chorus of “Asian” women is a separate, and sane, group (Evans 1988, 8). In the words Euripides gives to Dionysus, the latter are “my sacred band of women” (Euripides 1999, l. 55). More precisely, these two groups of women correspond to the two “faces” of Dionysus, *Bakhos* (maddener) and *Lyseus* (liberator), respectively.^{ix} That is, the European women are mad from repression, while the Asian women have been freed by their initiation into Dionysus’ mysteries. To remain mindful of this crucial distinction, I will refer hereafter to the maddened women as “maenads” (from *mainesthai*, “to rave”) and the liberated women as *bacchantes* (from *bacca*, vine-fruit).^x In short, one can either free oneself by

embracing ecstasy, or go crazy by rejecting it (as, pace Evans, these modern commentators have done by assuming every female worshipper of Dionysus is insane).

This alleged insanity, projected onto the bacchantes by these male Dionysus scholars, appears to the latter as contagious, since that madness also infects Dionysus, the god who dares to liberate women. Perhaps as a punishment for his transgressions against “proper” masculinity, Dionysus is often slandered as unmanly in ancient Greece. For example, Evans notes that in the Greek comedies of Euripides’ era, Dionysus “is often mocked for being effeminate” (Evans 1988, 21). Moreover, even when he is represented as conventionally masculine, (specifically as a bearded adult), his attire undermines that masculinity. “The most typical article of clothing long associated with Dionysus,” Evans relates, “was a drape of fawnskin, which in antiquity was also linked with women, since men usually wore the skin of a panther” (22). Also, “the traditional costume of Dionysus on the stage—a fixed style of garment of great antiquity—was a long, saffron-colored dress” (21).^{xi} Finally on this theme, Evans notes that Dionysus was “viewed by the Greeks” as “pansexual” (36).

Turning to Dionysus’ historical origins, Evans fleshes out Daniélou’s claim that “many elements characteristic of Shivaism” are found in Cretan culture, including “the young god, the Goddess of the Mountain, the bull and the Minotaur, the snake, the horns, the lion, the he-goat, the sacred tree and the phallic pillar, the bull sacrifice and the ecstatic dance of the Korybantes” (Daniélou 1992, 35-36). Evans begins his own narrative in 2000-1600 BCE, when (a) women in Crete “routinely appear in positions of leadership,” (b) the “chief deities appear to have been female,” (c) “the labyris (the double-bladed ax that was a principal symbol of authority) is never shown in the hands of a male god,” and (d) the “oft-recurring image of the labyrinth (or maze) suggests a religion based on earth deities” (Evans 1988, 40).

As these points suggest, Evans sharpens Daniélou's critique of sexism through his depiction of Dionysus' relationship to female deities. Whereas in Daniélou's narrative, female deities are derived from a male or agender primordial essence, Evans emphasizes the marginalized importance in Crete of Dionysus' mother, and thereby of women and femininity generally. For example, Evans claims that Semele, Dionysus' allegedly human mother, was "an import from the religion of Asia Minor (Western Turkey), whose inhabitants had long worshipped her as a great goddess, Mother Earth" (Evans 1988, 63).^{xii} Cretan religion in general, Evans claims, derived from the religion of Asia Minor, which "centered on a divine pair: the ecstatic son and his holy mother" (65). Evans elaborates on this point as follows: "The leading priests of this religion in its earliest period were women, and the rituals were often sexual in nature, including homosexual activity"; however, with "the subsequent rise of male power, the influence of the *potnia meter*, the great-mother goddess, was eclipsed" (67). More precisely, by 1600 BCE, "waves of nomadic invaders speaking Greek appeared from the north," conquering the Minoans and forming "a hybrid civilization called the Mycenaean" (40).

Shifting geographically therefore, from Crete to Athens, Evans notes that the nineteenth-century's discovery of inscriptions from the Mycenaean era "created quite a sensation" by showing "that Dionysos is as old as any of the Greek gods, including Zeus" (Evans 1988, 41, 42). More specifically, Evans claims that Dionysus, through his association with the bull, may be identical to both Zeus and the Minotaur (43, 46). In support of this claim, Evans observes that Dionysus' mother, Semele, "was related to King Minos of Crete" (47). Further supporting this position, Evans adds that the double-ax, which was also referred to as the "bull-slammer" (*bouplex*), (a) was the ritual weapon for sacrificing the bull in ancient Crete, (b) "frequently appears as a symbol of religious power in Cretan paintings, often between the horns of the bull's

head,” and (c) was often associated with Dionysus, who was sometimes “called by the name ‘Double-Ax’” (47, 49). In this animal form, finally, Evans notes that Dionysus “flew in the face of the major religious trend of his time,” since most “of the Greek gods has long since ceased to be worshipped in any animal form” (49).

This connection to animality, and thereby to systematic corporeal oppression (which nonhuman species continue to experience in the Western world), also connects Dionysus to the most oppressed humans in ancient society, namely “slaves who performed the actual labor on [the citizens’] farms” (Evans 1988, 50). In part for this reason, Evans notes, Dionysus’ cult “became enormously popular among slaves and women, who in fact constituted the majority of the Athenian population” (52). In support of this claim, Seaford notes that, during the Anthesteria (the annual festival of spring renewal), “not even slaves or children were excluded from the wine-drinking,” and “prisoners were released from goal” (Seaford 1993, 18, 29). Furthermore, another major Dionysus festival “contained the proclamation – probably throughout the fifth century – of a reward for killing tyrants” (97).

Relatedly, and of central importance for the present investigation, Evans reinterprets Socrates and his entourage as Dionysus and his chorus of dancing satyrs. In Evans’ words, “for Sokrates, philosophy meant critical thinking in the context of intimate personal dialogue and sexual attraction within a circle of same-sex friends” (Evans 1988, 105). As such, “Sokrates’ circle was probably a continuation and modification within classical times of the ancient religio-homosexual circle of archaic Greece” (105). In short, “his circle was to Western philosophy what the cult of Dionysus was to Western theater” (105). Evans’ implication seems to be that Socrates’ circle constitutes both the historical origin and the founding spirit of Western philosophy, which unfolds and elaborates itself on that model.

In support of this vision, Seaford notes at least five connections between Dionysus and the Socrates that one encounter in Plato. First, Dionysus is connected to liberation in both this life and the next, as is Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* (Seaford 1993, 76). Second, Dionysus is strongly associated with caves, like Socrates and the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic* (82). Third, Plato describes the Dionysian initiate "becoming a member of the mythical thiasos – a nymph, maenad, or satyr (e.g. Plato *Laws* 815) – for all eternity" (83). Fourth, Euripides describes Dionysus' madness as a "flutter," and Plato uses the same word to describe how the psyche "at death *flutters* painfully around the body because unwilling to leave it" (107, emphasis added). Finally, Plato makes an analogy between (a) Dionysus' "transition from anxiety to joy" (during his death and rebirth) and (b) the soul's "transition from mental fragmentation to mental wholeness" (114).

For my part, I wish to reinterpret this analogy as suggesting that Socrates' and Dionysus' circles embody—not an undeveloped germ that later reached fruition in the perfected forms of tragedy and Western philosophy—but instead an initial perfection of which the later institutions constitute decadent descendants. Put in the terms of Black Panther cofounder Huey P. Newton, who appears to share my view, the Socratic and Dionysian circles are the "vanguard" of philosophy and theater, respectively. My conclusion is that this vanguard should be revived today, hybridizing the Socratic and the Dionysian, restoring the transgressive and politically-disruptive beautiful power of the charismatic chorus, so that academic philosophers can be more effective in promoting social justice for all the groups Daniélou and Evans link to Dionysus. For the details of this hybridizing revival, I now turn to Euripides' tragic poem, *The Bacchae*.

II. Dionysus as Democratic Feminist Revolutionary (Euripides)

Before turning directly to Euripides' poem, I begin with Paul Woodruff's "Introduction" to his 1999 translation. On a biographical note, he writes that Euripides "was mocked even in maturity as a brash innovator and a threat to tradition" (Euripides 1999, xvii). More specifically, Woodruff observes that "Women's issues loom large in many of Euripides' plays, as he gives expression both to the fears that men have of women's power and the anguish of women at their lack of freedom" (xviii-xix). Given this liberating compartment, Euripides choice of Dionysus as subject was fitting, since according to Woodruff "the cult of Dionysus is egalitarian and therefore especially appropriate for a democracy" (xix). Euripides' Dionysus is therefore *prima facie* an ideal figure for the revolutionary philosophy chorus, whose social justice focus is closer to groups demanding more democratic practices (and fewer classical republican practices, such as the electoral college in the U.S.).

In support of this claim regarding Dionysus' egalitarian and democratic aspects, Seaford notes that Dionysus had the power, Seaford writes, "to bring people together in the promotion of *peace*" (Seaford 1993, 29). The peace in question was apparently reserved exclusively for domestic democratic affairs, however, because Dionysus was also associated with the violent overthrow of tyranny. In the city of Eretria, according to Seaford, Dionysus' "cult was deployed to celebrate the liberation of the city, and at Athens (294 BC) the liberator Demetrius was associated with Dionysus" (29). The god's anti-tyrannical violence also extended to aggressive warfare, when justified (or rationalized) by the overthrow of a foreign tyrant. For example, Seaford observes that Dionysus is described as "having fought with the gods against the giants" (37). This affirmation of militant violence is why Euripides' Dionysus aligns closer to social justice advocacy (and thus the revolutionary philosophy chorus) than to traditional justice advocacy, as the latter is closer to the political center and less open to deploying extralegal force.

This anti-tyrannical, pro-democratic aspect of Dionysus, Woodruff writes, is one reason why Thebes served as the “setting of many tragic plays” (Euripides 1999, xxiii). That is, Thebes “was never friendly to democracy,” Woodruff explains, “and it may have given the Athenians special pleasure to enact the violent arrival of their democratic god at the doorstep of a monarch” (xxiii).^{xiii} For Euripides’ part, Woodruff notes that the poet’s “contemporaries noticed the emphasis that he gives to ordinary people in preference to well-born heroes,” which indicates more democratic than tyrannical sympathies (xix). In short, Woodruff concludes, “we find hostility to tyranny in a number of plays” by Euripides, who “seems supportive of both democracy and the law” (xix).

This point deserves elaboration, since Euripides’ identification of Dionysus, democracy and the law may strike some readers as counterintuitive. More specifically, particularly after Nietzsche, Westerners tend to associate the Dionysian with anarchy and chaos (and to associate the Apollonian with tyranny and legal order). One important difference between a contemporary European context and that of Euripides, Woodruff suggests, is that “the Greek language at his period did not yet distinguish between written law and social custom; one word, *nomos*, serves for both” (Euripides 1999, xx). Replacing *nomos* with “norms” (its English cognate), one could paraphrase Woodruff’s point as follows: Dionysian and democratic norms are no less feasible than Apollonian and tyrannical norms. The question, though, for both Euripides and the revolutionary philosophy chorus today, is as follows: how can Dionysian norms be cultivated sustainably in the context of patriarchal tyrannical oppression?

Moving to Woodruff’s discussion of the *Bacchae* as an example of ancient Greek tragedy, he notes that the acting-dancing chorus members were all male, “wearing masks” for each different character—a gender-bending in poetic form that foreshadows the play’s gender-

bending content (Euripides 1999, xxii). The chorus in *The Bacchae* also transgressed racial lines, insofar as they are supposed to be “women from Asia,” and thus “foreign to Thebes and to Greece” (xxv). “The kind word for this status,” Woodruff elaborates, “is *xenia* (guests, strangers), but they are also called *barbaroi* (foreigners)” (xxv-xxvi). The latter term is an example of onomatopoeia, literally meaning “blah blah,” suggesting that Greeks experienced anyone not speaking Greek as a subhuman making inarticulate animal sounds. As champion of these foreign women, Euripides’ Dionysus is nemesis of nativist hostility to the Other. This suggests that the revolutionary philosophy chorus today should be willing and able to engage in transgressive embodied expression, and to recruit a demographically diverse membership, particularly international and nonwhite people.

Turning to Euripides’ text proper, the character of Dionysus, grandson of the King of Thebes, declares two reasons for returning home from abroad (in modern-day Turkey). First, “so that mortals would see me clearly as divine”; and second, to use said manifestation to defend his mother’s honor (Euripides 1999, ll. 22-23). “They said,” Dionysus claims of the Thebans, that his mother “Semélê was seduced by some man or other and put the blame on Zeus...and Zeus killed her—they yawped everywhere—because she pretended to be his wife” (ll. 28-32). It is for this reason, Dionysus continues, that “I have stung these women into madness, goaded them outdoors, made them live in the mountain, struck them out of their wits, forced them to wear my cult’s panoply” (ll. 33-35). In other words, for the honor of one woman, Dionysus strikes with madness all the women who dishonored her. Note this willingness on the god’s part to defy the majority and drive them to madness (as opposed to being conciliatory and using only rational persuasion). Applied to the revolutionary philosophy chorus, certain speech acts, including the hate speech of members of the alt-right, warrant a combative response.

In the subsequent song of the foreign female dancers, Dionysus' naturalness and animality come to the fore. Starting with the song's "Chorus," it hails him as the "Thunderer" (in Greek, *Bromius*) (Euripides 1999, l. 66). The implication here, though I found only one hint of it in the secondary literature, is that Dionysus consists of the fire-born effects of Zeus-as-lightning (as in the expression, "one is the child of one's actions").^{xiv} Evidence for this interpretation includes Dionysus' epithet, "Pyrigenes (Fire-born)," Euripides' reference to Zeus' lightning as "sacred fire, linking heaven and earth" (thus making Dionysus its burning), and the 7th-century BCE Greek poet Archilochus' claim "to know how to sing – his mind 'thunderbolted with wine' – the song of Dionysos, the dithyramb" (Daniélou 1992, 50; Euripides 1999, l. 1082-83; and fragment 120, quoted in Seaford 1993, 16). More precisely, Dionysus is (a) thunder (thus *Bromius*), (b) the fire started when lightning strikes a wooden object, and perhaps also (c) fermentation, on the understanding that lightning strikes grant to pre-fermented substances their figuratively fiery qualities (such as burning, intoxication, and carbonation).^{xv} In sum, Dionysus manifests nature's most powerful, beautiful, joyful, and destructive forces, which the revolutionary philosophy chorus should also manifest.

Deeper into the foreign female dancers' song, in a section titled "Antistrophe 1," they refer to Dionysus' "bull's horns," and to his Shiva-like "snake crown," in honor of which crown "the Maenads weave predator serpents" (Euripides 1999, ll. 101-102, 104).^{xvi} In this way, to the song's identification of Dionysus with the elemental force of lightning, this section adds a second identification of him with the animal force of predation. In a third Dionysus identification, "Strophe 2" refers to plant life, urging the play's audience to "Join the Bacchae, celebrate / with boughs of oak and fir" (ll. 109-110). In a fourth identification, the "Epode" associates Dionysus with nature's potentially-intoxicating substances, claiming he is present

when “milk” flows (in fermented form), along with “the nectar of bees” (as in mead, which is made from honey), while “the ground flows wine” (ll. 142-143).

Finally, the song concludes with Dionysus’ “flaming torch,” which is an aptly Dionysian full-circle, because a torch is literally a burning branch, which occurs naturally as the result of Zeus’ lightning striking a tree (Euripides 1999, l. 145). In other words, the branch-torch’s burning is its figurative “intoxication,” since burning is arguably the closest thing to drunkenness that a tree can experience. For one thing, in both tree and human varieties, the phenomena resulting from this figurative intoxication range from beautiful to useful to deadly. More precisely, one can burn to any degree, from minimally (in beautiful spectacles), to moderately (in fuel for machines), to completely (in death).

Importantly for the purposes of the present investigation, moreover, this figurative intoxication can also be applied to the rest of the phenomena traditionally associated with Dionysus. Beginning with Dionysus’ animal familiars, they are all species to which one often attributes a figurative “fire in their veins,” associating them with fiery energy and destructive power. Examples of this figurative fire include the poison of the fluid-sinuous serpent, the literal fire of the godlike dragon, the bloodlust of the graceful panther, and the raging libido of the bull, each of which symbolizes both the power within the animal’s self, and also the power to kill others. Secondly, Dionysus’ human allies are primarily mortal and immortal dancer-huntresses, including Ariadne, Artemis, and the bacchantes and maenads. The latter, in particular, are closely associated with intoxicated ecstasy (from the figuratively “lightning-infused” phenomena of alcohol, dance and sex). Thirdly, Dionysus’ geographical domains, including the ocean, the mythical Mount Nysa, and the underworld ruled by Hades and Persephone, are fluidly structured, which makes these domains capable of either peace, or else a figuratively-intoxicated state of

beautiful destructive power. More precisely, the respective substrates of these three domains (ocean, Mt. Nysa, and the underworld) are water, fantasy, and memory, and they can exist in the states of either (1) a calm or stormy sea, (2) an empty or overpopulated imagination, and a (3) contented or tormented afterlife.

Thinking together Dionysus' allied elemental forces, animals, humans, and domains, one shared dimension of their figurative intoxication emerges, namely the activity of dance. To elaborate, lightning dances through the sky, flames dance on the torch, carbonation dances in the wine, the snake and panther dance over land, waves and storms dance in the sea, Mount Nysa's nymphs dance in its streams, shades dance through the underworld, and Ariadne and the bacchantes' defining activity is dance.^{xvii} Dance's power in this regard can be observed in many animal species, and has always been emphasized in the testimony of its human participants. It is precisely for this reason that the revolutionary philosophy group must be a chorus: because nothing less than the beautifully-ecstatic and intoxicating literal and figurative dances of its participants can sustain social justice.^{xviii}

As "participant" is also the literal meaning of the word *Bacchae*, this point restores us naturally to the flow and content of Euripides' poem. After the abovementioned foreign female dancers' song, "Scene One" begins with two old men, King Cadmus of Thebes and the famously transgender prophet Tiresias. Preparing to join the women of the city in dance, they express an intense desire to "wear fawnskins" (which, as noted above, was a traditional women's garment in Ancient Greece), and to "wreath our head in fresh ivy" (the plant most closely associated with Dionysus, after the grapevine) (Euripides 1999, l. 177). "Isn't it delightful," King Cadmus exults, "to forget how old we are?" (l. 177). It turns out, though, that the two men are alone in this intention—"The only ones in our right minds," as Tiresias describes the king and himself—but

“The rest are mad” (l. 196). This is the heart of Euripides’ poetic handbook: in a community as unjust as tyrannical Thebes, the true (pejorative) madness is to go along with that community’s unjust norms, and the true sanity is defiance thereof. For this reason, the revolutionary philosophy chorus should be willing to embrace the majority’s slandering of them as “mad.”

In the case of the maenads, this defiance prompts the poem’s villain, the crown prince Pentheus (whose name means “grief”) to fear what he terms “a revolution” (Euripides 1999, ll. 367, 216). He accuses his city’s women of “pretending / to be Bacchant,” even though Euripides’ audience has just heard (and from Dionysus, no less) that the Theban women’s madness is genuine (ll. 218-219). More precisely, the maenads’ madness is Dionysus punishment for precisely the kind of behavior of which Pentheus provides the most extreme example (which thus foreshadows his being murdered by his maenad mother). From the prince’s paranoid perspective, however, the maenads are entirely sane, and motivated by the conscious desire “to sleep with men” (who are not their husbands) (l. 223). In other words, Pentheus’ madness is to fear the liberated sexual desire of the women of his society, whose temporary release he imagines would spark a revolution that would ultimately end his patriarchal regime. In a striking example of anxiety as self-fulfilling prophecy, it is Pentheus’ own unjust imagining, and the brutal crackdown it motivates him to instigate, that dooms him and his city. This irrational and self-fulfilling imagination, the true enemy of Dionysus and his chorus, is also the archnemesis of the revolutionary philosophy chorus. As Dr. King taught, it is not unjust people, who are mere vehicles of injustice, but unjust imagining that must be defeated, wherever it appears.

Taking the first step toward his tragic downfall, Pentheus imprisons all the maenad women. “Those I’ve captured,” he perversely boasts, “are chained by the hand, / and they are under guard in public jail. / As for the ones who got away, I’ll hunt them,” and “catch them all in

iron cages (Euripides 1999, ll. 226-228, 231). As wrong as Pentheus is about the maenads, he is even more wrong about Dionysus, as revealed by the following speech:

I hear there's a foreigner come to town,
 a wizard with magic spells from Lydia, who has
 long blond curls—perfumed!—upon his head,
 and the bloom of wine, the grace of Aphrodite,
 on his cheeks. Day and night he plays around
 with young girls, showing off his “*VoHē*”

mysteries. Just let me get him in this house! (Euripides 1999, ll. 233-239).^{xix}

There are several important details to note here. First, Pentheus is clearly xenophobic, irrationally fearing the foreign as such, and projecting truths about his own home onto a man whom he misperceives as foreign. Second, Pentheus ridicules, yet clearly also admires, Dionysus' androgynous beauty. Third, since Pentheus later expresses heterosexual desire as well, the remark about “young girls” suggests envy of Dionysus' free enjoyment of their company. Finally, Pentheus' reflections terminate ambiguously, with his desire to either imprison the god or erotically possess him, the latter of which foreshadows what Evans argues is a seduction scene between the two men. Such xenophobia and repressed homoerotic desire (and consequent malingering homophobia) must be actively self-expunged by the revolutionary philosophy chorus, lest it too descend into Pentheus' vicious insanity. Moreover, this insanity also afflicts those who oppose social justice, which the chorus must keep in mind, not only to prevent the mistaken assumption that all their adversaries' behavior is minimally rational, but also because that dysfunction is a weakness that can be exploited, as Dionysus does vis-à-vis Pentheus.

As if Pentheus' reaction was not already insane enough, he then threatens to imprison both his king-father and Greece's greatest prophet—allegedly for “importing this bad religion” (Euripides 1999, l. 260). Attempting to heal Pentheus from this madness, Tiresias responds to the threat of imprisonment with an elaborate speech praising Dionysus. At its beginning, Tiresias identifies the god with one of the two “first principles in human life” (l. 275). The first principle, associated with the harvest goddess Demeter, is dry earth. And the second principle, associated with Dionysus, which “balances her exactly,” is what Tiresias terms “the wet element, / a drink from grapes” that “brings relief from pain for long-suffering mortals” (ll. 277, 279-281). Translating this from mythological to naturalistic terms, human life is composed of several complementary pairs, including food/drink, bread/wine, and sustenance/joy. In each case, the first term corresponds to Demeter's earth, and the second term corresponds to Dionysus' wine. Put in these terms, Pentheus' problem—and the tragic doom of patriarchal Thebes—is to misunderstand and undervalue Dionysian joyful intoxication. Thus, understanding and celebrating this phenomenon is crucial for the revolutionary philosophy chorus, lest it too implode from its members' own nihilistic misery.

Continuing his Dionysian encomium, Tiresias notes that the god's other powers include “prophecy or foresight,” and the ability to strike fear into one's enemies in war (Euripides 1999, l. 298). “It is not Dionysus,” however, as Tiresias points out, “who will force virtue on women / in matters of sex” (ll. 314-315). In other words, it is not Dionysus' responsibility to produce the virtue that prevents bacchantes from engaging in promiscuous behavior. By the same token, if the women possess this restraint independently, then Dionysus cannot force them to vice. “Even in a Bacchic revel,” Tiresias says, “a woman who is really virtuous / will not be corrupted” (ll. 316-317). This suggests that the revolutionary philosophy chorus need not fear its figurative

intoxication, so long as the dancers' virtue is disciplined before participation. For an historical parallel, Civil Rights protestors engaged in extensive self-discipline training prior to participating in protests (as noted, for example, in the writings of Dr. King).^{xx}

Tragically, Tiresias' wisdom fails to cure Pentheus' madness, as does King Cadmus' admonition that he should not "cross the threshold of the law" (Euripides 1999, l. 331). The prince commands that Dionysus' sacred edifices be destroyed, and orders Dionysus himself stoned to death. But Pentheus is of course doomed to fail by his opponent's immortality, which unfolds in the following series of actions. First, the maenads escape, which a messenger relates to Pentheus as follows: the "chains simply fell off their feet, all by themselves, / and the doors—no human hand touched them, / but they were unlocked" (ll. 447-449). Second, Dionysus creates an earthquake to destroy the prison holding him. Third, despite Pentheus' vow to sell the maenads into slavery, the Dionysian women soundly defeat his male soldiers. Fourth, despite what Pentheus fears most (in his words, "I don't want the Bacchae laughing at me"), Dionysus persuades him to dress in drag and spy on the maenads, which results in his mother impaling his severed head on her spear as a trophy (believing it to be the head of a lion) (l. 843).^{xxi} Finally, Dionysus punishes the rest of the family by transforming King Cadmus into a "serpent," and Queen Agave into a "wild animal," and by forcing them "to take and sack many cities with an enormous army," more specifically "a ragtag army of foreigners against Greece" (ll. 1330, 1331, 1335, 1355-1356).

These six actions suggest six final guidelines for the revolutionary philosophy chorus: (1) free the wrongfully imprisoned; (2) refuse to conform to heteronormativity, in part because doing so can inspire similar transgression in our repressed oppressors; (3) destroy vicious institutions (such as prisons) in order to prevent similar future injustices; (4) train in self-defense and combat

in order to defend ourselves against oppressors' soldiers; (5) deceive oppressors into engaging in transgressive practices, in order to remove the protection they receive from their conformity to oppressive norms, and being prepared to use violence when they are thereby rendered vulnerable; and (6) transform the allies of patriarchal tyranny into unwilling enemies thereof, including by recruiting those foreign to the domestic political infrastructure. In this way, the revolutionary philosophy chorus can serve, in Huey Newton's term for the Black Panthers, as a vanguard of social justice.

III. Dionysus Lyseus as Leader of the Revolutionary Philosophy Chorus

To summarize the above analyses, I will now choreograph its four moves into a new dance of Dionysus, rendering an actionable figure for the revolutionary philosophy chorus. First, following Otto's move, Dionysian leaders should be androgynous feminists. Second, following Daniélou, these leaders should identify as, or as allies of, people of color. Third, with Evans, these leaders should create revolutionary philosophy choruses. And finally, with Euripides, these choruses should channel the beautiful power of figurative intoxication to combat power-mad patriarchal tyrants. In sum, these choruses should be led by the figure of Dionysus as *Lyseus*, practicing philosophical analysis among the defiant, liberating by loosening unjust bonds, in the ongoing dance of social justice.^{xxii}

Though a more concrete elaboration of the revolutionary philosophy chorus is beyond the scope of the present article, it might be helpful to close with a brief sketch, using an example from my own life. The Birmingham Philosophy Guild was created nine years ago, and is still going strong at the time of this writing. After earning my Ph.D., my first semester of teaching was at a community college in Birmingham, Alabama, where I decided to revive a philosophy

group that had originally been founded by my recently deceased predecessor. “The guild,” as we call it, began as a spontaneous extension of after-class informal discussion, and soon transformed into a community group, moving from campus to local cafes and restaurants in the city, where family, friends and strangers seem more comfortable attending and participating.

The primary activities of this twice-weekly group are open-ended discussion of various subjects (including philosophy, science, art, religion, politics, current affairs, and relationships), along with support group-style informal therapeutic conversation in pursuit of self-actualization and self-cultivation. Additionally, in response to political crises in the community, the guild has grown increasingly diverse and politically progressive, and is currently majority-minoritarian and international. Channeling that growing potential, the guild has repeatedly mobilized over the years to (a) stage protests and take direct actions, (b) create spin-off activist groups, and (c) provide staff and support for other progressive organizations in our community.

In the interest of space, I will describe just one example of each of these three types of activity. First, in 2015, police in the greater Birmingham metropolitan area allowed the death, in their custody, of the teenage mother of a newborn son. She was spending her first night in jail, after her first arrest, for nothing more than smoking marijuana and receiving a noise complaint at a local motel. The victim, Sheneque Proctor, was the niece of one of my students, and in response to her death, the guild organized a protest, secured international press coverage (in Britain’s *The Guardian*), and persuaded a renowned regional civil rights attorney to represent the family pro bono.^{xxiii} Second, after a gay undergraduate student at our community college suffered a violent hate crime on campus, the guild created the first and only LGBT+ organization in the school’s history, a student-led organization that we named the “Queer/Straight Alliance (QSA).” And third, in 2019, several other guild members and myself recently participated in a successful

protest organized by Adelante Alabama Worker’s Center, securing the release of one of their board members, as well as the board member’s son, both undocumented Guatemalan immigrants who were wrongfully imprisoned by ICE, during a routine, voluntary, semi-annual check-in.^{xxiv}

As this real-life example of the Birmingham Philosophy Guild suggests, revolutionary philosophy choruses are perhaps most easily created by academic philosophers channeling the energy from after-class discussions. The benefits of such choruses include a mix of intellectual stimulation, political inspiration and education, and professional and political networking for young people who often lack those resources. Aligned with the vision of Euripides and his modern interpreters—of Dionysus Lyseus as an androgynous, feminist, democratic revolutionary advocate for women, people of color, queer people, immigrants, poor people, and enslaved people—the revolutionary philosophy chorus constitutes a powerful strategy for promoting, beyond the classroom and the ivory tower, social justice for all.^{xxv}

Notes

ⁱ “Dionysus as the embodiment—Otto’s construct,” Henrichs concludes, “remains to this day the most successful attempt to deal with the multiple identities of Dionysus” (Henrichs 1993, 31).

ⁱⁱ In addition, the poem (as translator Paul Woodruff notes) is also the primary basis of Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian, which was in turn a major influence on Newton and Otto, and thereby on this entire tradition (Euripides 1999, xiii).

ⁱⁱⁱ The most influential member of this tradition whom I do not consider in detail is Carl Kerényi, who plays Hegel to Otto’s Kant (that is, dialectically resolving the contradictions posited by his predecessor’s as eternal). Kerényi argues that Dionysus represents the Greek concept of *zōe*, which he interprets as undifferentiated life, as opposed to *bios*, which he interprets as qualified human life. In this way, everything in Kerényi’s interpretation (including all gods and mortals)

blends into one life force self-transforming in history. As this effectively strips Dionysus' political power, it is of limited relevance for the present investigation; but in deference to his contributions, I will allow him to haunt these endnotes, in a kind of underworld which (in his view) is ultimately identical to the world above.

^{iv} This is likely one reason for Dionysus' importance to women, as reflected in his epithet "Gynaimanes" (meaning "He who maddens the women") (Daniélou 1992, 55). Evans concurs with Daniélou on this point, citing Kerényi's claim that, for Dionysus, "the primary purpose of sex is not to beget but to enjoy" (Evans 1998, 37).

^v "The Prime Cause," Daniélou writes, "may be conceived as masculine or feminine, a god or a goddess, but in both cases it is an androgynous or transsexual being" (Daniélou 1992, 64). When a god, Daniélou concludes, he is "virile in his terrible form, effeminate in his happy and benevolent aspects" (64). On the other hand, Thomas H. Carpenter argues persuasively that the effeminate depictions do not represent the god himself, but merely his disguise for Pentheus in the *Bacchae*. Finally on this issue, Kerényi blends the two conceptions dialectically (as usual), claiming that effeminate depictions represent Dionysus when emasculated and recovering in the underworld (during the grapes' fermentation), while masculine depictions represent Dionysus' return to the living (when the wine is ready for drinking). "*One mask was never the whole god*" (Kerényi 1976, 283).

^{vi} Kerényi also affirms the centrality for Dionysus of dance for Dionysus, praising it as "the most universal gesture, in which man is all gesture" (Kerényi 1976, 13). "In the dance," he continues, "gods can be made present: the greatest deity can be drawn into the midst of the dancers" (13).

^{vii} Regarding Dionysus as god of plants, Seaford notes Plutarch's claim that "all Greeks sacrifice to Dionysus as tree god (*Dendrites*)" (Seaford 1993, 23).

^{viii} In tension with this view, Kerényi argues that “throughout antiquity the life cult of the Dionysian women remained compatible with married life, which it complemented” (Kerényi 1976, 187). Similarly, Seaford argues that “Dionysus both threatens the gender division of the polis and is consequently propitiated and honored by the whole polis” (Seaford 1993, 134).

Ultimately, however, Seaford reaffirms the dominant view, asserting that “Dionysus and Hera [goddess of marriage] are of course natural enemies” (135).

^{ix} This is reflected, for example, in the presence of the two separate images of Dionysus that were traditionally displayed during his festival’s processions (Faraone 1993, 2).

^x For an opposing view, Kerényi implies that in ancient ritual, the two groups are the same, insofar as the ecstatic women first tear apart a living animal (symbolizing the infant Dionysus, as ripe grapes), secondly remove and carry the animal’s severed penis in a basket (symbolizing the grape juice in a bottle, transported to be stored and fermented), and finally preside like nurses over his rebirth (symbolizing the drinkable wine) (Kerényi 1976, 235, 266).

^{xi} As Daniélou observes, the color saffron is also associated with Shiva, and in India (and elsewhere) it is the official color of mourning. This saffron garment thus strengthens Dionysus’ identification with both Shiva and Hades (as underworld lord).

^{xii} Kerényi goes further, claiming that since (a) Ariadne is also Persephone, who is sometimes the mother and sometimes the wife of Dionysus; and (b) Dionysus is sometimes Hades; therefore (c) this constitutes additional evidence that Dionysus’ primarily symbolizes undying life (passing from mother to daughter, to hell and back, like grapes into wine) (Kerényi 1976, 119).

^{xiii} In support of this judgment, Froma I. Zeitlin argues that Thebes in Athenian tragedy appears as the place that fears and rejects foreignness and otherness, to its doom.

^{xiv} The closest thing I can find to this claim is found in Murrey (2014). “The absence and wandering of Dionysus (and his image),” Murrey observes, “combines with the transformative effect of the lightning flash, which is elaborated throughout the play” (22).

^{xv} For an example of this belief elsewhere, see Sharrer (2002).

^{xvi} As Daniélou notes, Shiva also wears this snake-crown.

^{xvii} Kerényi argues that Ariadne as goddess of the labyrinth is further linked to dance, since the original labyrinths were round, describing an “endlessly repeated meander or spiral line” (Kerényi 1976, 92). By dancing the labyrinth dance of Ariadne, the dancer was believed able to make their way safely through an underworld initiation and be reborn with Dionysian powers (93-94). For this reason, he writes, the curved lines of the labyrinth “were the paths of the dancers who honored the ‘mistress of the labyrinth’ with their movements,” and their “dancing ground” was a place that “represented the great realm of the mistress” (98).

^{xviii} For more on the incorporation of literal and figurative dances into philosophical practice, see for example Hall (2020, 2019, 2017, 2013).

^{xix} As Woodruff observes, *VoHé* is “the Bacchic joy-cry” (Euripides 1999, n142, p. 6).

^{xx} For more, see Hall (2018).

^{xxi} Though most modern scholars emphasize and criticize the horror of Dionysus’ punishment of Pentheus, the foreign female dancers of Euripides’ chorus interpret it as poetic justice. In their words, Pentheus had “appointed / himself to suppress the unconquerable by violence” (Euripides 1999, l. 1001). That is, Dionysus is the divine power of intoxication, dance, and liberation, and cannot be suppressed with mere physical violence, any attempt at which is morally wrong.

^{xxii} For more on social justice praxis as dance, see Hall (2021).

^{xxiii} The article in question is as follows: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jan/09/black-alabama-teenager-died-police-cell-sheneque-proctor>.

^{xxiv} For more on Marcos Baltazar's case, see <https://www.al.com/news/2019/08/protesters-call-for-release-of-detained-alabama-immigrant-rights-group-board-member.html>.

^{xxv} My heartfelt thanks to all our wonderful guild members over the years, including those who participated in the community activism recounted here, including Jake Bates, Brandon DeBalsi, Najwa Karassi, Tori Kervin, Spencer Lake, Evelyn Renée Mayben, Dylan Jeremy McGrann, Rodney Morgan, Spencer Portis, Aaron Pridemore, Clint Shiflett, Paul Stewart, Sage Virani, and Catherine Wright.

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