

Newton Contra Alt-Right Nietzsche:  
Dionysus as Androgynous Black Panther

**ABSTRACT:**

In this article, I channel the autobiography of Black Panther cofounder Huey P. Newton, entitled *Revolutionary Suicide*, against the misogyny of the alt-right movement today. Both Newton and the alt-right have been powerfully influenced by Nietzsche, but one way of grasping the central difference between them is by comparing their conceptions of Dionysus. While the alt-right sticks closer to Nietzsche's conception, which minimizes the god's androgyny, Newton's thought resonates with that androgyny, thereby bringing him closer to the most influential Dionysus scholar since Nietzsche, Walter Otto. I therefore turn to the latter's *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, whose analyses I synthesize into the following image inspired by the god's closest animal familiar: the dancingly-graceful panther as aqueous-androgynous soul-hunter. Reimagining Newton's Black Panther in this way, finally, can help us overcome the alt-right.

*"I saw a man move catlike  
Across the rooftops,  
Glide along the horizons,  
Casting no shadow..."*  
-Melvin Newton<sup>i</sup>

Perhaps the most egregious subcommunity responsible for today's political crisis in the United States, predating and facilitating the rise of its forty-fifth President, is the group known as the "alt-right" (short for the alternative right of the political spectrum). It is composed primarily of younger (millennial) cisgender white men, and it developed in response to a well-publicized controversy in the world of computer gaming known as "GamerGate."<sup>ii</sup> And one of their primary philosophical influences, like the Nazis before them, is Friedrich Nietzsche. They interpret the latter, often through the filter of Ayn Rand's work, as a powerful precursor to their self-appointed role as nemeses of "political correctness" and champions of the hierarchical views embraced by capitalists, racists, sexists, xenophobes, etc. (which they mask as "free speech").

One major aspect of the mainstream right to which the alt-right is "alternative" is orthodox Christianity. Many on the alt-right proudly identify as atheists or agnostics and, like Nietzsche, reach conclusions highly critical of democracy, women, Jewish people, women, etc.

that are shared by the mainstream right, but they do so via routes that do not consciously endorse any religious beliefs. As has frequently been observed, however, regarding the alt-right's favorite contemporary philosophers (namely "New Atheists" such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, and members of the "Intellectual Dark Web" such as Jordan Peterson), this conscious rejection of religion does not preclude a central place for mythology.

It is at this mythological locus that the present article stages an intervention into this political crisis. One important example of this mythology is Nietzsche's personal favorite god, Dionysus. The problem with that favor, in light of scholarship on that deity since Nietzsche, is that his interpretation is not merely unduly narrow, highly selective, and fundamentally distorted (all of which, admittedly, Nietzsche would acknowledge and celebrate, along with many of his scholarly admirers). What is more—and deeply ironic, given his and the alt-right's boasts of championing free speech and difficult truths—Nietzsche's conception is also a heavily censored one, stripped of Dionysus' most controversial progressive political content.

More specifically, Nietzsche hides Dionysus' androgyny and his advocacy for women, queer people, the poor, foreigners, the city, democracy, and peace. (Here I will address only the first issue, having addressed the others elsewhere). For some scholars, including Otto and Alain Daniélou, their critique of Nietzsche is mostly implicit, inferable from the many relevant characteristics that they note in Dionysus, but Nietzsche suppresses. For other scholars, this critique is explicit, and often damning. Richard Seaford, for example, criticizes Nietzsche primarily for an overly-abstract conception in which "the Dionysiac unity of humankind has no political significance" (6, 144). Arthur Evans laments Nietzsche's views on democracy, women, and slavery (193-194). And Carl Kerényi complains that Nietzsche "ignores the Dionysian

woman, after the god the second most important person in the drama, in a manner that was almost as pathological as his later appalling preoccupation with Ariadne” (136).

What is worse than Nietzsche’s own censorship, is that his academic philosophical interpreters, who are as predominantly white and cis-male as the alt-right, have followed Nietzsche in this censorship, failing to hold their infamously slippery subject accountable. For a relatively recent example, James Porter’s *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on The Birth of Tragedy* (2000), despite its title and its repeated insistence that Nietzsche is untrustworthy and unreliable, fails to raise even one of these political-charged dimensions of Dionysus. Such omissions go all the way back to Walter Kaufmann, and the entire school of U.S. Nietzscheans inspired by him, who have abetted this repression of politically progressive truth, wittingly or no. It should give us pause that a philosophy scholar such as myself could study and publish on Nietzsche for over a decade, consulting philosophy research from various traditions, and yet never encounter these progressive dimensions of Dionysus until moving beyond the boundaries of the discipline.

The bright philosophical counterexample, in this and many other things besides, is Black Panther cofounder Huey P. Newton. In his autobiography, Newton begins with Nietzsche but ultimately self-overcomes both himself and Nietzsche, in a way that resonates with the more inclusive and progressive figure of Dionysus. Illumined by the textual evidence I present below, I suggest interpreting Newton’s concept of revolutionary suicide, and of that entire autobiography, as a variation on Nietzsche’s concept of self-overcoming. Both concepts involve a kind of intentional death of the self. In both cases in pursuit of a kind of existential resurrection for a new self. And in both cases, the result is the “overperson” (*übermensch*), which term Newton applies to his hero George Jackson, the subject of the present article’s opening epitaph,

on the “catlike” man “with no shadow.” By thus self-overcoming Nietzsche, Newton’s thought thereby also resonates with the most influential scholar of Dionysus, Walter Otto.

Otto’s conception effectively challenges the Nietzscheans’ censored conception of Dionysus, and thereby the alleged Nietzschean dimension of the alt-right. I therefore turn, in the second section of the present article, to Otto’s classic monograph, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, deriving an account of the god’s strongholds, allies, and powers, synthesized in the figure of Dionysus as an aqueous-androgynous soul-hunter, as illustrated by his closest familiar: the dancingly-graceful panther. Otto’s Dionysus emerges clearly as both heroically violent and androgynous, in resistance to the strong temptation in the history of ideas to suppress Dionysus’ femininity, and arbitrarily deny the intersection of heroic violence and feminism. In other words, since the pre-Nietzsche Dionysus is a womanly male warrior, whose androgyny and warrior nature are linked, therefore to be Dionysian, and more consistently so than Nietzsche, means to fight like a woman, and beside women.<sup>iii</sup> Like Newton and his Panthers, we can fight the alt-right Nietzsche with Newton and Otto’s Dionysus.

### Newton’s Explicit Nietzschean Influences

Just this year (2019)—shamefully for the philosophy profession—there appeared the first and only article on Newton listed in the *Philosopher’s Index*, by John Narayan. And just six years previous (2013), Henry Caygill published a brief note on the Panthers’ philosophy, including a few paragraphs on Nietzsche’s influence on Newton. Focusing on the autobiography, Caygill emphasizes the idea of the will to power and his genealogy of morality and its language, and then quotes two relevant passages from other writings by Newton. The first is as follows:

When we coined the expression “All Power to the People,” we had in mind emphasizing the word “Power,” for we recognize that the will to power is the basic drive of man. But it is incorrect to seek power over people. We have been subjected to the dehumanizing power of exploitation and racism for hundreds of years; and the Black community has its own will to power also. ... To us power is, first of all, the ability to define phenomena, and secondly the ability to make these phenomena act in a desired manner (Newton 227, quoted in Caygill 6).

Note the explicit mention of “will to power,” and the centrality of linguistic definition to his conception of power. As for Caygill’s second quote, it is taken from Newton’s “The Mind is Flesh,” as follows:

As we cross the threshold from the past era of scarcity to the future era of abundance, the mind is learning the controls required to remain zestfully engaged with life, throughout increased longevity devoid of drudgery and poverty. It must also learn to generate a new sort of man, capable of preserving, amplifying, and passing to our human or posthuman followers the striving for mastery of reality, while preserving its elements of intellect, character, freedom, and joy. Especially joy, for we are entering some of the most joyous of all the moments of man (Newton 330, quoted in Caygill 6).

Here, the championing of the posthuman, and the central affirmation of joy, are unmistakably both Nietzschean and Dionysian.

With this background in place, I now turn to autobiography, beginning with its explicit account of Nietzsche’s influence on him and on the Black Panther Party. For starters, near the beginning of the book, in a discussion of his education in high school and college, Newton singles out Nietzsche for highest praise among the philosophers he read and admired. And

thereafter, as Newton's life story unfolds, he returns periodically to multiple Nietzschean concepts and tropes, namely the transvaluation of values, will to power, being all-too-human, and the *übermensch*.

Regarding his high school and college career, Newton writes that "Philosophy was another favorite subject" (67). More specifically, he continues, "While studying philosophy, I realized I had been moving toward existentialism" (68). In typical Newton fashion, however, he refuses to stop with ideas and theory, instead translating his existential studies into concrete action. After concluding that the speaker of the Book of Ecclesiastes (of the Bible) was "the first existentialist," Newton tells how he:

began to engage friends in existentialist discussions. If a brother was hungry, I would say that it is all the same whether you are hungry or full, whether you are cold or warm. It is all the same. They *really* thought I was crazy. Then I began living as an existentialist, hitchhiking to Los Angeles and back, walking into the class dirty, without shoes, and sometimes soaked to the skin from the rain (69).

Also in customary Newton fashion, this action almost immediately extends to social action in general and informal education specifically. "Sometimes," Newton relates, "I got into teaching on the block, reciting poetry or starting dialogues about philosophical ideas" (76).

Speaking of this street-corner teaching, the topics it covered brings me to the first Nietzschean trope I follow Caygill in identifying in *Revolutionary Suicide*, namely what Nietzsche calls the transvaluation of values, and what Newton sometimes describes as a "reversal of values." One example is the paradoxical contrasting fates, in poor Black neighborhoods, of socially-conforming versus socially-nonconforming people. Newton explains as follows:

Those in the Black community “who defy authority” and “break the law” seem to enjoy the good life and have everything in the way of material possessions. On the other hand, those who work hard and struggle and suffer much are the victims of greed and indifference, losers. This reversal of values presses heavily on the Black community (42).

In the first group (those who “defy authority”), Newton includes gang members, drug dealers, and thieves, such as Newton’s own big brother (called “Sonny Boy”), and even for a brief period, Huey himself.

In other words, things are so bad for Black folks in the United States (and by institutional design), that for many of them, doing the exact opposite of the socially acceptable is the most reliable path to what mainstream America defines as “success.” Simply trying to achieve mainstream success, however, is in Newton’s view an unworthy goal for anyone, Black or otherwise. As an alternative, Newton urges Black people to embrace and celebrate whatever Blackness white society disparages. Newton eventually frames his alternative in relation to Nietzsche’s analysis of the “noble” classes, and this is where transvaluation enters the mix. “Nietzsche shows,” Newton writes, “how this reasoning was used in the German ruling circle, which always defined phenomena in terms complimentary to the noble class” (174). In short, Newton concludes, “Thought had been shaped by language,” and “We have seen the same thing in the United States” (174). More specifically, this affected black Americans as follows:

e were made to feel ashamed and guilty because of our biological characteristics, while our oppressors, through their whiteness, felt noble and uplifted. In the past few years, however—and it has *only* been a few years—the rising level of consciousness within our Black communities has led us to redefine ourselves (174, emphasis added).

For an example of the latter, Newton observes that “Today we call ourselves Black people and wear natural hair styles because we have changed the definition of the word ‘black’” (174). Put in Nietzschean terms, Newton’s advice here is not for one to change one’s body or being, but rather to affirm one’s body and being as the yardstick of one’s own values. Perhaps Newton’s capitalization of “Black” (like Du Bois’ capitalization of the highest ideal terms in *The Souls of Black Folk*), derives in part from his being influenced by a philosopher writing in German. In short, perhaps this capitalized Blackness is also a Nietzschean affirmation.

Transvaluation’s most famous and effective impact on Newton, as also attested by Caygill, can be found in the Black Panthers’ epithet for the police, namely “pigs” (Caygill 6). Having studied the law in order to better protect himself and his fellow Black community members from the police, Newton knew that it was a punishable offense to curse at police officers (i.e. use “swear words”). Thus, he sought a creative, non-criminal, alternative to cursing that could accomplish his goal of denigrating their law enforcement oppressors (as a complementary revaluation to his elevation of Black folks). In Nietzschean fashion, Newton chose a new, vivid, and humorous metaphor. “We began to show policemen as pigs,” Newton writes, “in our cartoons, and from time to time used the word” (175). Though other, similar words (including “dog”) had failed to take off in the community, “‘Pig’ caught on; it entered the language” (175). In short, Newton concludes, “This was a form of psychological warfare” (175).

Perhaps the most obvious and intuitive influence on Newton by Nietzsche, also the one most emphasized by Caygill, is his “will to power,” including one of the Black Panther Party’s two central slogans, namely “All power to the people!”, and their most famous symbol, the Black Power fist (Caygill 6). Moreover, from Nietzsche’s entire corpus, Newton names only *The Will to Power* in *Revolutionary Suicide*. “When I read Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*,” Newton writes,



I learned much from a number of his philosophical insights...many of his ideas have influenced my thinking...some of his ideas are pertinent to the way Black people live in the United States; they have had a great impact on the development of Black Panther philosophy (173).

For anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the Panthers or Newton, it should come as no surprise that his autobiography fairly bristles with will to power. But it may be surprising that its presence is almost omnipresent, and self-consciously so on Newton's part. My favorite example occurs in Newton's account of his own self-overcoming during solitary confinement. In his first imprisonment, as a punishment for defiance, Newton is almost immediately sent, he writes, to "the 'hole'—what Black prisoners called the 'soul-breaker'," one of two cells, each "four and a half feet wide, by six feet long, by ten feet," their floors of "red rubber tile" and their walls pure black (103-104). Though most prisoners had nervous breakdowns in just two or three days there, begging their jailors for release, Newton had already lasted more than two weeks when the prison released him in order to verify that he had not gone insane. It is in Newton's account and interpretation of this experience that the will to power is manifest, as follows:

Soul breakers exist, because the authorities know that such conditions would drive *them* to the breaking point, but when I resolved that they would not conquer my will, I became stronger than they were. I understood them better than they understood me. No longer dependent on the things of the world, I felt really free for the first time in my life. In the past I had been like my jailors; I had pursued the goals of capitalistic America. Now I had a higher freedom (107).

In short, Newton used his physical and existential isolation as an opportunity to focus his willpower and affirm new values, foremost among which is the reflexive value of that same Black will to power itself.

Newton also briefly deploys Nietzsche's phrases "all-too-human" in the autobiography, describing his comrades and himself as "we, the all-too-human Black Panthers," in contrast to those who shared what he dubs Eldridge Cleaver's "fantasies of instant power" (323). Earlier in their history, however, Newton admits that the Panthers "too, had joined the suicidal dance around the golden calf" (meaning Cleaver's impatient pursuit of immediate violence) (323). Put in the overarching rhetoric of *Revolutionary Suicide*, Cleaver's path is for Newton that of reactionary suicide, while Newton's path is revolutionary suicide. And both ways are traversed via that highest of Nietzschean-Dionysian activity of dance. Fleshing out this dancing metaphor, the reactionary suicide's dance is too fast and short, while the revolutionary suicide's dance is long and slow. One reason for this, perhaps, is that Newton's revolutionarily suicidal Panthers know their history, realizing today's battle is not the war, nor this song the last Black dance.

Finally from these Nietzschean influences is the *übermensch*, which Newton writes as "superman." Noting that the writer, activist, and "Soledad Brother" George Jackson—whom Newton repeatedly calls his "hero" in *Revolutionary Suicide*—was rumored to have done physically impossible things that no mere human could achieve, Newton notes parenthetically that "Of course my hero would have to be a superman" (336). It would appear that what makes Jackson great, and a worthy hero for Newton—based on the numerous Nietzschean affirmations in the autobiography noted in this section—is Jackson's being what Nietzsche held was best to be, an *übermensch*. And the latter entails, in part, being Dionysian.

## Newton's Nietzschean-Dionysian Resonances

In this section, I will consider the five characteristics that I find shared by Newton, Nietzsche and (anticipating my concluding section) Walter Otto's Dionysus, namely imaginativeness, madness, dance, balance, and self-overcoming. Nietzsche's relationship to these five characteristics is already well-known and established. As for Dionysus, in addition to being the god of dance, Otto emphasizes his relationship to the Muses, myth, poetry, and other forms of imaginative production, his madness, the centrality of various forms of balance (including between male and female, and life and death), and the self-overcoming of his multiple cycles of birth, violent death, and resurrection. With this background noted, I now turn to Newton.

If one synthesizes these five characteristics into proposition, Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide* is Nietzschean-Dionysian insofar as Newton's imaginativeness leads to the perception that he is crazy, which throws his opponents off balance, which helps him achieve his balance in the form of a kind of battle-dance, which in turn facilitates his self-overcoming into a victorious revolutionary suicide. For evidence for this interpretation, I now resume my close reading of *Revolutionary Suicide*.

Beginning with the first of these five Nietzschean-Dionysian characteristics, imagination is so important to Newton that, at two points in the autobiography, he uses its present/absence to divide the armies in the war for social justice into Panther heroes and pig villains. Beginning with the latter, Newton writes of the prison administrators who lacked the courage to implement his reforms (even though they agreed the reforms would be beneficial), that they "were unimaginative, mediocre, and fearful men" (284). By contrast, Newton describes the deaths of his comrades as being "all suicides of one kind or another," because they all "had the sensitivity and tragic imagination to see the oppression" (359). In other words, the tragedy of rank-and-file

oppressors (like the cowardly prison staff) is their lacking sufficient imagination to overturn oppressing institutions; while the tragedy of the exceptional oppressed (like the suicides) is their possessing enough imagination to perceive the oppression, but not enough power to outlive that oppression. For this reason, Newton warns, at the beginning of the book, that “a revolutionary must learn that he is a doomed man” (3).

Since these revolutionary Panthers thus begin their journey with a tragic vision, and with their feet pointed toward suicide, it is no wonder that their journey is attended by madness, the second Nietzschean-Dionysian characteristic. For his part, Newton explains that he witnessed, revered, and even consciously adopted the “madness” that his father allegedly possessed, according to the white men whose racist oppression he routinely defied. His father first earned the epithet “crazy” when he stood up to a white man threatening to whip him. “My father replied,” Newton writes, as follows:

no man whipped him unless he was a better man, and he doubted that the white man qualified. This shocked the white man, and confused him, so that he backed down by calling my father crazy. This story spread quickly around town; my father became known as the “crazy man” because he would not give in to the harassment of whites. Strangely, this “crazy” reputation meant that whites were less likely to bother him. This is often the way of the oppressor. He cannot understand the simple fact that people want to be free. So, when a man resists oppression, they pass it off by calling him “crazy” or “insane”... “Crazy” to them, he was a hero to us (29-30).

Note the additional instance here of the transvaluation of values. Though a white man fearfully recasts his fear of Newton’s father as that Black man’s “craziness,” Newton is not fooled, and instead reinterprets what the white man calls “crazy” as his father’s “courage.” As with the

abovementioned instances of transvaluation, Newton also put this new value (of “craziness” as courage) into action.

This brings me to the third Nietzschean-Dionysian characteristic, balance. As a teenager, Newton consciously imitated his father’s way of dealing with oppressors (white and Black), and soon earned himself the same label of “crazy” in his community, in part “because I always did the unexpected, a valuable practice in keeping your adversary off balance” (77). Significantly in terms of my earlier discussion of Newton’s androgyny, while he attributes his apparent madness to his father, he attributes his balance to his mother. She “helped us to see the light in even the most difficult situations,” Newton writes of her and his siblings, and that “light and balance have carried me through some difficult days” (11).

The most famous expression of balance involving the Black Panthers is Newton’s concept of “shock-a-buku,” which he defines as “a tactic of keeping the enemy off balance through sudden and unexpected maneuvers that push him toward his opponent’s position” (129). The word “balance” also recurs at several other important moments of the autobiography. For example, regarding his decision to make small talk with two officers who held him in custody, in order to “keep the situation cool,” Newton advises that, “no matter what is going through a person’s mind, it is always to his advantage to keep the enemy off balance” (299).

That Newton would be open to interpreting this strategy of unbalancing/balancing as a kind of dance, the fourth Dionysian-Nietzschean characteristic, seems probable and implicit in much of *Revolutionary Suicide*. Moreover, this openness is further suggested by his own affirming reference to dance as both symbol and effect of successful revolution. The context of this dancing reference is his description of Marcel Camus’ 1959 Brazilian film, *Black Orpheus* (*Orfeu negro*), a retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice set in a twentieth-century

Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. Newton “loved that film, and saw it many times” (48), and that, at “the end of the film the little girl is dancing while the little boy plays Orpheus’ guitar” thus, although “Orpheus and his woman are dead, her dance is a victory over death” (49). Dance is therefore both (a) the reason Orpheus fights and gives his life for a victorious revolutionary suicide, and (b) the evidence of his victory.

This brings me to the final Nietzschean-Dionysian characteristic in Newton. In a public statement, read after being released from prison when his unjust sentence was overturned, Newton remarks that “a revolutionary man always transcends himself or otherwise he is not a revolutionary man, so we [Black Panthers] always do what we ask of ourselves or more than what we know we can do...” (263). Like Nietzsche, and the god that inspired him, Newton and his visionary Panthers are committing to being, and calling their fellow warriors to be, more than they are, even at the cost of embracing death.

### Newton’s Nietzsche-Overcoming Dionysian Resonances

Of course, even the best-intentioned have only varying degrees of success in their attempts at self-overcoming. And some things appear to be even harder to overcome in oneself than the fear of death. One example, unfortunately, is misogyny, which marks a signpost at the fork in the road that divides Dionysus and (at his worse moments, at least) Nietzsche. In this section, I will explore how far Newton follows Dionysus down his more gender-virtuous path, which involves a cluster of six characteristics that overcome some of Nietzsche’s weakest moments.

All six of these characteristics relate to women and gender, and are as follows: androgyny, feminism, supernatural powers of intoxication, apotheosis, panther-hood, and soul-hunting. Synthesizing these six Nietzsche-overcoming characteristics into one proposition, as I

did for the six Nietzschean-Dionysian characteristics in the previous section, Newton and the Panthers resurrect a Dionysian practice (obscured by Nietzsche) of a kind of androgyny that facilitates feminism, which facilitates a seemingly superhuman power of intoxication, which facilitates an apotheosis of Newton and the Panthers into a Dionysian panther as hunter of souls.

Beginning with the first Nietzsche-overcoming Dionysian characteristic, androgyny, Newton remembers that his siblings “often teased me when I was young, telling me I was too pretty to be a boy, that I should have been a girl,” adding that this “baby-faced appearance dogged me for a long time, and it was one of the reasons I fought so often in school” (11). Note here both his acknowledgement of stereotypical femininity and his defensive reaction thereto. One could describe this defensive reaction as a flight from his femininity, overcompensating by picking fights with other men. There are two implications here worth noting.

First, social justice for all, especially in terms of gender and sexuality, can never be achieved in Newton’s view by a group of men hypersensitive to any hint of physical femininity or womanliness being attributed to them by their peers and community. Second, this misogynistic self-loathing could help explain peer violence among (nominally) straight African-American men despite their conscious commitment to fight racism and white supremacy. Thought together, this entails that men’s acceptance of their perceptible androgyny is required for both maturity and intra-racial peace. In other words, to fight the true enemy, namely the varied forces of injustice, revolutionary men must accept their visible femininity.

Support for this interpretation can be found elsewhere in Newton’s writings. For example, in “The Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements,” Newton acknowledges that straight men “want to hit a homosexual in the mouth because we are afraid we might be homosexual” (170). Going further, he bravely confesses that “I have hang-ups myself about male

homosexuality,” but not “female homosexuality,” because only the former is perceived as “a threat to me” in terms of his gender/sexuality (172).

In addition to this external, involuntary physical androgyny, Newton also later hints at a complementary androgyny in himself that is internal, (at least partially) voluntary, and psychological. “I had a weakness for women,” he writes, and “Therefore, I could never be harsh with them; I always identified with them, and fell in love” (96). It is this movement of identification, in addition to mere love, that arguably helps Newton overcome his Nietzschean phase of selfhood and rebirth himself closer to Otto’s Dionysus. That is, if men merely passively accept others’ observations of their perceptible androgyny, rather than actively seeking out their androgyny that is initially merely internal and imperceptible to others, this deprives the community of desperately-needed resources for social justice. This is true for two reasons.

First, mere tolerance of external attributions of femininity leaves intact the myth that people identified as “men” and “women” are dichotomously different, which in turn prevents the level of sympathetic understanding and emotional intimacy between men and women that is required for happy and healthy relationships, families, and communities. And second, there are powers, skills, and other resources to be discovered in a men’s stereotypical femininity, which can then be deployed as one more crucial tool in the fight for social justice.

Support for both of these points can also be found in Newton’s other writings. Regarding the gender dichotomy, consider “Eldridge Cleaver: He Is No James Baldwin,” Newton’s defense of Baldwin (who was openly bisexual) against Cleaver’s homophobic attacks. The root of these attacks, according to Newton, is Cleaver’s desire “to project his femininity onto someone else,” which Newton diagnosis as based on the “need for a clear-cut male-female dichotomy” (Newton 2019, 303, 304), On the contrary, Newton asserts, “there is some masculinity in every female and



some femininity in every male” (Newton 2019, 305). And regarding the untapped resources for social justice, Newton’s abovementioned piece on women’s and queer people’s liberation suggests that queer people “might be the most oppressed people in the society,” but that it might also be true that “a homosexual could be the most revolutionary” fighter of all (171).

As usual with Newton, these idealistic words then get applied to real-world actions. This brings me to his second Nietzsche-overcoming Dionysian characteristic, his feminism. For one thing, Newton relates that he became close friends in college with the free-love advocate Richard Thorne, who “saw nonpossessive love as pure love, the only love” (61). In Thorne’s view, which Newton quickly and enthusiastically adopted as his own, “No man should *own* a wife, nor should a wife *own* a husband, because ownership is predicated upon control, fences, barriers, constraints, and psychological tyranny” (61). It is further suggestive of Otto’s Dionysus that, when Newton later engaged in open relationships, modeled on Thorne’s open relationships, with multiple women, Newton writes of their group that “Together we became almost a cult” (94).

A second important dimension of Newton’s feminism is his willingness to acknowledge and express remorse for his previous misogyny, and his corresponding ability to make concrete changes in himself for gendered justice. “Various influences,” he writes, “helped to form my attitude” toward women, and because these influences “were often contradictory, they led to certain conflicts in my feelings and involvements with women” (93). For example, regarding his abovementioned free-love experiment with Thorne, Newton eventually felt that “part of it was exploitative” (95). More specifically, Newton concludes that he was acting in the following way:

taking advantage of the women for practical reasons. Women paid my rent, cooked my food, and did other things for me, while any money I came by was mine to keep... The fact that I found it necessary to explain to women that they were at a disadvantage in their

relationship with me indicated that I needed some kind of defense mechanism against the guilt I felt (95).

Again, therefore, Newton not only feels remorse, and acknowledges that feeling. He also generates his own self-critique in order to understand that remorse, and then changes his behavior even though that means losing pleasure and a validating community. The high watermark of Newton's guilt, appropriately, concerns his most unethical behavior toward women in the book. "Whenever I pimped a Black sister," he writes, "my mind would be filled with flashes of the slave experience" (96). He also pimped white women, but claims that with "white women the feeling was not shame but guilt, because I was now in the role of the oppressor" (96).

Also like Dionysus, Newton was believed by members of his community to possess supernatural powers similar to intoxicating powers of wine, music, and dance. Writing of his youth, Newton writes that "some people got the notion that I had mystical powers," and that he "began to put various friends and acquaintances into hypnotic trances" (49). In a further similarity with Dionysus, the god of intoxication who is himself intoxicated, Newton also used his intoxicating powers on himself, in his case by putting himself into a hypnotic trance (49). Though Newton acknowledges how easily one could turn this power to exploitation and abuse, he claims that, "Far from using hypnosis in a destructive way," he merely "used it for 'styling' in the community" (49). This makes Newton even more like Dionysus, the primary expression of whose intoxicating powers is the aesthetic stylization of music, theater, and of course dance.

Given these perceived powers, it is unsurprising that some community members (and for a brief period, apparently, even Newton himself) tended to worship him as a kind of god. This brings me to a fourth Nietzsche-overcoming Dionysian characteristic in Newton, namely apotheosis. For example, remembering his cult-like free love phase, Newton writes that "I look

back on this time as a kind of ‘God experience,’ when I was ‘free’ to do anything I wanted” (95). For a second example, regarding the time of vindication following his longest imprisonment (as discussed above), Newton observes “an element of hero worship that had not been there before” in the people of the community (315). In short, the panther had become the Panther.

This, finally, is perhaps the most obvious affinity between Dionysus and Newton, their central animal figure. Reminiscing about their decision to name the Party after this jungle cat, Newton claims that “The panther is a fierce animal, but he will not attack until he is backed into a corner; then he will strike out” (119). Thus, this cat whose graceful femininity and kinship to Dionysus’ female dancers makes it an androgynous and woman-empowering Dionysian figure, is also for Newton far from being some hypermasculine conqueror. That is, the panther in his view does not strike preemptively. Instead, in a more stereotypically-feminine passive comportment, the panther does not initiate but merely reacts to the threat of violence from another, and even in that case only engages in violence as a last resort, and then only for self-defense. In support of this emphasis, Newton insists throughout *Revolutionary Suicide* that the violence of the Panthers has been exaggerated, and that their armed self-defense was merely the seventh of a ten-point platform, intended to function more as “weaponized propaganda” than for actual combat (355).

In short, and to conclude this section, these weapons of physical warfare were primarily psycho-spiritual weapons in the Dionysian Panthers’ hunt for souls. “We strive,” Newton writes in the last sentence before the epilogue, “to carry out the revolutionary principle of transformation, and through long struggle, in Camus’s words, ‘to remake the soul of our time’” (358). Like Dionysus, Newton aims to intoxicate the soul of his fellow oppressed people, in his case in order to fill them with the madness of his father’s courage and the cooling balance of his

mother, so that they might overcome even themselves, in the ongoing soul-war against racism, misogyny, and all social injustice.

### Conclusion: Newton's Androgynous Black Panthers

In this section, I will review the aspects of Otto's account of Dionysus that buttress the Nietzsche-overcoming Dionysian resonances in Newton, organized around his preferred strongholds, allies, and powers. In list form, they are the sea, the underworld, various goddesses and the bacchantes, and the powers of fluidity, animal transformation, disguise, dance, liberation, and prophecy. I will then synthesize these aspects into the figure of the dancingly-graceful panther as an aqueous-androgynous soul-hunter, thereby further reinforcing the singular fitness of that image for Newton's Black Panthers.

Beginning with the strongholds, the reason Dionysus gravitates to the sea, in Otto's words, is that its element of water "betrays a dual nature: a bright, joyous, and vital side; and one that is dark, mysterious, dangerous, deathly" (162). A second reason is that water is "able to change" its form, just like the god (164). And finally, "if he does gain a victory over strong enemies," then this victory "occurs characteristically when he has assumed some other form" (175-176). That is, water too must depart from its usual/stereotypical form in order to achieve victory over those that oppose it (as, for example, when water takes the form of wine). Second is the underworld, "the realms of the dead," from which Dionysus resurrects his human mother Semele and his wife Ariadne (67). In part for this reason, Otto concurs with Erwin Rhode that Dionysus and Hades "are actually the same" god (115).

Turning to Dionysus' allies, his closest and most faithful companion, according to Otto, is Princess Ariadne, daughter of King Minos of Crete. "It is as essential to Ariadne's myth as to

Dionysus’,” Otto claims, that she “experience terrible sorrow” (181). Ariadne also possesses several marked similarities to Dionysus, according to Otto. She is frequently named among his dancing nurses, the huntress maenads, was later elevated to the status of a goddess in her own right, and has much in common with Dionysus’ other goddess-allies (182). First, Otto claims that she is “most closely related to Aphrodite” (of whose name “Ariadne” is apparently a linguistic variant). Second, Otto notes that, as “a dancer,” Ariadne “is also like Artemis,” who is also both a hunter and a dancer (183, 92). And finally, Ariadne is also, as the bride of Dionysus-qua-Hades, like Persephone, the goddess of spring who was abducted by Hades to be his bride and queen of the underworld (the difference being that Dionysus rescued an abandoned Ariadne instead of kidnapping her from her mother).

Concluding this survey with Dionysus’ powers, I have already noted Dionysus’ ability to mimic the fluidity of water, and to restore souls from the dead. He is also able to transform into various animals, including a lion, bull, fire-breathing dragon, and—of central importance to the present article— “a panther” (110). His power of disguise, according to Otto, appears most clearly in the centrality of the mask to his rituals, during which “women attendants” ceremoniously conduct “the mixing of the wine” (86). Otto also emphasizes Dionysus’ dancing prowess, in part through the following quote from Sophocles’ *Antigone* (in which the character speaking is directly addressing Dionysus): “Oh, thou leader of the choral dance of the fire-breathing stars, lord of the songs of night” (1146, quoted in 82). So strong is Dionysus’ association with dance, Otto notes, that at the god’s birth, “all of the immortals danced,” after his mother had already danced during her pregnancy, along with her dancing unborn child (96). This freeing quality of dance leads to his power of liberation. Not only is dance per se liberating, and not only did Dionysus’ dancers acquire the additional specific freedom of invulnerability to fire

and iron, but Dionysus was also thought capable of breaking the figurative chains that bind human knowledge to the present. That is, like Apollo, with whom he is often identified, Dionysus is a prophet and empowers prophecy in his dancing partners, in recognition of which Otto calls him “the Lord of Souls” (97, 49).

Condensing these various phenomena into one composite image, I offer the animal species with whom Otto claims Dionysus is most closely associated. “The panther, as is well known,” Otto writes, “appears in descriptions of a later period as the favorite animal of Dionysus and is found with him in countless works of art” (111). The panther also possesses important connections to Dionysus’ strongholds, allies, and powers, which I will now enumerate. Of Dionysus’ strongholds, the panther is closest to the sea and the underworld, given the fluidity of its movements and its reputation as the most bloodthirsty species. Like Dionysus, Otto observes, the panther “is as beautiful as it is dangerous” (112). The panther “was not only the most graceful and fascinating but also the most savage and bloodthirsty” of Dionysus’ familiars, with “lightning-fast agility” and a “perfect elegance of its movements, whose purpose is murder” (112).

These latter traits also connect the panther to most of Dionysus’ allies, including Artemis the huntress, and are “found in the mad women who accompany Dionysus” (112). The panther “leaps as gracefully and as lightly as a Bacchant,” which Otto claims is “the reason [Dionysus] loves him so” (111). In other words, the panther possesses a feminine grace reminiscent of Dionysus’s female dancers. As the dancers of Dionysian ritual, Otto claims, these women “become, through the primal force of divine revelation, accessories to a holy occurrence,” comparable to the panther’s manifestation of the terrible beauty of nature (45). Moreover, the Dionysian dancer’s performance is “characterized by a stateliness and a haughty aloofness,”

comparable to the characteristic appearance of the panther (177). Finally on this note, the panther's feminine grace, like that of the maenads, also connects it to two of Dionysus' other goddess-allies, his lovers Aphrodite and Ariadne. Against the misogynist stereotype of femininity as weakness, Otto insists that Dionysus is "in no way a weakling," and that "his manhood celebrates its sublimest victory in the arms of a perfect woman" (175).

Regarding the panther's relationship to Dionysus' powers, finally, I have already mentioned the fluid movements of the panther's graceful dance. One can also easily recognize its power to disguise itself (by camouflaging into its environment), as well as the liberation entailed by the freedom of its solitary hunt. The closest the panther comes to the rest of the abovementioned powers is through sending human souls to the underworld, thus constituting through its movements what one might call a gestural prophecy of its prey's death. In sum, Dionysus' and the panther's shared strongholds, allies, and powers all revolve around dance. The reason for this, arguably, is that dance is the intensification of (and with) life to the point of lethality, including the death and rebirth of self. The panther-like Dionysus reveals, in Otto's words, that "love and death have welcomed and clung to one another passionately from the beginning," in what I would interpolate as their own, fundamental dance (137). More precisely, Otto locates Dionysus' dancing madness as the point at which a maximally intense and ecstatic life borders on death, "the supreme moment—the enchanted moment when something new is created—when death and life meet in an embrace of mad ecstasy," exemplified above all (for Otto) in reproduction, childbirth, and nursing—which constitutes yet another reason, in Otto's view, why that "the Dionysiac world is, above all, a world of women" (137, 142).

It is this world of women that is missing at important moments in Nietzsche's corpus, and that is devastatingly absent in the writings of his neo-Nazi admirers today. The latter, who tend

to see Nietzsche as a paradigm of violent masculinity and misogynist aggression, fail to recognize that his favorite god is also the most androgynous of the Greek deities, god of an activity that continues to be associated in the Western imaginary predominantly with women, and the god who lived, died, and rebirthed surrounded by the women and goddesses who were his nurses, dance partners, lovers, and fellow warriors. In short, neo-Nazi admirers of Nietzsche today need to either educate themselves about the powerful androgynous and feminist dimensions of their hero's favorite god, or else renounce their allegiance to Nietzsche's thought. For Nietzsche's own aspiration was to be fully Dionysian, and to be Dionysian is to embrace—whatever your gender—your panther-like androgyny, and to dance through the fight alongside the women you love.



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Notes

<sup>i</sup> Melvin Newton, brother to Huey P. Newton, is referring here to the latter's hero, Black revolutionary theorist and fighter George Jackson.

<sup>ii</sup> For an overview of the movement, see NPR's article, "What You Need to Know about the Alt-Right Movement." And for its origin in "Gamergate," see *The Guardian's* 2016 article. The most direct connection, perhaps, is that white nationalist strategist Steve Bannon helped propel Milo Yiannopoulos to his GamerGate stardom.

<sup>iii</sup> For more, see my article, "Bodily-Social Copresence Androgyny: Rehabilitating a Progressive Strategy."

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