

## **Theology and Real Politics: On Huey P. Newton**

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*Panther*, the Mario and Melvin Van Peebles film fictionalizing the early days of the Black Panther Party, begins with the familiar sounds of “We Shall Overcome,” and the familiar voice of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>1</sup> Soon the images turn to documentary footage of the violent repression of civil rights marches and the voice of Malcolm X talking about the right to self-defense. The film switches from black and white to color, from documentary to fiction. We see a young black boy bicycling through a friendly community of fast-talking black people of familiar types – informal merchants, knowing elders, curvy and colorful women, corner boys, and a well-dressed preacher. The young bicyclist is hit by a car, and the varied community members gather around his bloody corpse to mourn. Reverent Slocum, we are told, is holding “another vigil,” but a group of twenty-something black men proposes to their friends that they respond differently – that they put pressure on the police by following them. They propose that they respond to the tragedy “not by praying, but by watching.” “You think City Hall really cares about a bunch of black people holding another prayer vigil at some God-damned church?” the character played by Chris Rock queries. We see a prayer vigil: a road filled with candle-holding black people, led by Reverend Slocum, singing “We Shall Not Be Moved.” They are confronted

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<sup>1</sup> *Panther*, Directed by Mario Van Peebles. Gramercy Pictures, 1995. Based on Melvin Van Peebles, *Panther: A Novel* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1995).

and beaten by billy club wielding police, while the nascent Panthers scramble to record police badge numbers.

In jail, Reverend Slocum interrupts the Panthers' planning, interjecting "Remember, we must turn the other cheek, brothers. ... What we need to do is pray for their forgiveness." After further exchange, the minister, played by Dick Gregory, exclaims, "Lord, why don't they show us no respect?" Huey Newton, played by Marcus Chong, responds, "Because they don't have to. They can they can brutalize us and lock us up without a jury of our peers because we are ignorant of the law. What we need to do is organize and keep our shit correct and exercise our Constitutional rights as citizens to defend ourselves and arm ourselves." Exiting the jail, with a golden cross in his hand, Reverend Slocum exclaims to the waiting crowd, "Free at last, my brothers and sisters. God hath delivered us from the lion's den." He is embraced by an adoring crowd of young black women. Behind him, the Newton character ponders: "As the good reverend says, God helps those who help themselves." The Black Panther Party creates a human stop light at the intersection where the boy was killed, and their membership grows.

This dramatized origins myth leans on the commonly held view that black power, and the Black Panthers in particular, emerged as the limits of religiously-inspired non-violent protest became evident. The iconic songs and prayers of the Civil Rights Movement were met with billy clubs and bullets from the police. Initially, the televised images of these confrontations mobilized support for civil rights in many parts of the US and internationally. But after years of protest and little substantive progress, younger movement leaders grew frustrated, culminating in Stokely Carmichael's decisive rhetorical shift, in 1966 during the "March Against Fear," to the language of "black power." The Van Peebles' fictionalization captures this trajectory as it manifests at the local level, in Oakland. An older generation of civil rights leader (the gray haired

and gray bearded Reverend Slocum) is superseded by a younger generation without the patience to pray. This new generation, the Van Peebles' suggest, was also more deeply rooted in the lived realities of black life, emerging from the community rather than leveraging positions of religious leadership. Their language is sprinkled with expletives, and they talk politics on the basketball court rather than in the sanctuary. The civil rights-to-black power narrative concludes in tragedy, as the transition provoked such a virulent response from the police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation that black power was finally an empty spectacle, making none of the substantive political gains of the civil rights movement, and resulting in little more than an affirmation of black and African culture – with the ultimate result being the ascendance of liberal multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s. Christianity had become atheism which had, in turn, become some vague sense of African spirituality. “We Shall Overcome” was replaced by “Power to the People” which was replaced by African dance classes at the local fitness center. Or so the story goes.

But *Panther* also hints that the shift from civil rights to black power may involve a transformation, rather than rejection, of religious ideas and images. It is in jail, in conversation with Reverend Slocum, who is treated respectfully by all, that the Black Panther program crystalizes. And the Panthers' activities begin when Newton is depicted as saying in response to Reverend Slocum, “God helps those who help themselves.” Indeed, the religious and theological background of the historical Black Panthers is even deeper.<sup>2</sup> Father Earl Neil, of Oakland, asserted that “the only difference between Jesus and the Black Panther Party is that Jesus fed

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<sup>2</sup> For the deep connections between black power and black religion in another context, in Detroit, see Angela D. Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007).

5,000 and the Black Panther Party feeds 10,000.”<sup>3</sup> In California and beyond, the Panthers cultivated close relationships with individual churches, which more often than not provided the facilities to house the Panthers’ free breakfast programs, as well as other social services that formed the core of the Panthers’ activities. Churches also provided spaces of sanctuary in the face of virulent police persecution. Beyond institutional sympathies, the Panthers’ drew on a range of Christian theological images, stories, and styles. If we take religion to be more about practices than beliefs, if we take theology to be more about tradition than proposition, and if we take secularization to more often than not to mark false consciousness, perhaps there is a way of reading the politics of the Black Panthers as political theology. Taking the Panthers as exemplary grounds discussions of political theology in real politics, in the concrete struggles of communities to build power for themselves. In a field of inquiry that often loses itself in abstractions – of ontology and becoming, or of love and justice, or of community and intersectionality – reading the Panthers binds our reflections to the practices, norms, and powers of ordinary life.

“Huey P. Newton followed Malcolm X like Jesus Christ followed John the Baptist.”<sup>4</sup>

What does it mean to take this assertion at face value? How can such seemingly hyperbolic iconology be held together with statements such as: “Faith is not a mythical bullshit thing. Faith is where you directly relate yourself to reality”?<sup>5</sup> To address these questions this chapter will first explore what “real politics” might mean, then it will narrate Huey Newton’s ascendance in

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 155.

<sup>4</sup> Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970), 264.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

the Panthers, and finally it will offer a series of suggests as to how Newton can be read as exemplifying a theology of real politics.

The proverbial woman or man on the street is suspicious of abstractions. They don't point to anything real, anything concrete. They obfuscate. Technical terms might be necessary – they denote precisely, fulfilling specialized tasks that aren't encountered in everyday life – but abstractions ought to be abandoned. This conventional wisdom meets with the rejoinder, from academics, that abstractions make visible what is not immediately obvious, providing tools to better understand, critique, and transform the world around us. But framing a contest between the abstract and the concrete in these terms overlooks the particular challenges of politics (and, in a different way, of theology). For there is a temptation to imagine how people could best live together – in the abstract – and then to apply this vision to a specific group of people living together, here, now. In one sense, it seems quite reasonable to imagine lands of milk and honey, and to strive to make them real here, now. But this is not politics. It is ethics, and perhaps it is prophecy. Politics is how we do live together: the institutions and practices and values that allow us to live together, here, now. Making interventions in this collective world is quite another matter. When the distinction between these two topics is collapsed – that is, when the vision of the world we want inflects our view of the world as it is – both are contaminated. The world as it is blurs, and our aspirations are compromised. Abstractions are often the means by which this contamination takes place. Abstract ideals like justice, equality, and rights are imagined to be operative in political institutions and practices, but this obscures the workings of power and mystification. In other words, abstract ideals obscure the workings of real politics.

Put another way, and drawing on the formulation of Raymond Geuss, what actual politics looks like is quite different from what political philosophy talks about.<sup>6</sup> The “moralized tone” of political actors conceals this difference. Political actors use some of the same words used by political philosophers (justice, equality, rights, and so on), yet for political actors this vocabulary is mere rhetoric: it is language used to persuade, and to gain power. Political philosophers take this rhetoric as philosophy, as substantive claims that can be put in conversation with systematic theories. Further, because of the resemblance between the vocabularies of political actors and political philosophers, political philosophers operate with the false consciousness that their systematic work could have an effect, ignoring the actual mechanisms of persuasion and authority in real politics.

Geuss diagnoses the problem with contemporary political philosophy as rooted in a mistaken anthropology. This anthropology is necessary because contemporary political philosophy sees its task as systematizing ethical intuitions, which requires humans to be the sort of creatures that have sets of intuitions that exist independent of context. But Geuss argues that “people are rarely more than locally consistent in action, thought, and desire, and in many domains of human life this does not matter at all, or might even be taken to have positive value.”<sup>7</sup> Humans can love and hate at once. If we could not, we would not be human. Further, when intuitions can be discerned, it is more helpful, if our interest is in politics, to ask where these intuitions “come from, how they are maintained, and what interests they might serve,” rather than to try to organize them into a system.<sup>8</sup> Historical and anthropological work may be

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

more important than philosophy for understanding real politics. Even if the political philosopher could succeed in discerning intuitions, systematizing them, and extrapolating prescriptive rules, rules do not seem to be the sort of thing that matter in politics. As Geuss puts it, fairness in applying rules “may be the supreme virtue of the bureaucrat, the administrator, or the umpire, but, then, is all politics administration? Can there even be administration without power?”<sup>9</sup> If an umpire notices that he is officiating at a match between a team of adults and a team of children, what counts as a fair judgment may be quite different than if it were a match between all adults. In other words, even in the most apparently rule-governed aspects of politics, we may want to commend attentiveness to differences in power.

When political philosophy conceives itself as applied ethics, it is making an intervention in real politics, but not the intervention it thinks. The intervention political philosophy makes is on the side of ideology, on the side of the powerful, because the powerful rely on mystifications that conceal the workings of power in order to keep themselves in power. If people realized that the status quo benefited a particular group at the expense of others, they wouldn't stand for it. The language of the political philosopher, and the political actor, conceals the interests of particular groups in the guise of the universal. The prescriptions offered by the political philosopher are presented as though they are discerned from systematizing intuitions that everyone has, and so they ought to garner the assent of all. In fact, these prescriptions, no matter how much they may appear to differ in their substance, have the same effect because of their shared form: they all support the interests of the powerful.

Geuss makes two constructive proposals, one about real politics and the other about political philosophy. Real politics, he argues, is about better and worse, not about good and bad.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 93.

It is “a craft or skill, and ought precisely *not* to be analysed as the mastery of a set of principles or theories.”<sup>10</sup> Theories do have a role, but they are to be used instrumentally, and part of the craft of politics is knowing when and how to employ models or theories, while keeping in mind their limitations. There is no meta-theory to determine when theories are to be employed, only the craft or skill – the skill of political judgment. Geuss further proposes that there is, indeed, a role for political philosophy. Informed by close attention to history, anthropology, and economics, political philosophers can strive to understand what actually motivates people and how institutions actually operate.<sup>11</sup> This is the work of philosophers, and not just historians, anthropologists, and economists, because it involves ideology critique, rigorous interrogation of the concepts in use to discern in what ways they are being employed to advance the interests of the powerful. For ideology critique to be successful, it must be aware of an array of factors that are not discipline-specific. In other words, the role of political philosophy has inverted. Instead of securing its autonomy by authorizing the use of certain concepts in certain ways, political philosophy secures its autonomy by its capacity to question the authority of concepts used in other disciplines, and by political actors, with the ultimate purpose of better exposing the actual workings of real politics.

Does political theology suffer from the same problem that Geuss diagnoses for political philosophy? If so, might it benefit from the same remedies? Geuss has little to say about religion, other than the expected Nietzschean conflation of Christian ethics and modern moral

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>11</sup> Geuss does allow a place for “imaginative life” in these actual motivations. He opposes reality to illusion, which is always distorted; imagination, in contrast, is a part of reality and can lead to real motivations. See also Raymond Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

philosophy.<sup>12</sup> There is an obvious dissimilarity in that political theology most often does not begin with, and certainly does not treat as ultimately authoritative, human intuitions. Rather, it often starts with the sorts of things Geuss commends: beliefs, experiences, and practices, all wrapped up together in tradition. Yet Geuss's queries about intuition still seems relevant: where do those beliefs, experiences, and practices come from, how are they maintained, and what interests do they serve? Moreover, if political theology discerns principles from tradition and then applies them to political practice, it faces the same objections concerning the insufficiency of principle-application as a way of understanding political practice.

Some political theologians who privilege virtue might see themselves aligned with Geuss's account of politics as a craft or skill, as most essentially the exercise of the virtue of political judgment. But it is not entirely clear that virtue in general, or particular virtues, translate into the skill of political judgment. Indeed, it seems plausible that the opposite may be the case: certain virtues may have to be suspended in order to more accurately perceive and participate in the rough and tumble world of real politics. Even if they did translate perfectly, identifying virtues is a messy business, one that is also distorted by the interests of the powerful, particularly when those virtues have direct political consequences. Other political theologians, whose work flows from contextual theology, may see their work as evading Geuss's critique because of their attentiveness to the rich textures of communities, to history, anthropology, and economics. These form the inescapable starting point through which tradition is engaged for contextual theologians. But this seems like politics as applied ethics in another guise, privileging the ethical

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<sup>12</sup> "Two thousand (and more) years of moral preaching have not seemed to provide much evidence that this is an effective way to improve human behavior, and training children properly self-evidently does not require having the correct 'ideal theory'." Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 101.

values of a community while eliding the need to develop political judgment and skills for negotiating political institutions and practices that may not respect the epistemic privilege accorded by contextual theologians to their communities. Finally, political theologians who take community organizing as their starting point would find affinities with Geuss's realism and his emphasis on power analysis. But these political theologians often leave underdetermined the theological dimension of political theology – which often translates to a de-emphasis on ideology critique.

Geuss's critique of political philosophy may seem irrelevant for political theology because political theology would seem necessarily committed to naming the impartial universal, the *bête noire* of Geuss's account. Yet political theology shares Geuss's suspicion of elevating the interests of certain groups in the name of the universal: that is idolatry. Political theology can avoid Geuss's critique of political philosophy if it conceives of its task first and foremost as that of the critique of ideology, understood interchangeably with the critique of idolatry. Rather than prescribing certain political stances, or appealing to abstractions, political theology must root out the way religious ideas and practices are used to conceal the interests of the powerful, clearing space for the exercise of political judgment. But to describe political theology as focused solely on the political mis-appropriation of religious ideas and practices is to submit to secularist supremacy. Political theology, rather than focusing on the religious, refuses the repression of the religious; more precisely, since repression cannot be simply refused, political theology offers therapy to loosen that repression. Examining Huey P. Newton is part of that therapeutic practice, for Newton's life and image intensely intertwine the purportedly secular and the theological, and Newton's political practice exemplifies political theology at its best.

Born in 1942, Huey P. Newton was the seventh of seven children.<sup>13</sup> As a child, his family moved from Louisiana to California, where he was an unhappy student, often fighting with his classmates. As an adolescent he taught himself to read, and began devouring political books. In 1966 he formed the Black Panther Party with Bobby Seale. The first activity of the Panthers was to organize police patrols: groups of black people who would follow police officers through black neighborhoods in order to witness abuses, and to intimidate police so that abuses would not occur. Newton led the drafting of a ten point list of demands adopted by the Panthers, including demands for full employment, for housing, for education, and for an end to economic exploitation and police brutality. The first demand on this list asserts that power is the prerequisite for freedom: “We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community. We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.” The tenth demand, demanding a United Nations plebiscite to determine the future of the “black colony” in America, is notable for quoting, verbatim, the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence in its explication (“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature’s God entitle them...”).<sup>14</sup> As the Declaration of Independence citation suggests, the Panthers were particularly, and somewhat paradoxically, concerned with framing their work within the context of an American legal framework. Newton thought it important to be able to cite state laws in confrontations with police. The iconic image

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<sup>13</sup> Biographical details draw on Seale, *Seize the Time*, and Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009 [1973]).

<sup>14</sup> Different versions of Point Ten appear in Bobby Seale’s and Huey Newton’s post facto accounts of the platform’s drafting.

of the Panthers bringing their guns into the California state capitol often overshadows the legal framework in which the event occurred. Openly carrying guns was legal, and the state legislature was debating a bill to restrict gun rights.

In 1967, Newton was involved in a violent confrontation with police. He was shot and injured, and he was put on trial for the murder of a police officer. The Panthers used this incident to mobilize support for the organization, making Newton into an icon (if not a deity, as we will see below). Newton was freed in 1970 and treated as the natural successor to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr, even if he lacked their oratorical abilities. However, it was difficult for Newton to re-integrate into the leadership of the Panthers, with so many young new members who had never met him in person and with his image having been magnified so greatly while he was in jail. Leadership difficulties ensued, particularly as Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale were in and out of jail, and Cleaver drifted away from the Panthers' founders. These problems were compounded by FBI efforts to infiltrate, confuse, and divide the Panthers. Discussions commenced about a possible merger with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had turned towards black power from the mid-60s. By the early 1970s, despite swelling membership, the Panthers were in disarray, and Newton withdrew into insular philosophical meditations and esoterica. He was killed by an Oakland drug dealer in 1989.

The particular interest of this chapter is Huey P. Newton, and it is important to disentangle him from the Panthers in general, as well as from broader currents of black power and black nationalism. Black nationalism is a longstanding tradition of envisioning African Americans as a nation within a nation, affirming the distinctiveness of black culture, and often emphasizing the connection of black Americans with Africa. At times, black nationalists promote shopping at black-owned businesses, wearing distinctively "African" clothing, and

encourage distinctive rituals, such as the celebration of Kwanzaa. The black power movement emerged in the mid-1960s as a response to the limitations of the Civil Rights movement. Not only do black people need rights, they also need power – power to claim and maintain those rights, and power to ensure equitable treatment more broadly. The *black* in black power is significant, as it marked a shift from the earlier term, “Negro.” Claiming and re-signifying the word “black” exemplifies the exercise of black power. Where black nationalism is a broad cultural, economic, and political current, in black power the political has priority. The Black Panthers were an organization that represented one manifestation of black power, and they explicitly opposed currents of black nationalism that privileged the cultural or the economic over the political. Within the Panthers, I take Huey P. Newton’s voice as paradigmatic, with figures who joined later, such as Eldridge Cleaver, Elaine Brown, and Assata Shakur, as variations on Newton’s paradigm – although of course these figures are significant in their own right.<sup>15</sup>

There are three main approaches to studying religion in the black power movement, emanating from black theology, black pragmatism, and black humanism, respectively. Black theology emerged contemporaneously with the black power movement, and it was similarly (though implicitly) positioned as a step beyond the religious thought of the Civil Rights Movement, as exemplified by figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Howard Thurman. James Cone famously wrote that black theology *is* black power, and black theologians more generally crafted their theological reflections in a way that would support the political conclusions of the black power movement.<sup>16</sup> As for the Black Panthers in particular, at times

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<sup>15</sup> Cleaver, for example, converted to Christianity and wrote a theological reflection, *Soul on Fire* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> See especially James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

they sound strikingly similar to black theologians: “The Black Panthers have never intended to turn Black people away from religion. We want to encourage them to change their consciousness of themselves and to be less accepting of the white man’s version of God – the God of the downtrodden, the weak, and the undeserving.”<sup>17</sup> Like SNCC in the late 60s and its iconic leader, Stokely Carmichael, black theology as a movement leaned on fiery rhetoric and celebrity rather than on grassroots organizing. There is strikingly little reflection in the writings of black theologians in the early 1970s on the theological significance of political organizing, a major shortcoming for black theology as a lens through which to examine Huey P. Newton.

The hegemonic force in the academic study of black religion and politics today is black pragmatism. In large part this is due to the charisma and intellect of Cornel West, the African American religious thinker who positions himself in a trajectory of American pragmatists stretching from William James and John Dewey through Reinhold Niebuhr and Richard Rorty to himself. West’s former colleagues at the Princeton Religion Department Eddie Glaude and Jeffrey Stout have analyzed black nationalism through the lens of black pragmatism, concluding that black nationalism is a form of piety.<sup>18</sup> Understood as a naturalized religious concept, piety connotes loyalty to one’s forbearers. But black pragmatists take issue with black nationalism for its excessive piety, which they suggest turns into patriarchy and the worship of power. Black nationalists need to recognize the “multiple traditions of American life” and to situate black culture as part of one among those multiple traditions.<sup>19</sup> When this approach is applied to Huey P. Newton, it does not seem particularly productive. The Black Panthers were explicitly opposed

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<sup>17</sup> Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 179.

<sup>18</sup> Eddie Glaude, ed., *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 52.

to uncritical piety directed at African heritage, although they also did not embrace the “multiple traditions of American life.” The black pragmatist’s suspicion of robust religious ideas and practices prevents her from encountering the religious ideas of Newton and the Panthers on their own terms.

Black humanism is the third major current of African American religious thought today, and some black humanists have embraced Newton as one of their own. Anthony Pinn has included Newton in his canon of black humanist thought because Newton affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, and because Newton locates ultimate worth in the human, rather than in the divine.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Newton does seem to embrace such a Feuerbachian reversal, inverting an all-powerful God with his embrace of “power to the people.” As Newton writes, “My opinion is that the term ‘God’ belongs to the realm of concepts, that it is dependent upon man for its existence.”<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, Newton adds, “the greater man becomes, the less his God will be.”<sup>22</sup> In his later, more speculative writings, Newton is even more explicit, describing a progression of mankind towards a “higher state”: “‘godliness’, where man will know the secrets of the beginning and the end and will have full control of the universe.”<sup>23</sup> The Panthers’ criticism of the Christian church could be pointed, even crude. When Panther leader David Hilliard addressed the National Committee of Black Churchmen in 1970, he angrily called them “a bunch of bootlicking pimps and motherfuckers,” and he threatened that the Panthers would “off”

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<sup>20</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 179.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>23</sup> David Hilliard and Donald Weise, eds., *The Huey P. Newton Reader* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 189.

some of the preachers if they disagreed with the Panthers.<sup>24</sup> On the black humanists' reading, the culmination of the Panthers' relationship with religion was their establishment of the Son of Man Temple in Oakland in the mid-1970s. It featured lectures and arts events on Sundays, at which it took collection, there were Temple committees to organize its work, bake sales and car washes for fundraising, and other familiar accoutrements of a religious organization. The Temple described itself as a "place in which we come together to express our humanity," and it was not a place to "honor one God or one reverend." "This does not mean that we negate any religion; we all have different philosophies and views of our world. We are all part of everything and it is part of each of us.... We want our belief in the beauty of life to spread to freedom-loving people everywhere."<sup>25</sup> Over time, the Son of Man Temple's resemblance to a religious institution faded and it became a more conventional cultural center.

While the black humanist's approach to Newton seems plausible, it misses the opportunity to more deeply engage with the religious ideas and practices employed by Newton. The black humanist's Feuerbachian premises commit her to religion as viewed through the eyes of the secularist: religion as personal misdirected belief. But religious ideas and practices cannot be so easily reduced with repression, distortion, and fantasy. The black theologian's approach fares little better, ignoring the Panther's focus on community organizing, while the black pragmatist conflates several flavors of black nationalism, boiling them all down to a flaccid account of piety. What follows is an alternative approach, reading together narrative, aesthetics, political struggles, and political practice. Although Newton and the early Panthers' sometimes present seemingly discordant approaches to religion, this is an indication of a rich theological

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>25</sup> David Hilliard, ed., *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 14-15.

imagination closely tied with engagement in real politics, politics that critiques ideology/idolatry while exalting the skills of political judgment.

Newton's political self-identity was constituted through struggle that exemplified such political judgment. The founding of the Panthers was propelled by Newton's dissatisfaction with, on the one hand, black nationalist organizations, because their ideas were too detached from the black community, and, on the other hand, non-profits organizations intended to serve the black community. Because of their funding sources and structure, these non-profits created a class of program administrators more interested in preserving their jobs and careers than in the well-being of the communities they ostensibly served. Newton's intuition was that political organizations ought to be by and for a community, not created by others to serve them and not propelled by ideas distant from their lived realities. Newton's political struggles continued within the Panthers. He sought to tack away from Carmichael's turn to "African ideology," with its concomitant rejection of everything associated with Marxism (the Panthers would critically appropriate Marxist ideas). He also distanced himself from SNCC's reliance on college students as its core; college students were *prima facie* distanced from the mainstream black community. At the same time, Newton sought to tack away from fellow Panther Eldridge Cleaver's focus on violent struggle and his hyperbolically proletarian ethos. Cleaver's salty language and distaste for religion also created distance from the mainstream black community, and when Newton was released from prison he attempted to pull back the Panthers who had drifted in Cleaver's direction.

Refusing the pre-packaged ideologies of both black nationalists and Marxists, and refusing to privilege either the authority of higher education or the authority of street culture, Newton took attunement to concrete realities as the essential component to his own "ideology."

As Seale describes it, “Our ideology is to be constantly moving, doing, solving, and attacking the real problems and the oppressive conditions we live under, while educating the masses of the people. This is what we try to, and this is how we move to make the basic political desires and needs of the people realized.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, rather than fetishizing revolution as messianic or deflating it to everyday political progress, Newton discerns an alternative. He writes that “revolution is a process rather than a conclusion or a set of principles,” but he also refuses to associate revolution with any particular aspect of a process that could be named. “Any conclusion or particular action that we think is revolution is really reaction.”<sup>27</sup> According to Newton, revolution gives the subject (“man”) agency as he understands more about the world and “gains more control over himself.” Paradoxically, this control over oneself is also what Newton names, significantly, “revolutionary suicide.” This is also the title of his autobiography, associating himself with the figure of the revolutionary suicide. Newton asserts that black people in America are already condemned to death, and the only way to reclaim agency is through struggle. Struggle gives life, gives freedom, even if it inevitably results in death. The Christological resonance is obvious. According to Newton, the only alternative is reactionary suicide: death without struggle, death without life, death without freedom.

*Revolutionary Suicide* opens with a dedication to Newton’s parents “who have given me strength and made me unafraid of death and therefore unafraid of life.”<sup>28</sup> His father, we learn, was a pastor, and the whole family was very involved in church life. Newton sang in the choir, attended Sunday School, and served as a youth deacon. Participating in church life “gave us a

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<sup>26</sup> Seale, *Seize the Time*, 426.

<sup>27</sup> Huey P. Newton *Reader*, 214.

<sup>28</sup> Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, v.

feeling of importance unequaled anywhere else in our lives.”<sup>29</sup> In the face of humiliations he endured at school, church life opened an alternative:

Even though I did not want to spend my life there, I enjoyed a good sermon and shouting session. I even experienced sensations of holiness, of security, and of deliverance. They were strange feelings, hard to describe, but involving a tremendous emotional release.

Though I never shouted, the emotion of others was contagious. One person stimulated another, and together we shared an ecstasy and believed our problems would be solved, although we never knew how... Once you experience this feeling, it never leaves you.<sup>30</sup>

Newton reflects, “One of the most long-lasting influences on my life was religion.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Newton contemplated becoming a minister until he took philosophy classes in college. Despite the apparent significance of this religious upbringing, and of his father in particular, Newton follows the dedication of *Revolutionary Suicide* with an epigraph, authored by “Huey P. Newton,” seemingly disclaiming his parentage. “By having no family, / I inherited the family of humanity. / By having no possessions, / I have possessed all. / By rejecting the love of one, / I received the love of all. / By surrendering my life to the revolution, / I found eternal life. Revolutionary Suicide.”<sup>32</sup> The religion of his childhood has clearly transformed, but it has not been abandoned. Both author and symbol, whose wisdom is worthy of citation as epigraph, Newton demonstrates a self-awareness of his political theological status as simultaneously earthly body and divine.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., xxi.

The Christomorphic form that Newton's autobiography sometimes takes echoes the sanctification, and sometimes deification, of Newton as part of an orchestrated campaign to both have Newton freed from jail and to use the struggle for Newton's freedom as an organization-building opportunity. In the last years of the 1960s there were "Free Huey" rallies held around the country, including one that brought more than 5000 people to Oakland Auditorium to hear from Movement superstars Stokely Carmichael, James Forman, and H. Rap Brown. Images of a Newton speaking, or preaching, to the masses were disseminated. So, too, was the most famous image of Newton, seated in a wicker chair, wearing the Panther uniform of black leather jacket and black beret. In his left hand is a spear and in his right hand is a rifle; to his side are two African shields. Less discussed is the large wicker chair in which Newton sits. The chair forms a giant circular halo around Newton's head, complete with ribbing along the edges. Newton became Huey P. Newton, with the middle initial always included elevating his name beyond the realm of human signifiers. Panther co-founder Bobby Seale published his hagiography of Newton in 1970 using Newton's full name frequently throughout, as the words and wisdom of the founder are conveyed to Seale's readers. For example, "Huey P. Newton wanted that light there on the corner, and worked to see that the light was there"; "The cultural nationalists ... wanted to sit down and articulate bullshit, while Huey P. Newton wanted to go out and implement stuff"; "For that reason Huey P. Newton wrote Executive Mandate Number Three, concerning Gestapo cops busting down our doors." In fact the enterprise of writing a Huey P. Newton biography, according to Seale, was prompted by an explicitly Christomorphic remark by Eldridge Cleaver: "Eldridge said that Huey P. Newton followed Malcolm X like Jesus Christ followed John the Baptist. That made a heck of a lot of sense to me. So Eldridge got some tapes

and a recorder and a typewriter and took me down to Carmel to a little cabin to work on the book.”<sup>33</sup>

In the lore of the Black Panthers, recorded by Seale, Newton himself, and others, religious parables are re-told with new meaning. For example, after a discussion of “how brainwashed the society was,” a white liberal friend of the Panthers asked his girlfriend to get him an apple. Eldridge Cleaver noted:

[Y]ou let the omnipotent administrator send down a pig angel. His name was Chief Gain or any chief of police in the country. You let him come down with a flaming sword. With a weapon, you let him drive you out of the Garden of Eden. And you didn’t defend it, you and your woman... But if it had been Huey Newton in the middle of the Garden of Eden and the pig angel came down after the omnipotent administrator had told Huey to go forth and exercise his constitutional rights and replenish the earth – if it had been Huey P. Newton and this pig had been swinging the flaming sword at him, Huey would have jumped back and said, “No, I’m defending myself. If you swing that sword at me, I’m shooting back.”<sup>34</sup>

In this riff, retold by Bobby Seale, Genesis is understood as a common point of reference, and it is re-narrated for the Black Panther context. The black humanist would read Cleaver’s re-narration as, again, Feuerbachian, showing that the human – Newton being the greatest of humans – is capable of asserting his own will, and ultimately replacing God. (Note how Newton ascends in the narration from “Huey Newton” to the pure icon, “Huey P. Newton,” when he asserts himself). But in light of the Christomorphic imagery so often used to describe Newton –

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<sup>33</sup> Seale, *Seize the Time*, 264.

<sup>34</sup> Seale, *Seize the Time*, 265.

this story is told one paragraph after Newton is explicitly described as Christ – it seems more reasonable to read Cleaver’s new narration as a New Testament, the Christ-Newton, armed with gun instead of sword, capable of retaining his place in the Garden, overcoming the Fall. It is, after all, Huey P. Newton who can defeat the angel, not just any ordinary man. By following Newton, it is possible to challenge those who would hold the wisdom of the world for themselves, prohibiting access by others – those who would set themselves up as gods.

Unlike other early Black Panthers, Huey P. Newton likes to talk about love. While love is largely absent from Bobby Seale’s writings, and perhaps the closest Eldridge Cleaver comes to talking about love is his infamous remarks on “rape as an insurrectionary act,” love is a natural part of Newton’s vocabulary. The Panthers, following Malcolm X, were highly critical of Martin Luther King’s love language, and Newton’s usage is quite distinct from King’s. For Newton, love is not universal but particular: directed as a specific person or group of people. At the funeral of George Jackson, the great symbol of prison injustice, Newton spoke of how Jackson “bequeathed us his spirit and his love.”<sup>35</sup> By “us,” Newton meant something quite specific: the Panthers, not humanity. Similarly, at the funeral of Bobby Hutton, an early Panther killed by police at age 17, Newton eulogized: “Like a bright ray of light moving across the sky, Li’l Bobby came into our lives and showed us the beauty of our people. He was a living example of infinite love for his people and for freedom.”<sup>36</sup>

Newton describes his initial exposure to a (secular) conception of “nonpossessive love” before his days with the Black Panthers. A friend of his was an advocate of free love, arguing that “nonpossessive love did not enslave or constrain the love object” as does the possessive love

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<sup>35</sup> *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, 243.

<sup>36</sup> Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, xx.

of the bourgeoisie. According to this friend, “Nonpossessive love is based upon shared experiences and friendship; it is the kind of love we have for our bodies, for our thumb or foot.”<sup>37</sup> For a time Newton attempted to put nonpossessive love into practice, but with poor results. Newton encountered another pathology of love when he was in prison. On his account, sex was used, indirectly, as a mechanism of control by the prison authorities. Once the prisoners “became addicted to sex,” “Love and vulnerability and tenderness were distorted into functions of power, competition, and control.”<sup>38</sup> It was not homosexuality that Newton decried (in fact, he spoke in support of the gay rights movement<sup>39</sup>); rather, it was the way that power can distort love by relying on the wrong kind of vulnerability, forced vulnerability that precludes tenderness. In other words, Newton refused both love that was ostensibly nonpossessive and love that was excessively possessive: both, he seems to conclude, are at the service of the powerful. What remains is the difficult work of navigating what might be in between – work that requires virtue, not rules.

What Huey P. Newton presents is less black humanism than black political theology grounded in real politics, black political theology as critique of idolatry. Newton explicitly refuses the reduction of his religious views to humanism, writing: “I’m a very religious person. I have my own definition of what religion is about, and what I think of God.”<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, when an interviewer asks Newton about his religion, he responds that in all religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) God is “the unknown, the unknowable.”<sup>41</sup> But this God of Newton’s is

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 61/

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>39</sup> Huey P. Newton, “The Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements,” in *The Huey P. Newton Reader*.

<sup>40</sup> *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, 280.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 281.

not hidden; this God's erasure is what animates the political theological vision of Newton and the Panthers. Their commitment is to achieve the unknown, to struggle against those who would name it – who would name God, or who would name revolution. They struggle together: they organize. And they learn the law. Understanding the normative context is the prerequisite for political intervention. In organizing and learning law they gain agency. Agency is lost when actions are dictated by ideology, or idolatry; it is gained in the struggle against ideology, against idolatry - a struggle without end. It is a struggle complemented by virtue, and by love.

But what of Newton's Christomorphic presentation, sometimes self-presentation? Is Newton not dangerously close to becoming the God he refuses to name? Huey P. Newton had a stutter, was perpetually nervous, and was a remarkably poor public speaker. Unlike the smoother talking King or Carmichael, or Bob Moses, who went so far as to change his name so as to dis-identify with his charismatic alter ego, Newton did not fit the part. And that, perhaps, is precisely why the Christomorphic imagery is appropriate: because it is so clearly a performative contradiction. As such, the critique of idolatry is located right in the center of Black Panther political theology. The very body of the redemptive man, whose home is Eden, continually refuses the seat of authority which is thrust upon it, dramatizing the shortcomings of all ideology, the dangers of all idolatry. Reflection on the haloed image of Huey P. Newton is preparation for critique, training in virtue – training in love. As Newton says of himself, "I'm not a leader, I'm an organizer."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 276.