

Philosophy and the Black Panthers

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The vanguard party only teaches the correct methods of resistance.

Huey P. Newton, 1967

'Hey Joe! How many of you motherfuckers are coming out here?' 'Here' was Santa Rita Jail, California, early morning, Thursday 3 December 1964. 'Joe' was Joe Blum, a student radical, and the accompanying 'motherfuckers' were the 814 students who had been arrested for occupying Berkeley the day before in support of the Free Speech and, indirectly, Civil Rights movements. The prisoner who greeted Joe Blum was Huey P. Newton, then in jail for felonious assault. The friendship of Blum and Newton was a cameo for the brief alliance of white radicals and black militants in the wake of the civil rights struggle. Both were students at Oakland City College in 1961 and, on that morning in the bus at Santa Rita, Blum was struck by Newton remembering him. Thereafter he followed closely Newton's development through the foundation of the Black Panther Party with Bobby Seale in 1966 and beyond. He later interviewed Newton when in prison in 1968 on the charge of murdering a police officer and published the conversation as a very influential article in the *The Movement*. In 1969 he even named his son Huey. He repented his support when he learnt of Newton's alleged criminal activities, in his article 'The Party's Over' published in *New Times*, 10 July 1978, an article that confirmed the growing eclipse of the Black Panther Party.

At this time of mounting public accusations against Newton and the Black Panthers, in great part seeded by the FBI and its Counter Intelligence Programme of surveillance, infiltration and defamation (COINTELPRO), Newton embarked on a PhD programme in the History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, which he completed in 1980. He wrote a thesis that described the evolution of COINTELPRO and the way it was used against him, an analysis of the

sustained and deliberate campaign of defamation conducted in the third person. In the early hours of the morning of 22 October 1989 Newton was gunned down in West Oakland. His assassin remembered his last words, 'You can kill my body, but you can't kill my soul. My soul will live forever', but he didn't realize the significance of this last of Newton's many paraphrases of Plato's *Phaedo*, which describes Socrates' last hours on death row in ancient Athens.

Much earlier, back in 1970, some representatives of the Black Panthers visited Jean Genet in Paris asking for solidarity; he replied that he was prepared to travel to the USA immediately. His subsequent public statements in support of the Panthers are collected in his book *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, but it is in his last book, *Prisoner of Love* (1986), that he proposed a methodology for understanding their struggle, one that links it with the Palestinian resistance, in which he also directly participated.¹ It's a method that appeals to dimensionality, one refined and confirmed by Genet's experience of walking through the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut hours after the murders in 1982. He was struck there by how the killers had taken great pains to create little visual scenarios – little installations of terror – designed to be photographed, televised and disseminated worldwide as a spectacle of humiliation. So at the outset of his '4 Hours in Shatila' Genet insists

A photograph has two dimensions, so does a television screen: it is impossible to walk through either. From one wall of the street to the other, arched or curved, their feet pushing on one wall and their heads leaning against the other, the blackened and swollen corpses I had to step over were all Palestinian and Lebanese.²

The walk multiplies the dimensions of the experience, restoring depth to the two dimensions of a photographic testimony implicated in a spectacle of terror.



In *Prisoner of Love*, Genet moves between the Palestinians and the Panthers as between two groups of what he calls ‘virtual martyrs’, reflecting constantly on the politics of their image:

The Whites’ recoil from the Panthers’ weapons, their leather jackets, their revolutionary hair-dos, their words and even their gentle but menacing tone – that was just what the Panthers wanted. They deliberately set out to create a dramatic image. The image was a theatre for enacting a tragedy and for stamping it out – a bitter tragedy about themselves, a bitter tragedy for the Whites. They aimed to project their image in the press and on the screen until the Whites were haunted by it. And they succeeded.

Genet continues: “Power may be at the end of a gun,” but sometimes it’s also at the end of the shadow or the image of a gun.’ Genet regarded entry into the spectacle as a plausible tactic of subaltern resistance, but one with its own dangers and risks:

Wherever they went the Americans were the masters, so the Panthers should do their best to terrorize the masters by the only means available to them. Spectacle. And the spectacle would work because it was the product of despair. ... But the spectacle is only spectacle, and it may lead to mere figment, to no more than a colourful carnival; and this is the risk that the Panthers ran. Did they have any choice?³

The danger of the Panthers losing position and threat in depth and slipping into a spectacular politics was especially intense given their adversary’s mastery of the terrain of the spectacle, especially the FBI and its director, who deliberately set out to transform the

Black Panthers’ resistance in depth into a revolutionary pantomime of gestural violence. Genet feared that the consequences of this unequal struggle could be devastating, and urged in his speeches and writings a return to engagement in depth in the ‘metamorphosis of the black community’:

So the Panthers were heading for either madness, metamorphosis of the black community, death or prison. All these options happened, but the metamorphosis was by far the most important, and that is why the Panthers can be said to have overcome through poetry.⁴

But this was not the poetry of the spectacle; it was the multidimensional expression of an emergent capacity to resist.

Pantomime villains?

Huey Newton and Bobby Seale with guns and leather jackets in 1966; Huey posed by Eldridge Cleaver with gun and spear in an image he despised; Huey taking his shirt off when leaving prison in 1970 – moments from the escalating spectacle that Genet saw was both weapon and trap. But against this iconography may be posed the photographs of kids eating free breakfasts, community ambulances and the title page of Huey P. Newton’s PhD thesis. From one perspective, Newton’s doctoral thesis is a devastating confirmation of Genet’s concerns, showing how the spectacle was used against the Black Panthers and by extension against any attempt to frame a radical politics in the USA. The FBI wanted to transform the ‘metamorphosis of the community’ that began not so much with the Civil Rights Movement as with the armed defence of the community pioneered in the South by Robert Williams and the Deacons for Defence and theorized in *Negroes with Guns*. How the authorities in the United States ever expected the black men that they trained to be Marines, like Williams, to leave the army and meekly return to the humiliations of Jim Crow is beyond belief. The free breakfasts for children, the educational and health initiatives, the sickle cell anaemia screening programme – the FBI set out to convert this capacity, this depth of resistance, into the surface of a ‘colourful carnival’. This is confirmed by Hugh Pearson, who in his implacably hostile *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* leaves us with a spectacular portrait of the revolutionary as pantomime villain.⁵ And he may not be entirely wrong. Yet it is hard to imagine anyone’s reputation surviving the manipulations of COINTELPRO intact. (Imagine J. Edgar Hoover’s minions getting to work on Socrates: ‘Subject is an ex-hoplite with spear and

shield training. Mentally disturbed, he maintains a sham marriage while preying on underage males in the agora and at “symposia” ... Frequenting gymnasiums and bathhouses, where he spreads anti-democratic propaganda that he claims to be “philosophy”. Known Associates include declared and potential enemies of the state Alcibiades and Plato...’).

Stepping back from the carnival that swept up, and then swept away, Huey P. Newton, perhaps it is time to look instead at Newton as the revolutionary intellectual who turned away from the religious inspiration of the Christian Civil Rights Movement and the Nation of Islam and looked towards philosophy for strategic and tactical insight. This came at a price. Anyone familiar with the political theology of resistance cannot fail to be struck by a certain thanato-political groundtone resounding from Plato and his scenario of the death of Socrates – his revolutionary suicide – played out in the *Phaedo*. It may be heard in the haunting phrase of the revolutionary Levine, who when on trial for his life after the collapse of the Munich Soviet in 1919 declared to the military court: ‘We Communists are the dead on leave.’ This thanato-politics obviously informed the writer and the movement that could produce a text with the title *Revolutionary Suicide*, published by Newton in 1973.⁶

This book is many things, one of which is a contemporary rewrite of Plato’s *Phaedo*, the story of a condemned criminal on death row who knew he had been sentenced to death long before his trial and execution and who responded, tactically or otherwise,



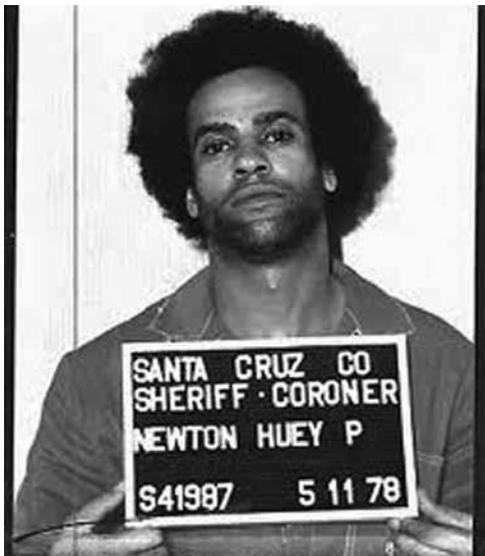
with an appeal to the doctrine of immortality. In place of the immortal soul, however, Newton proposes the immortal revolution that is always to come – in the meantime, though, in this life, there is but resistance. Indeed one of the major and enduring contributions of Newton’s *Revolutionary Suicide* to the work of the Black Panthers, and to radical politics generally, is its status as a rare case of theoretical clarity regarding the often blurred distinction between revolution and resistance.

The politics of resistance is generically different from revolutionary politics, a separation that can be traced to a bifurcation in the immediate philosophical succession to Kant’s critical philosophy and that was played out through the interpretation of the categories of modality. The dominant lineage passed from an emphasis on the modal category of possibility to the problem of the realization of freedom: Fichte, Schiller and Hegel worked through this revolutionary lineage dedicated to realizing freedom. The other, less well known, line of descent passed through Johann Kiesewetter, Kleist and above all Clausewitz, emphasizing the modal category of actuality and the problem of opposed force or resistance. Sometimes described as ‘military Kantianism’, it drew upon and refounded the political tradition of resistance, a struggle more sombre and unremitting than temporary enthusiasms of revolutionary freedom. It has its purest expression in Clausewitz’s *On War* and its analyses of *Widerstandsfähigkeit*, or the capacity to resist, and in Clausewitz’s reader, Nietzsche, with his view of actuality as will to power.⁷ From Marx and Engels onwards, Clausewitz and resistant politics occupied the margin – to varying degrees – of revolutionary politics. The by no means self-evident compatibility between revolution and resistance was realized by some revolutionary thinkers, notably Mao in his texts from the mid- to late 1930s on the prolonged war of resistance, which

focused on the enhancement of the ‘capacity to resist’, excerpts from which (along with embedded quotations from Clausewitz) appear in the *Little Red Book* closely studied by Newton and Bobby Seale in the mid-1960s.

The theoretical clarity with which Newton and Seale grasped the distinction between revolutionary war and the war of resistance is almost unique, and can be traced back not only to the experiences of the struggle but also to Newton’s passionate engagement with the philosophy of Plato and Nietzsche, which allowed him to see things in the fragments of Clausewitz passed over by Mao and otherwise barely visible to his contemporaries. Newton’s clarity regarding the distinction between revolutionary war and the war of resistance was extraordinary, evident already in the early position document ‘The Correct Handling of a Revolution: July 20, 1967’. The opening proposition of this strategic and tactical reflection locates the black struggle firmly at the level of resistance:

The Black masses are handling the resistance incorrectly. When the brothers in East Oakland, having learned their resistance fighting from Watts, amassed the people in the streets, threw bricks and Molotov cocktails to destroy property and create destruction, they were herded into a small area by the gestapo police and immediately contained by the brutal violence of the oppressor’s storm troops.⁸



Newton here reveals a strategic weakness in the resistance, one that Clausewitz warned against repeatedly. The strategic conduct of resistance is the responsibility of the vanguard party, whose task for Newton ends there: it is responsible for building and sustaining a capacity to resist, hopefully as a prelude to revolution but with a clear strategic priority lent to self-defence.

Newton applied Mao’s strategy of the prolonged war of resistance, theorized in the context of the resistance to the Japanese invasion of the 1930s, to the

circumstances of the black community in the United States. Here, as in Mao’s China, ‘The primary job of the party is to provide leadership for the people. It must teach by words and action the correct and strategic methods of prolonged resistance.’⁹ The notion of prolonged resistance points to Mao’s temporal inflection of Clausewitz’s capacity to resist – a capacity is precisely a prolongation in time – thus the struggle for resistance occupies an extended time horizon, unlike a revolutionary bid for power which thrives on the acceleration of time. Newton also shows an acute grasp of the actuality of war and the vital necessity of preserving capacity to resist in this setting: the strategic priority afforded the preservation of the capacity to resist follows the intuition on Newton’s part of Clausewitz’s sombre premiss of the actuality of opposed forces – war – in which each adversary is dedicated to extinguishing the other’s capacity to resist. Consequently:

The main function of the party is to awaken the people and teach them the strategic method of resisting a power structure which is prepared not only to combat with massive brutality the people’s resistance but to annihilate totally the Black population.¹⁰

The communiqué concludes with one of those moments of clarity regarding the distinction between revolution and resistance that Newton would sustain throughout his career as a revolutionary theorist:

So if things get worse for oppressed people they will feel the need for revolution and resistance. The people make revolution; the oppressors, by their brutal actions, cause resistance by the people. The vanguard party only teaches the correct methods of resistance.¹¹

Yet resistance is always in danger of adopting a purely reactive posture that adapts itself to the initiatives of the adversary – one that is momentary, not prolonged; reactive and not the expression of an affirmative *capacity* to resist. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense founded in Oakland in October 1966 initiated a programme of building up and sustaining the ‘capacity to resist’, understood affirmatively, not in responding to discrete acts of oppression but as constituting the visible presence of a capacity to resist present and future threats and attacks.

The rightly celebrated Ten-Point Program of October 1966 is thus not directly revolutionary, but certainly not reformist, as objected by some of its critics. It attempts to theorize an eventual move from resistance to revolution through constituting and augmenting the capacity to resist:

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black Community.
4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.
5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society...
6. We want all black men exempt from military service.
7. We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people.
8. We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons or jails.
9. We want all black men when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.
10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as our major political objective we want a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.

Thomas J. Sugrue perceptively observes in *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (2008) that the list of demands emerged from a matrix of radical ideas ranging across the demand for full employment from the 'labor-civil rights agenda of the 1940s', decent housing from Roosevelt's Second Bill of Rights, and the themes of decadence and exploitation of capitalism from Malcolm X and the Revolutionary Action Movement. He also notes the tactic of appealing to the constitution and the UN, supplementing radical demands with an appeal to true constitutional legality and international law.¹²

The syncretic character of the Ten-Point Program was deliberate; it was intended to collect together the experience of over half a century of struggle in a programme dedicated to enhancing the black community's capacity to resist. This strategy would later inspire other resistance movements, such as the Dalit Panthers of the early 1970s in India and the contemporary anarchist movement in Greece. It was meant to serve as a codification of proven tactics. The symbol of the Black Panther Party itself was developed by SNCC workers in the voting registration campaign of Lowndes County Alabama, led by Stokely Carmichael, as a symbol to distinguish the local 'Lowndes County Freedom Organization' from the state Democratic organization, whose symbol was a white rooster. It was readily adopted by the

Californian militants, as was the experience of Robert Williams and the Deacons for Defense in Monroe, North Carolina, who armed themselves against the Ku Klux Klan in 1957, an experience narrated in Williams's *Negroes with Guns*, studied closely by Seale and Newton. Williams's experience in resisting racist attacks with the armed Deacons for Defense directly motivated the seventh point in the Program, which was implemented by the 'neighborhood watch'



of armed Panthers, the 'Police Monitoring Patrols' that observed the behaviour of the police, intervening where necessary and within the limits of the law. This, the most visible of the Black Panthers' actions, formed part of a classic strategy of resistance; however, when it was transformed into the spectacle of militants in black leather jackets carrying shotguns it was open to misinterpretation as a spectacular revolutionary gesture. It was deliberately used in this way on occasions such as the 22 May 1967 siege of the State Assembly Chamber at Sacramento, but the basic strategic justification of the patrols was set in terms of building a capacity to resist.

The spectacular invasion of Sacramento by twenty Black Panthers armed with shotguns, M1 rifles and revolvers, dressed in full regalia of leather jackets and berets, was conceived by Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, although Newton was not present. Later, he would severely distance himself from such actions and Cleaver's violent revolutionary rhetoric, which flourished during Newton's imprisonment. In a frequently hilarious television confrontation with William F. Buckley on 11 February 1973, Newton was categorical in taking a distance from Cleaver and the tactics adopted by the Black Panther Party during the latter's ascendancy:

I think that rhetoric ran amok in the Black Panther Party while the leadership was under the influence of Eldridge Cleaver. It caused murders of many of our people. It laid the foundation so that even the black community could say, 'Oh, see those bad guys are out there, you see, they always want violence and robberies and so forth.' This kind of rhetoric can provoke physical conflict.¹³

Newton's critique of Cleaver was even harsher on other occasions, such as his essay on Cleaver's homophobia, 'On Eldridge Cleaver: He Is No James Baldwin' (1973), but whatever the personal antipathies, the question of political strategy was central to their differences. In a return to the initial inspiration of the Black Panther Party with the departure of Cleaver, laid out in 'On the Defection of Eldridge Cleaver from the Black Panther Party and the Defection of the Black Panther Party from the Black Community: April 17, 1971', Newton claimed that

the only reason we have been able to survive the repression of the Party and the murder of some of our most advanced comrades, is because of the Ten-Point Program – our survival program. Our programs would be meaningless and insignificant if they were not community programs.¹⁴

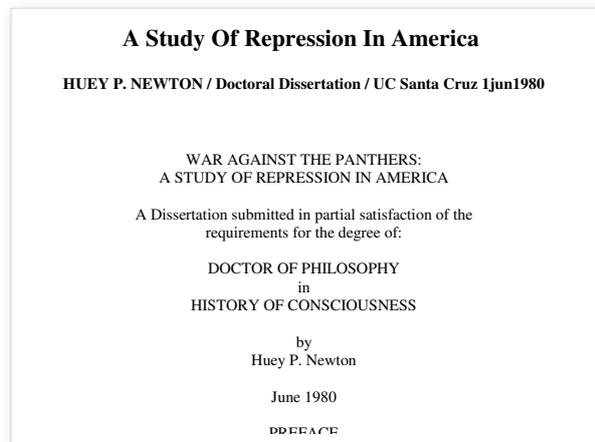
The work of building up a capacity to resist was compromised by Cleaver's rhetoric, Newton now saw. Cleaver's departure was an opportunity to renounce the spectacle of violence and to return, in Genet's words, to 'dimensional' work in the community: 'So the Black Panther Party has reached a contradiction with Eldridge Cleaver, and he has defected from the Party because we would not order everyone into the streets tomorrow to make a revolution.' With this: 'We are now free to move toward the building of a *community structure* that will become the true voice of the people, promoting their interests in many ways.'¹⁵ After 1971 the Black Panthers invested a great part of their efforts and resources to the community programmes: free breakfasts for school children (a move that deeply alarmed J. Edgar Hoover, who saw this initiative as the greatest 'long-term threat' to the internal security of the USA), free health clinics, free ambulances, sickle cell anaemia screening, clothing and shoe programmes, buses to prison programmes – all measures consciously directed to building up the community's capacity to resist.

Will to power

Let us turn back to *Revolutionary Suicide*, which is a chronicle of Newton's life of resistance, beginning with his schooldays. Newton ironically thanks his school for their contribution to his formation as a resistance fighter: 'They never realized how much they had actually educated me by teaching the necessity of resistance and the dignity of defiance.' But what is most remarkable is Newton's narration of how he learnt to read, inspired by his brother Melvin:

Then I picked up Melvin's copy of Plato's *Republic*, bought a dictionary, and started learning to read things I did not already know.... I spent long hours

every day at home going through the *Republic* and pronouncing the words I knew. If I did not know a word, I would look it up in the dictionary, learn how to sound it out if I could, and then learn the meaning... I worked on that book, going over it page by page, word by word.¹⁶



Newton took from Plato not only the analysis of the idea of justice, but also the scenario of the public struggle of ideas. He took this lesson first of all to the block: 'Sometimes I got into teaching on the block, reciting poetry or starting dialogues about philosophical ideas. I talked to the brothers about things that Hume, Peirce, Locke, or William James had said.' He particularly recalled the impact of Plato's *Republic* on the street:

I told them about the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*, and they enjoyed it. We called it the story of the cave prisoners.... The allegory seemed very appropriate to our own situation in society. We, too, were in prison and needed to be liberated in order to distinguish between the truths and the falsehoods imposed on us.

These philosophical debates on the block moved directly into confrontational debates with the police about their individual acts of injustice and their role in a system that perpetuated it, as well as to the study of police science and law, in order to learn how to 'outmaneuver the police' but also 'to become a better burglar'.¹⁷

Second in importance only to Plato in the formation of Newton, and through him the Panthers' philosophy, was Nietzsche, of whom Newton was a close reader. In *Revolutionary Suicide* Newton observes:

When I read Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, I learnt much from a number of his philosophical insights. This is not to say that I endorse all of Nietzsche, only that many of his ideas have influenced my thinking. Because Nietzsche was writing about concepts fundamental to all men, and particularly about the meaning of power, 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 the Black Panther philosophy.¹⁸

Newton goes on to explain how. The first impact was Nietzsche's thought 'that beyond good and evil is the will to power – it is really the will to power that controls our understanding of something and not an inherent quality of good or evil.' He describes how the Panthers tried to apply this theory.

In the early days of the Black Panthers we tried to find ways to make this theory work in the best interests of Black people. Words could be used not only to make Blacks more proud but to make whites question and even reject concepts they had always unthinkingly accepted.¹⁹

Newton and the Black Panthers took Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* and his account of the rise of Christianity as a strategic manual in the struggle for power, revaluing words such as 'Black', using others to compromise the confidence of the adversary by devaluing them. The strongest example was the use of 'pig' for policemen, part deliberate strategy to devalue and delegitimize the police.

Another example of the Panthers' Nietzschean politics was the expression 'All Power to the People': 'that helped to raise Black people's consciousness' and

has meaning on several levels – political, economic, and metaphysical – it was coined by the Black Panther Party about the same time as pig and has also gained wide acceptance. When we created it I had in mind some distinct philosophical goals for the community that many people did not understand.²⁰

The political and economic meanings were the actuality of power or the recognition of a state of war and ultimately 'complete control of the institutions in the community'.²¹ The metaphysical was explicitly explained in an earlier position document 'Black Capitalism Re-analyzed I: June 5, 1971'. There Newton comments:

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.²²

Power as the ability to define phenomena and to control their action returns to the distinction between resistance and revolution; power becomes the affirmation of a community, not of its freedom, as with the Civil Rights Movement, but of its capacity to resist.

Yet, on the other side of Nietzsche's genealogy of morals and will to power is the thought of the more-than-human and its cluster of concepts such as nobility, affirmation and joy. Newton, like Fanon before him, saw a new kind of human emerging from the prolonged and bitter struggles of resistance. He described this in the 1974 article 'The Mind is Flesh', a rare moment in which Newton looked beyond the thanato-politics of resistance to the revolution and then even further into a posthuman communist future that preserves freedom as but one value alongside intellect and character, all of which are second to joy:

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.²³

Notes

1. Jean Genet, *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*, trans. Jeff Fort, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2004; *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray, New York Review Books, New York, 2003.
2. Genet, *The Declared Enemy*, p. 209.
3. Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, p. 99.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
5. Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*, Perseus, Cambridge MA, 1996.
6. Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, Penguin Books, New York, 2009.
7. See Howard Caygill, 'Also Sprach Zapata: Philosophy and Resistance', *Radical Philosophy* 171, January/February 2012, pp. 19–25.
8. *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, ed. David Hilliard and Donald Weise, Seven Stories Press, New York, 2002, p. 141.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
12. Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, Random House, New York, 2008.
13. *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, p. 283.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
16. *Revolutionary Suicide*, pp. 50, 54.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 76–9.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 174–5.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, p. 227.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 330.