

The Socratic Black Panther: Reading Huey P. Newton Reading Plato

In his court testimony at the trial for the death of officer John Frey, Huey P. Newton opens with an anecdote about how he had learned to read by repeatedly pouring over Plato's *Republic*. Newton explains to the jury that Platonic philosophy had a crucial influence on him during his adolescent years:

I tried to explain what a deep impression Plato's allegory of the cave had made on me and how the prisoners in that cave were a symbol of the Black man's predicament in this country. It was a seminal experience in my life, I explained, for it had started me thinking and reading and trying to find a way to liberate Black people. (*Revolutionary Suicide* 249)

This vignette suggests that for Newton reading Plato's *Republic*, the cave allegory in particular, marked a pivotal moment in his life, "a seminal experience." Indeed, Plato's *Republic* and reading Plato are central themes within part 2 of Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide* (hereafter *RS*) that covers that period of his life after he graduated high school but before he and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party. In general, Newton only cites Plato or makes allusion to the cave allegory at key moments in the narrative.

And yet, the writings of Huey P. Newton and contemporary memoirs about Newton and/or the Black Panther Party outside *RS* are conspicuously absent of references to Plato or the *Republic*. In Newton's *To Die for the People*, for example, there is not a single reference to Plato, the *Republic*, or the cave allegory. As is the case for Bobby Seale's *Seize the Time*. The most obvious exception to this is Eldridge Cleaver's 1968 *Soul on Ice*, whose two essays, "The Primeval Mitosis" and "Convalescence," are racial readings of Plato's *Symposium*. Cleaver had, of course, already published these essays

while in prison, before joining the Panthers and editing *Soul on Ice*. Plato, the *Republic*, and the cave allegory are, from a textual perspective, therefore, essentially relevant to *RS*.

This essay examines the role of Platonic literature and philosophy in part 2 of Newton's *RS* and argues that Plato's *Republic*, as the seminal text in Newton's early adult life, intertextually directs the course of events, both the ways Newton describes the plight of black America and how Newton engages other literary texts, poetry in particular. Over the course of part 2 of *RS*, Newton increasingly adopts the guise of a modern day Socrates, confounding his white opponents and revealing the truth about racial oppression. Studying prose texts, especially philosophy, becomes (inter)textually symbolic for racial enlightenment, on the one hand, and for the responsibility Newton sees of himself to share that enlightenment with those still chained in the dark recesses of the cave, on the other. In my reading, Newton is transformed into an updated and remixed version of Socrates, an American gadfly, called to prompt his fellow citizens toward justice and equality. Through this innovative approach to reading *RS* by way of Newton's reading of Plato, this essay contributes to the growing scholarly interest in classical reception, black classicism in particular, and provides a literary lens through which to interpret Newton's practical theory of revolutionary suicide.