Race, gender and class in the autobiography of Huey P. Newton[1]

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"We'll just have to get guns and be men", such was the powerful rallying cry uttered by Black Panther member (and later leader) Elaine Brown in her 1969 song "The End of Silence". I take Brown's words as the point of departure for my article, since they seem to encapsulate much of what is at stake in relation to gender and the Black Power movement. Brown's call to arms in "The End of Silence" immediately poses the question of the significance as well as the function of masculinity in the movement. It also highlights the link between masculinity and armed resistance. However, the use of the verb "to be" signals that "men" are the product of an action—getting guns—rather than a pre-existing subject performing the action, thus putting into question the automatic correlation between masculinity and the male body, a feeling reinforced by the words being uttered by the female voice of Elaine Brown. The contradictions and problematic aspects of the Black Power movement's invocation of black masculinity, as well as the intersections of race, gender and class, will be at the core of this discussion. In order to explore these issues, I will focus on the autobiography of Black Panther leader Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, where I will examine the tensions in this activist narrative's construction of a racialized, classed and gendered self.

Historical background
As far as mainstream U.S. history goes, the Black Power movement has characteristically been understood as a distinct historical phenomenon following on, and breaking from the more widely accepted Civil Rights movement. According to the traditional periodization of the era, Black

Power spans the years between 1966[2] and 1975. 1966 corresponds to the year in which Stokely Carmichael, leader of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordination Committee), brought the slogan of Black Power to national attention during the March Against Fear,[3] by uttering the now famous words: "This is the twenty-seventh time that I've been arrested. I ain't going to jail no more. The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!" (quoted in Joseph 2006: 2). 1975, the year marking the decline of the movement, more diffusely stands for a time when its ideological fractures became overwhelming, as well as when the popular media lost interest in Black Power and its leaders. In other words, the movement was eventually silenced (Van Deburg 1992: 15).

In dividing the Civil Rights era into two distinct periods, historians of course have done more than simply impose a tidy order onto politically tumultuous times and help clarify the divergent strategies characteristic of both movements. They have also implicitly or explicitly constructed a value-laden narrative in which Black Power often functions as the constitutive Other of the Civil Rights movement, or even its "evil twin", to use the words of historian Peniel E. Joseph (2001: 2). The Black Power leaders' advocacy of self-defense is thus made to contrast neatly with the Civil Rights movement's nonviolent stance, while the call for black nationalism offers a counterpoint to the Civil Rights movement's path toward liberal integration.

Another aspect that has come to be more specifically associated with the Black Power movement, and which I hinted at in the opening paragraph of this article, is its often narrow definition of black liberation as the liberation of black men and its adoption of a traditional understanding of gender roles (Estes 2005: 2-8). The reclaiming of black men's manhood occupied a central place in the Black Power movement's rhetoric and activism, one that also necessitated the subsuming of the

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[2] 1965, the year of the Watts riots in Los Angeles, is often also given as the starting point for the Black Power movement (Joseph 2006: xi).

[3] The March Against Fear was originally begun by Mississippi University's first black student, James Meredith, who singly decided to walk across what remained the most dangerous state for black people to live in. After he was shot on the second day of the March, however, Civil Rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael, joined together to support Meredith and to finish what he had started (Joseph 2006: 1).

interests of black women to those of black men in the political struggle. Still today, the image of the (male) Black Panther, complete with leather jacket, black beret and shotgun, remains powerfully evocative of this period in history (Williams 2006: 90).[4]

Moreover, in the black nationalist struggle to forge a society free of racism, blackness as an identity category took central stage and aimed to transcend the differences within the group (be they of class or gender for example). The subscription to the idea of black authenticity, as well as the tendency to offer black masculinity as the one-size-fits-all model for African American activist subjectivity has, however, been a problematic aspect of the movement that continues to require critical attention—as part of the aim both to understand the past and to theorize about the future.

More recently, the last decade has seen a significant revival of interest in the Black Power era, in particular by historians interested in offering new and more nuanced interpretations of the period and of the movement.[5] This article thus inscribes itself within the growing field of research now known as Black Power Studies. Since I have chosen to examine this movement through the lens of an autobiographical text, I also need to account for autobiographical studies as a field of research, as well as for its relevance for exploring issues of race, gender and class.

Autobiographical studies
The advent of autobiographical studies as a recognized field of research has gone hand in hand with the transformation of the academic landscape to include issues relevant to more than simply white middle-class men. As Kenneth Mostern has argued in *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*, "the very development of autobiography as a field of study has depended on the entrance of African American as well as other minority

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[4] Although black masculinity is central to how Black Power is represented and understood, many women were in fact involved in the movement and were crucial to its organization. Women represented, for example, more than half of the membership of the Black Panthers (Ogbar 2004: 104).
[5] See for example Nikhil Pal Singh *Black Is a Country* (2004); Peniel E. Joseph *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour* (2006), *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights – Black Power Era* (2006); Cedric Johnson *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders* (2007) and Amy Abugo Ongiri *Spectacular Blackness* (2010).

and feminist literatures into academic study" (1999: 11). Similarly, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have claimed, in their introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, that "interest in women's autobiographical practices […] was acknowledged as a field around 1980" and was informed by a perception of this "as both an articulation of women's life experience and a source for articulating feminist theory" (1998: 5). The correlation of these two phenomena—the emergence of autobiographical studies as a field of research and the process of diversification of academia—suggests that, from the outset, this new focus on the genre of autobiography has been fundamentally interlinked with different emancipatory political projects.

The genre has indeed been of particular significance to marginalized groups, not least African Americans, in their struggle for social liberation. In fact, autobiography, in the form of slave narratives, constitutes the beginning of the whole African American literary tradition. It is therefore not accidental that so many African American writers have used the genre to articulate both their own personal experience as well as a collective history of exploitation and resistance, making African American autobiography, according to Paul Gilroy, the most powerful expression of a "process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation" (quoted in Mostern 1999: 11).

The significance of personal narratives to such marginalized subjects rests in part on the fact that it provides them with a decisive first step in constituting oneself as a subject worthy of interest, or even in constituting oneself as a subject at all. These writers, having previously been socially marginalized and silenced, could at least claim authority over their own experience and, in this way, enter the public debate. The link that exists between personal experience and political consciousness is therefore particularly relevant to scholars within the field. To once again cite Mostern: "the origins of revolt are always necessarily in people's self-understanding of their lived conditions, their autobiographies" (Mostern 1999: 27). The nature of the articulation of personal experience and politics is, however, a controversial subject within autobiographical studies, something that I will return to later.

The link between the personal and the political is one that also points to the fundamental nexus between the individual and the collective. The ways in which the individual "I" of the writer meets the collective "I" of the group they are perceived to belong to, is something that scholars of

the genre have been particularly concerned with. These narratives hold therefore a potential of representativity. As Smith and Watson for example point out: "[W]omen reading other women's autobiographical writings have experienced them as 'mirrors' of their own unvoiced aspirations" (1998: 5). In providing, in some sense, "models of heroic identity" (1998: 5), autobiographies can thus perform political work in themselves through helping other marginalized people to come to consciousness and find a voice. bell hooks also stresses the central role that autobiographical writing, in particular by black women activists, can play in helping other black women develop a "radical subjectivity" (1992: 56). Thus, paradoxically perhaps, while autobiographies by marginalized groups put into question the universal character of privileged white men's experience and subjectivity, they also subvert the individualist ideology often underpinning the genre through their reliance on the idea of a collective. The articulation of collective experience by the autobiographical "I" also implies to a certain extent the notion of authenticity: the subject needs to show that her/his experiences are representative of the community allowing her/him to speak on its behalf.

As can be seen from the above, the autobiographical narrative occupies a privileged position in relation to the exploration of issues of gender and race. The first problem that confronts us in our discussion, however, is the question of definition. What is meant by these two concepts? Even before asking ourselves what they mean or represent, one first needs to grapple with the ontological status of such categories. Is there for example such a thing as race or gender? Is there in other words any biological basis for these concepts, as we often seem to infer in our everyday use of them.

These questions have long exercised critics investigating these issues in the wider context of emancipatory strategies. The refusal to accept the classification of black and female subjects as lesser human beings has led inevitably in contradictory directions, where the need on the one hand for positive re-evaluation and, on the other, for recognition of a universally accepted equal status has proven difficult to reconcile.[6] Activists and scholars have thus in turn emphasized social constructivist and difference

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[6] Nancy Fraser has for example shown the political consequences of this dilemma for feminist and anti-racist movements as they struggle toward the twin goals of *recognition* and *redistribution* that often seem to take them in opposite directions (1995: 68-93).

models of both race and gender. The former would understand the experience of being a woman and being black as shaped by a specific historical and social context rather than as the expression of a potential inherent in the subjects themselves, while the latter would engage in a project of valorization of black and female subjects in their specificity while interrogating the white male norm.

At the risk of being reductionist, one could exemplify this dilemma as it pertains to the concept of sex/gender by contrasting Simone de Beauvoir's most famous formulation about the condition of womanhood: "On ne naît pas femme : on le devient" (One is not born a woman but rather becomes one) ([1949] 2002: 13), to Luce Irigaray's dual project of rejection of phallogocentrism and re-evaluation of the experiences of women and of their bodies. Beauvoir, through her provocative claim, seeks to challenge the biologically deterministic notion that being a woman is reducible to the fact of being female (2002: 14-15). In *The Second Sex*, she thus emphasizes the significance of women's experiences in a patriarchal society as shaping their existence. Irigaray, for her part, takes the starting point in women's morphology in order to define the female imaginary. Her claim in *This Sex Which Is not One* that "Without any intervention or manipulation, *you are a woman already*" (85: 211, my emphasis) seems to be in complete opposition to Beauvoir and has led many to criticize Irigaray for her essentialism.[7] A third way of looking at gender is through Judith Butler's concept of performativity. To Butler, there is no essence to gender identity, instead "the anticipation of a gendered essence" is what in fact "produces that which it posits as outside itself" (2004: 94). Thus gender is not the expression of biological truth, but is instead "manufactured through a sustained set of acts" that take on a ritualistic character (2004: 94).

The discussion of the concept of race has similarly been divided along the lines of social construction, essence and performance. One way the social constructionist stance can be expressed is by the idea that race or racialization is the product rather than the cause of racism. In this respect it is significant to note that French philosopher Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvauroux has adapted Beauvoir's statement as the title of one of his

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[7] See Diana J. Fuss for a reading of Irigaray that addresses and criticizes the charges of essentialism directed at her (1989: 62-80). The contrast between Beauvoir and Irigaray is not unequivocal on this point since Beauvoir never denied the role of anatomy to the experience of women (2002: 22).

works: *On ne nait pas Noir, on le devient* (One is not born, but rather becomes Black) (2004). The slogan of the Black Power era "Black is Beautiful" and James Brown's invocation of black pride in "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud" corresponded to a will to define the content of blackness in more positive terms, not least as a form of resistance to the institutional racism of U.S. society. More recently, Butler's concept of performativity has also found currency in the discourse on blackness (Johnson 2003), something I will explore in more detail later.

While theories of gender have often taken women as their subject, masculinity studies have developed in the last two decades to focus both on the experience of men as gendered beings and on the meaning of masculinity. One aim of masculinity scholars has been to emphasize the multiplicity of experience that the category of "men" encompasses, where men from lower social backgrounds and who are not white are very differently situated in relation to male status and privilege (Connell [1995] 2005: 36). Of particular interest to a U.S. context and to the Black Power era in particular is the experience of black men, which needs to be discussed both in relation to their often privileged position vis à vis black women, as well as to the specifically gendered ways in which they have been discriminated against in racist society (Mostern 1999: 13; hooks 2004). In the context of Newton's autobiography, I will also seek to show how the images of blackness and masculinity cannot be discussed without taking into account the issue of class. More than just a category that needs to be added to an analysis of gender and race, class in fact modifies the content of these other categories and plays a central role in how gender and race are both experienced and represented.

I am inclined to agree with Kwame Anthony Appiah who states in *In My Father's House*: "The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us" (1992: 45). The same, I would argue, could be said about gender. This, however, is not to minimize the significance of race and gender in people's lives. Howsoever we might question the biological basis of these categories, race and gender do matter in the sense that they have serious material consequences. In line with Appiah's claim, I would suggest a more revealing aspect to study is what uses are made of "race", or "gender" even in emancipatory discourses. In the context of this article, I will therefore be interested in looking at the way one Black Power activist makes use of and conceptualizes these categories in order to make sense

of himself and his community and as a way to propagate a specific form of politics. I believe that these questions are particularly interesting and relevant to the study of Black Power texts, since the 1960s and 1970s corresponded to the heyday of both second-wave feminism and the Civil Rights movement, where issues of difference versus equality and the accompanying strategies of liberation increasingly led to confrontation.

In my analysis, I will focus particularly on three concepts: authenticity, performance and experience. These concepts are closely linked to the three approaches I have discussed above: essentialism, performativity, and social constructionism. Authenticity, in relation to race in a U.S. context, points to the belief in there being a genuine and agreed upon content to African American identity (Favor 1999: 2-3). It is linked to the concept of essence in that it presupposes an original model of identity against which each subject can be measured. Performativity, as I have already mentioned, undermines the notion that there is an essence to either gender or racial identity; gender and race are instead conceived as the product or effects of regulatory gender and racial norms rather than their origin. Finally, experience, to use Joan Scott's words, is usually defined as "an expression of an individual's being and consciousness" or, at a more collective level, refers to "influences external to individuals—social conditions, institutions, forms of belief or perception—'real' things outside them that they react to" (1998: 61). In looking at Newton's autobiography I will try to analyze his construction of black masculinity with the help of these three concepts, as well as see how they are interlinked with one another.

As I have already pointed out, the text I have chosen to analyze is the autobiography written by Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*. My reasons for this choice are manifold: the first concerns Huey Newton's status in the Black Power movement. Newton was the co-founder and leader of the Black Panther Party, the organization that remains the icon of black militancy (James 2009: 140). Through the successful "Free Huey" campaign, Newton himself became for a while a powerful symbol of the struggle for black liberation. Moreover the Black Panther Party appears as somewhat at odds with other Black Power groups. Unlike most Black Power organizations, the Black Panther Party for example opposed a strict separatist stance and advocated alliances with white radicals. The party also supported, at least rhetorically, the movements for women's and gay liberation (Newton [1970] 2002: 157-59). This is

why I believe issues relating to the construction of race and gender would be particularly significant to examine in a text produced by the leader of the organization.

The second point has to do with the autobiography as a genre of particular interest to African American and gender studies. Autobiographies also hold a privileged position in African American history and literature, allowing readers access to the weaving of subject, collective identity and politics, aspects I will return to later. In choosing this text, I have also been sensitive to the date of publication. *Revolutionary Suicide* was published in 1973 which makes the text concomitant with the Black Power struggle. Most of the other autobiographies written by members of the Black Panther Party were published some time after the event, between the 1980s and the 00s, and therefore responded to very different contexts, in relation to gender, race and politics in general. Moreover, relatively little critical work has been done on Huey Newton's autobiography, compared to other members of the Panther party, such as Angela Davis and Elaine Brown. This might be related to the less literary nature of Newton's text, but might also have been due to the lack of availability of the text. It is nevertheless relevant to note that *Revolutionary Suicide* has recently been re-edited as a Penguin classic (2009), a sign that Newton's autobiography now enjoys Canonical status and is still considered politically and historically significant. This new edition should also open up for more scholarly work on the text. Finally, and most significantly, my claim is that Newton's text provides a particularly illuminating case study of how gender, race and class are alternately articulated in terms of authenticity, performance and experience. My aim therefore is to investigate the significance of black masculinity to the construction of Newton's autobiographical self, as well as the function masculinity occupies in relation to his overall political project. The main questions I want to try to answer are to what extent are gender and race, and more specifically in this study masculinity and blackness, understood in terms of authenticity, performance or experience in Newton's autobiography? What is the function of class in his construction of black masculinity? And how does Newton relate masculinity to political violence and resistance?

In order to explore these particular critical questions, I intend to implement an interpretative reading of Newton's autobiography which, in keeping with the modern trend in autobiographical studies, I will treat

as a literary text (Smith and Watson 1998: 7). What I am therefore interested in looking at in relation to Newton's autobiography is not whether the narrative provides an accurate portrayal of the subject's life and of the social and political context it describes. What matters more to is to examine Newton's text as a construction that reveals much about the contradictory discourses about black masculinity that were prevalent at the time of its production.

In search of authentic black masculinity

As I have previously pointed out, the Black Power movement has often been characterized as particularly masculinist in defining the goal of the black liberation struggle as giving black men their male pride back, not least through their access to the same patriarchal privileges they saw white men enjoyed. Black men, it was argued, had been castrated by 400 years of slavery and second-class citizenship and it was now time for them to reclaim their manhood. The reference to castration was of course metaphorical, but it also invoked the horrific reality of lynching in the U.S South where black men—often after being accused of having preyed on white women—were savagely beaten, dismembered and their bodies burned. It was not uncommon for these men to be castrated in the process, a sign that reflected the intimate link in white people's minds between black masculinity and sexuality (Apel 2004: 91).

Although revealing the specific ways in which black men were victimized in white supremacist societies such as the United States, the rhetoric of Black Power leaders in asserting black masculinity also played into the conservative discourse of the time which sought to diagnose the breakdown of the black family as an institution. The most prominent example of this was the government report published in 1965 by Daniel Patrick Moynihan under the title: "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action". Here, Moynihan described the black family in pathological terms, not least because of what he claimed was its matriarchal structure. Women had the authority while black men were too weak psychologically as a result of the consequences of slavery: "[T]he establishment of a stable Negro family structure" (n. pag.)—read patriarchal structure—was the goal Moynihan advocated the government should adopt in relation to black families, before blacks could gain full citizenship within U.S. society.

This promoting of traditional gender roles as desirable and ultimately 'normal' is something that is also apparent in Huey Newton's autobiography. By introducing the reader to his childhood background, Newton claims in particular that his own family, although representative in some ways, also distinguishes itself because of its atypical power structure. His father appears as special because of his pronounced patriarchal role and his firm belief in the work ethic, as Newton explains:

> My father was not typical of Southern Black men in the thirties and forties. Because of *his* strong belief in the family, *my mother* never worked at an outside job, despite seven children and considerable economic hardship. Walter Newton is rightly proud of his role as family protector. To this day, my mother has never left *her* home to earn money. (2009: 9-10, my emphasis)

Newton's father appears here as having escaped the disorder seemingly afflicting other black men at the time in retaining his natural masculinity. He asserts his masculine authority in such an effortless manner to the point that Newton's mother even becomes a subject without a will of her own: "Because of *his* strong belief in the family, *my mother* never worked at an outside job."

In the opening paragraphs of his narrative, Newton thus extols the virtues and even naturalness of the nineteenth century bourgeois model of the separate spheres that divided the public world of work, reserved for men, from the private domestic sphere, which was the special domain of women ("*her* home"). Ironically, in doing so, Newton reproduces the rhetoric and ideology of the Moynihan report. He accepts both the nuclear family and its traditional division of labor as being necessary, while also characterizing his own family as being less dysfunctional insofar as it copied that traditional model.

One could say that Newton initially adheres to an idea of masculine essence, one he sees his father possessing. The reason why black men in general lacked this quality is seen as the result of hundreds of years of oppression that have conditioned them into unnatural submissiveness. In fact, other black men are not viewed as being completely devoid of masculinity as much as purposefully restraining themselves, hiding their true nature, not least in their interaction with whites: "Although many other Black men in the South had a similar strength, they never let it show around whites" (2009*: 29).

In terms once again reminiscent of the Moynihan report, black mothers in Newton's narrative also seem complicit in this state of affairs since they encourage their boys not to assert themselves:

> Traditionally, southern Black women have always had to be careful about how they bring up their sons. Through generations, Black mothers have tried to *curb* the *natural masculine aggressiveness* in their young male children, lest this quality bring swift reprisal or even death, from the white community.
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> (2009: 29, my emphasis)

Although Newton also shows the good intentions behind black women's way of bringing their children up, as a way to protect their sons, it was one that had both negative and lasting consequences for the low self-esteem of black men.[8]

Significantly, through his characterization of his father as an unapologetically masculine man and his emphasis on the lessons his father taught him, Newton posits himself from the outset as a natural inheritor of black masculinity. At this early stage in the narrative, Newton defines masculinity in line with bourgeois concepts of the family provider and protector, as well as with more general ideals of male dignity and pride (2009: 29). Aggressiveness also forms another key constitutive element of Newton's understanding of masculinity. Aggressiveness could also refer to entrepreneurship and the image of the self-made man so central to mainstream American masculinity (Kimmel 2002: 137), thus remaining consistent with white bourgeois norms. In Newton's case, however, it is more in line with another type of violence, one that is more literal and physical.

In *Revolutionary Suicide*, the role of violence is significant in forming the core of both a masculine and (male) working-class sense of identity. In the same way that "aggressiveness" is described as a natural possession of boys and men (2009: 29), Newton considers fighting as occupying a "big part in […] the lives of most poor people" (2009: 22). As such, a man's readiness to use violence and defend himself becomes the measure of his masculinity. It is also a necessity of working-class

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[8] A similar diagnosis, couched in much more critical terms, forms part of the argument of another leading Panther figure, George Jackson, in *Soledad Brother* (1970).

life, both as a way to assert oneself against aggressors and as a form of bonding between male friends (2009: 23).

Fighting therefore takes on a very positive value in Newton's narrative as a signifier of authenticity—both real masculinity and as the mark of a genuine experience of oppression. In his autobiography, in which he frames his own experience as being representative of blacks in America—often moving from the "I" of the narrator to the collective "We" of the "race", as exemplified by the title of the epilogue, "I am We" (2009: 359)—Newton privileges the experience of black working-class males as being a more valid starting-point for political organization. This is achieved not least through the binary opposition between the campus and "the block", which also resonates with other sets of binaries—between talk and action, words and guns, mind and body. In an episode that dramatizes a turning point in his political evolution, Newton clearly emphasizes this class dichotomy:

> Most of the people in the [Afro-American] Association were *college* students and very *bourgeois*, but *my people* were *off the block*; some of them could not even read, but they were angry and looking for a way to channel their feelings. […] Sometimes our street meetings ended in fights […]. That was when I began to see through Warden [the founder of the Afro-American Association]. […]
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> My disillusionment began when I realized he would not stand his ground in a fight. (2009: 63, my emphasis)

It is significant to note that the illiterate "street brothers", whom Newton also repeatedly characterizes as "righteous" (2009: 61, 67), are shown to deserve more respect than intellectual leaders, because of their ability to fight. Paradoxically, in a reversal of the traditional nature-culture binary, it is the bodies of men that form the constitutive element that defines their status. More specifically, the masculinity of black working-class men, from being a stereotypical trait, is here promoted more positively as part of their potential political identity.

Thus, working-class origins not only serve to lend masculine credibility but also political authenticity. This is exemplified in a humorous passage in which Newton derides another campus organization—the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM)—for their lack of masculine political resolve:

> They claimed to function as an underground movement but instead of revolutionary *action*, they indulged in a lot of revolutionary *talk*, none of it underground. They

> were all *college* students, with *bourgeois* skills, who *wrote* a lot. Eventually, they became so infiltrated with agents that when an arrest was made, the police spent all their time showing each other their badges. (2009: 72, my emphasis)

In contrasting the image of the active, righteous and virile "brothers on the block" to that of intellectualizing but ineffectual college students, Newton suggests that their middle-class status is a form of emasculation. Their capacity as revolutionary agents of change has been compromised and lost. To use a masculinist metaphor, one could state that Newton portrays these self-appointed, middle-class leaders of the black community as 'firing blanks'.

Significant to the way in which class, gender and racial identities are intimately intertwined, working-class status in Newtown's autobiography not only gives men privileged access to masculinity and political credibility, it also has the power to confer blackness. This is apparent in the comparison Newton makes between his own party and yet another political group engaged in the struggle for black liberation. This time the group also shared the same name as Newton's party. To mark the fundamental difference between his own party and theirs, Newton once again has recourse to the word/action binary: the other group is nicknamed the "Paper Panthers" in reference to the fact that "their activity was confined to a steady production of printed matter" (138). Here again, the more privileged class background of the "Paper Panthers" makes them ideologically suspect: thus, the group, according to him, is all talk and no action (138). More revealingly, however, their lack of revolutionary activism and street credibility puts into question their very blackness. As Newton informs the reader: "No one was doing very much, just lying around 'becoming Black'" (138). This notion of "becoming Black" is relevant in several ways. By applying it to the black intelligentsia, Newton opposes the authenticity of the working class to the factitious existence of the middle class. Blackness is therefore not an identity conferred automatically through skin color. It is a gauge of social and political trustworthiness which Newton locates in the 'natural' condition of underprivileged black men. As a result, class becomes not only a gender but also a racial marker, which, as such, denotes the "brother on the block" as the personification of authentic black masculinity.

By linking black authenticity to working-class status, Newton in fact follows the norm since, as E. Patrick Johnson for example points out, the

cultural forms "associated with the black working class" have also often been "viewed as more genuinely black" (Johnson 2003: 22). The discourse of authenticity that Newton relies upon in his narrative certainly offers a positive subject position to the "brothers on the block," one often denied them in their everyday life. This is what Johnson also views as the positive potential of the recourse to authenticity, in that it "enables marginalized people to counter oppressive representations of themselves" (Johnson 2003: 3).

However, inherently in this argument, there is another, more negative aspect as well. Because of the binary opposition between civilization and nature, Black working-class males are not free from other stereotyped racial images. In fact, one could argue that they owe their privileged access to authentic blackness to their greater exclusion from mainstream society. In other words, the positive re-evaluation of marginalized black men in Newton's autobiography is unable to fully eliminate the link of "racial authenticity with a certain kind of primitivism and anti-intellectualism" (Johnson 2003: 23).

The discourse of authenticity is also problematic in other ways. As Johnson has pointed out, "When black Americans have employed the rhetoric of black authenticity, the outcome has often been a political agenda that has excluded more voices than it has included" (2003: 3). However, and paradoxically perhaps, it also denaturalizes and destabilizes the link between body and identity and as a result calls attention to the performative nature of categories such as masculinity and blackness. This ontological contradiction is what I will turn to next.

Performing race and gender
As I have pointed out above, the quest for authentic blackness and masculinity presupposes the idea of performance. If some black men's experiences are viewed as being more authentic, then it means others' are not. Some are hopelessly trying to fake it, hoping to "becom[e] Black". So if neither the color of a black man's skin nor his anatomy is able to guarantee him unequivocal access to an authentic black masculine identity, what will? It would seem that what makes some subjects the privileged repository of this identity is not their biology but their performance: how well they are able to embody the definition of black masculinity that has gained currency at one particular historical moment.

As Martin Favor argues in relation to blackness, the meaning and content of the concept fluctuates over time:

> A cursory and anecdotal glance at the subject reveals that—even outside the rules and strictures of the law—the definition of blackness is constantly being invented, policed, transgressed and contested. When hip-hop artists remind themselves and their audiences to "stay black" or "keep it real", they are implicitly suggesting that there is a recognizable, repeatable, and agreed upon thing that we might call black authenticity. (1999: 2)

Favor's use of the adjectives "recognizable" and "repeatable" here echoes Butler's definition of performativity which she describes in *Bodies that Matter* as "a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms" (1993: 95). If repetition characterizes performativity, the other adjective "recognizable" articulates the relationship between performance and authenticity in that what is repeated, in order to be sanctioned by society or a specific group, must correspond to the norms of acceptable behavior that are available to different categories of people. The idea of performance or performativity relies on some agreed upon, or at least more hegemonic forms, of behavior according to which the success of a performance can be recognized and measured. If there was no notion of authenticity, performance would be unintelligible, so performance and authenticity paradoxically presuppose one another.

In a way, the Black Panther Party relied on their capacity to perform an already established privileged black masculine identity—that of the poor urban black male, which I discussed in the previous section. But it also provided underprivileged young African Americans with a new script in order to politicize their social position, through popularizing and embodying the notion of armed self-defense.

The spectacular and theatrical elements of the Black Panther Party's political strategy have recently been emphasized by Black Power scholars such as Nikhil Pal Singh (2004), Jane Rhodes (2007) and Amy Abugo Ongiri (2010). Ongiri's study for example aims in part to question the commonplace idea that the Panthers "were created by the mainstream media" (2010: 19), thus showing that they were themselves acutely aware of the powerful impact of the media and were trying consciously to use it in a process of self-promotion and self-creation. Ongiri argues that the Panthers' recourse to extremely visible and spectacular political

strategies is also characteristic of the changing trends within African American culture in the postwar era (2010: 4-7).

This tendency towards the spectacular is also visible in Newton's autobiography and calls attention, I would argue, to the performative character of (black) masculinity that often occurs throughout the narrative. After drafting their new party's 10-point platform and program, Huey Newton and co-founder Bobby Seale for example consciously chose to emphasize point 7, which demanded an end to police brutality. Not only because of the urgent need to stop the state terrorization of the black community, but also because of the potential it offered for visibility: "Interested primarily in educating and revolutionizing the community, *we needed to get their attention* and give them something to identify with" (2009: 127, my emphasis). What better way to attract attention than by "patrolling the police with arms." As Newton points out, this sent a powerful visual message to the police and to the community: "With weapons in our hands, we were no longer their subjects but their equal" (2009: 127). Significantly, this points to the productive aspect of performativity in the sense that the subject does not precede the performance, but is in fact produced through it, or, to use Judith Butler's own words, performativity, that is, the repetition of norms "is not performed *by* a subject" but is instead "what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject" (Butler 1993: 234). Black men thus became the equals of white men through their delivering a new kind of performance.

Contrary to the idea of emulating an already existing authentic black manhood, something I discussed earlier, this points to the Panthers' well-scripted performance as the moment of production of something new, contingent on the specific social and political context of the mid 1960s. At that juncture in history, a new model for black masculinity could be enacted.

The change of trends in African American culture from the textual to the visual discussed by Ongiri and typical of the Panthers also had some very significant ramifications for the issue of class. Because of the theatrical nature of the party's political strategy, the Panthers became themselves powerful embodiments of their ideas and had thus the capacity to reach the illiterate brothers on the block who were their target audience. In relation to their very dramatic protest action against a new bill that would make carrying loaded weapons illegal—thus

incapacitating the Panthers' armed patrols—Newton explains for instance: "Sacramento was certainly a success […] in attracting national attention; even those who did not hear the complete message saw the arms, and this conveyed enough to Black people" (159). In other words, the bodies of Panther members were effectively turned into public signs which the community could easily read and interpret. Their bodies became in effect their prime resource for political education:

> We were an unusual sight in Richmond, or any other place, dressed in our black leather jackets, wearing black berets and gloves, and carrying shotguns over our shoulders. […] Walking armed through Richmond was our propaganda. (2009: 151)

The use of uniforms in particular contributed to the forceful visual impact of the Panthers, both then and now. Uniforms called to mind images of an army, a comparison Newton himself makes (2009: 148), but one of a different kind. While black regiments earned a certain amount of respect fighting to end slavery and preserve the Union during the Civil War, and then again fighting for the U.S. government in WW2, the Panther army was one that definitely did not exist in the service of the nation.

In planning such spectacular shows of militant blackness, the Panthers were consciously projecting an empowering identity for the black community. They used violence, or rather self-defense as a conscious tool to this end. The specific form that this performance often took can be described in terms of what Douglas Taylor—using Malcolm X—calls a "showdown", that is, "a ritual performance in which two men square off against one another before the gaze of a third party to assert their manhood" (2007: 2). The fighting scenes in Newton's autobiography, which I discussed earlier, certainly qualify as such, but more politically significant in this respect are the confrontations between the Panthers and the repressive white state apparatus. As Taylor argues, an important element of the "showdown" performance in relation to masculinity is that it points to "the intersubjective manner" in which this gender identity is produced (2007: 2). The effect of masculinity is produced through a transaction: the transfer of that quality from one individual or group to another. The transactional nature of masculinity through performance is also evident in Newton's nostalgic descriptions of the early confrontations between Panthers and the police:

> It was not all observation and penal code reading on those patrols. The police, invariably shocked to meet a cadre of disciplined and armed Black men coming to the support of the community, reacted in strange and unpredictable ways. In their fright, some of them became children, cursing and insulting us. […] It was sometimes hilarious to see their reaction; they had always been so cocky and sure of themselves as long as they had weapons to intimidate the unarmed community. When we equalized the situation, their real cowardice was exposed. (2009: 129)

In this passage, the confrontation leads to the police losing the stable masculine authority they formerly possessed. They become infantilized and their masculinity is thus transferred to "the cadre of disciplined and armed Black men". This can, however, only happen through the spectatorship of a third party who needs to witness the transaction. The spectator in this case is the black community and their witnessing of the performance also transforms them. They begin "to lose their doubts and fears", something that will allow them "to move against the oppressor" (2009: 129). As Newton sums it up at the end of the section entitled "Patrolling": "We had provided a needed example of strength and dignity by showing people how to defend themselves" (2009: 135).

The atmosphere that sustains the Panthers' performance could also be described at times as carnivalesque in that the roles are reversed, for a time at least, and ordinary people are given a taste of riotous power. The people, often pictured as looking in on police/Panther altercations, are for example laughing at the cops (2009: 131). Newton certainly emphasizes the humorous character of such moments: "I ignored the gun, got out of the car, and asked the people to go into the Party office. They had a right to observe the police. Then I called the policeman an ignorant Georgia cracker who had come West to get away from sharecropping" (2009: 130). While he tells the people they have the "right to observe the police", Newton becomes in fact the real center of attention, something he evidently relishes as he is putting on a show of his own. Newton also invites the reader of the autobiography to share in the laughter, in particular in prison scenes, where his usual audience is missing. Describing for example his ride outside of the prison with two policemen, he tells the reader, in a one-man show style:

> The two deputies got in front. While one of them was starting the engine, the other one said, "Wait a minute, I have to get my equalizer out of the trunk." I glanced back as he was coming around the car and saw him putting what looked like a snub-nosed .38 revolver in his belt. With his gun and me in chains I guess we were equal.
>
> (2009: 296)

Through this joke, Newton again aims to reveal the tenuous nature of the policemen's masculinity: how much of a man is a cop who is afraid of a prisoner, when the latter cannot defend himself.

The kind of showdown which Newton dramatizes in such passages differs somewhat from that which Douglas Taylor describes in the autobiography of Malcolm X. As Taylor notes, showdowns in this context are usually played out between two black men. Taylor's argument is that the performance is intended for an absent third party: the white man, as the ultimate authority in having the power to confer on black men their manhood (2007: 2). In Newton's case, the "squar[ing] off" is between black men and the white establishment. This, however, seems to strengthen rather than undermine the idea that masculinity remains measured in relation to white men. This is also what gave Newton's father, Walter, his masculine pride, since he "never hesitated to speak up to a white man" (2009: 29). Masculinity is thus shown here not to be an essence one possesses in virtue of one's body, but a highly conditional identity and one which, for black men, depends on a relation to the white other. As an assertion of what is denied, the Panthers' show of masculinity thus still remains the expression of a lack.

Masculinity also appears to be a tenuous and conditional identity at a more personal level in Newton's autobiography. In the beginning, he recalls for example that when he was little, family members used to tease him, telling him that "[he] was too pretty to be a boy, [and] that [he] should have been a girl" (2009: 11). On his own admission, this pretty boy look was what started him fighting at school, as a means to prove himself. Thus, violence and masculinity, instead of appearing as two essential aspects of the experience of being male, are instead shown to be a question of performance. Violence is not an expression of a true male nature, but becomes the way to dispel doubts about his own masculinity. It is relevant to note here that this is one of the few passages where masculinity is clearly described in a relational manner to femininity. Elsewhere, as I have pointed out, masculinity is more clearly portrayed as a transfer from white to black bodies.

One last aspect of the performative nature of masculine identity in Newton's narrative can be located in the autobiographical genre itself. Indeed, as Kenneth Mostern has pointed out, the *subject* of autobiography is after all a construction, in that the writer tries to reconstruct the past in order "to fit a notion of identity consistent with a particular narrative moment" (Mostern 1999: 140). In the case of Newton, one can claim that he is writing back at a specific image of himself and of the Panthers, hoping to complicate the simplistic picture of them in the media. It is thus remarkable that, although the spectacular performance of black masculinity plays a central role in his narrative, Newton in fact chooses to present the reader with a very different side of himself, thereby providing an alternative image of black masculinity. In contrast to the armed black working-class male hero who stands as the epitome of black authenticity, Newton the narrator appears at times instead as the isolated intellectual. Especially at the beginning of the autobiography, we can see clearly the effort of Newton to disprove the myth about the ignorant black man as he drops names of great thinkers, such as Plato, Durkheim, Nietzche, or Fanon, in order to show the reader the range of his extensive knowledge. The opening manifesto and especially the acknowledgements section also serve to dissociate Newton, as the aloof intellectual leader, from the immediate, everyday struggle. Indeed, not one Panther member or brother on the block is mentioned or thanked, only the people who have helped him with the writing and publication of the book (2009: xix).

The contrastive personas of Newton as "street brother" and aloof intellectual serve to complicate a one-dimensional understanding of black masculinity, opening up instead for the possibility of alternative performances and for the multiplicity of identity. A critical look at the book covers of the three different editions of *Revolutionary Suicide* can be instructive in this respect. The two images adorning the first edition present the reader with exactly such a contrast. The front cover shows the famous poster in which Newton, in his Panther uniform, is sitting down in a high-backed, African wicker chair holding a rifle in one hand and a spear in the other. The defiant pose of the militant activist emphasizes the Panther's program of self-defense, as well as connotes the politics of cultural nationalism through its reference to tribal Africa. The militant stance is however complicated by the fact that the photograph of Newton is on a window that has been shot through by a bullet, thus underlining

the immediate personal danger facing the activist in the movement. The back cover, however, presents Newton in a very different light, one that reminds one more of "The Thinker" of Rodin. I would argue that these two illustrations emphasize the performative aspect of black masculinity and Newton's own awareness of the role-playing aspect of political involvement. In other words, the image is in part also the message.

In contrast, later editions exploit the stereotyped image of the revolutionary guerilla activist. The second edition for example makes use of the same iconic figure of Newton in the wicker chair, but this time omitting the bullet hole. More significantly still are the illustrations chosen by Ho Che Anderson for the latest—Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition. The front cover shows an image of Newton in his leather jacket and black beret with a rifle pointed at his neck. The back cover shows Newton aiming a gun—the same rifle that is in fact pointed at him on the front cover, presumably to suggest the suicidal nature of revolutionary struggle, also foregrounded by Newton in the title and introductory manifesto of his autobiography. This re-cycling of the popular media image of Newton as tragic hero reveals how enduring the link remains between the Panthers and violence and how difficult it is in fact to change the stereotype, as Newton tries to do in his autobiography. This can be seen as the double-bind of the theatrical nature of the Panthers' political strategy and how much a specific performance of black masculinity can come to dominate the discourse.

Authentic experience
As I have tried to show, Newton's invocation of black masculinity rests at times on the notion of authenticity, on the idea that liberation for black men in the U.S. relies in some way on them reclaiming or affirming an identity they in fact inherently possess, but have been unable to display. At other times, however, Newton also shows an awareness of the performative aspect of both race and masculinity, making use of black masculine performance in different ways to promote the party's political agenda. However, I would nevertheless argue that the dominant way in which Newton conceives of black masculinity in his narrative and uses it in a project of liberation can best be discussed through the concept of experience.

After the initial manifesto, "Revolutionary Suicide: The Way of Liberation" (2009: 1-6), Newton opens the narrative proper by situating his own life within a much wider social and historical context: "Life does not always begin at birth. My life was forged in the lives of my parents before I was born, and even earlier in the history of all Black people. It is all of a piece" (2009: 9). Through this opening paragraph, Newton situates from the outset his own narrative as the continuation of a much older one, an inherited past. Consequently, Newton de-centers himself through the acknowledgement that his life story is not unique: "It is all of a piece". He also posits blackness as a specific collective identity, one that has been shaped ("forged") in significant ways by the experience of structural racism in the U.S. and beyond that by the colonial past of Africa.

The beginning of Newton's autobiography relies on an understanding of experience that makes manifest the articulation between the individual and the collective. The narrative that will follow will thus be what Joan Scott has discussed elsewhere as both "an expression of an individual's being and consciousness" and, on a more collective and macro level, an exposure of the "influences external to individuals—social conditions, institutions, forms of belief or perception—'real' things outside them that they react to" (Scott 1998: 61).

Newton's reliance on collective identification and the designation "all Black people" can certainly appear problematic and in fact seem to be on a par with the concept of authenticity that I discussed earlier. The notion that the history of "all Black people" can be "of a piece" underplays the differences even among African Americans (not least of class and gender) and risks essentializing experience through the promotion of one particular type of experience—that deemed most authentic—as a way to define the collective consciousness, thus marginalizing other possibly divergent narratives. Newton does not, however, summon the specter of a collective past as a way of accessing a fixed black essence. The experience of blackness is not a product of skin color per se, but acquires instead meaning through the experience of racism. Newton's choice to focus both his personal narration of black experience and the political efforts of the Black Panther Party on the "brothers on the block" similarly arises from a belief that their material conditions and social position have the power to provide greater critical insight into the inner workings of racist U.S. society. What makes them

central to the dual project of naming oppression and working towards liberation is their exacerbated marginalization, even from the field of politics:

> None of the groups were able to recruit and involve the very people they professed to represent—the poor people in the community who never went to college, probably were not even able to finish high school. Yet these were our people; they were the vast majority of the Black population in the area. Any group talking about Blacks was in fact talking about those low on the ladder in terms of well-being, self-respect, and the amount of concern the government had for them. All of us were talking, and nobody was reaching them. (2009: 111)

The social position of the black working-class does not simply make them the primary target for political organizing and theorizing according to Newton, but it also gives them a more direct and tangible understanding of oppression:

> The painful realities of their lives from childhood on reveals that the inequities they encounter are not confined to a few institutions. The effects of injustice and discrimination can be seen in the lives of nearly everyone around them. A brutal system permeates every aspect of life; *it is in the air they breathe*.
>
> (2009: 42, my emphasis)

As a result of their lived and felt experience, Newton adds that deprived young blacks in particular adopt an attitude that "usually takes the form of resistance to all authority"—their material suffering thus potentially leading them towards revolutionary consciousness. To a certain extent, Newton here relies on a form of standpoint epistemology as the basis for his understanding of the link between experience, consciousness and politics, or, to use the Marxist formulation, on the idea that existence determines consciousness. As Mostern explains, determination does not suggest that there is "some pure oppositional consciousness embedded in an already defined aggregate called 'the working class,' but rather that there is a relevant structural *tendency* for certain objectively positioned groups to articulate certain positions" (Mostern 1999: 9).

Newton's grounding of his own personal narrative in the "history of all Black people," and more particularly in that of the black working class, rests therefore on an identification of blackness as not only the product of oppression, but also as the source of political resistance. This points to the link that Mostern has also made between politics and the

autobiographical genre: "the origins of revolt are always necessarily in people's self-understanding of their lived conditions, their autobiographies" (Mostern 1999: 27).

A similar point can also be raised in relation to the connection Newton makes between violence and masculinity as being a product of experience rather than an inherent essence. Significantly, the section of the autobiography in which Newton makes this link, "Growing", begins with a quote by Frederick Douglass that also emphasizes violence and resistance: "He who would be free must strike the first blow" (2009: 21). In this light, violence appears more as a social and political necessity in a specific context where freedom is denied and not as a biological exigency. Since this form of oppression is also shared by African American women, violence as a form of reaction to racist experience can also unite beyond gender boundaries. Newton gives such an example in relation to the first efforts of the Panther Party to organize the black community:

> The community was a little timid but proud to see Black men take a stance in their interests, and when we arrived, everybody was very receptive. […] Then a remarkable thing happened. One by one, many of the community members went home and got their guns and came to join us. *Even one old sister of seventy years or so was out there with her shotgun.* (2009: 148, my emphasis)

It is undeniable, however, that Newton's narrative foregrounds almost exclusively black male experience. Passages like the above are rare and become a tenuous alibi, first because of the somewhat humorous tone used to describe this "sister", but also because of the scarcity of other examples of female activism in the autobiography.

The articulation of experience, both historical and contemporary, on which Newton bases his narrative has in fact more potential to bridge other gaps—those of race and class. Poverty and oppression are indeed something that links poor whites and blacks together and the sharing of experience can undermine the divide-and-conquer rule of racist society. Solidarity and political alliance can also extend beyond class categories. As Newton points out, the 1960s and 70s were a time when an increasing number of middle-class whites came to identify with the black Civil Rights and Black Power movements and to understand, through a rational effort, "what Blacks knew in their bones" (2009: 183). While experience understood in relation to authenticity can appear

exclusionary, as something to which only a specific group can have privileged access, here Newton also emphasizes its inclusionary potential.

This potential of experience to bridge gaps forms also, I would claim, the whole rationale for the autobiographical text itself. As I pointed out earlier, in his capacity as narrator, Newton in fact performs an alternative form of masculinity that deviates from the one he is using as a model of black experience. Through emphasizing his intellectual and theoretical self, rather than the gun-toting one, Newton also acts as a liminal figure who is positioned in between two worlds and can therefore reach beyond the black ghetto in order to mediate and generalize experience. This becomes evident in passages where the distance of the assumed reader to black working-class experience is made manifest:

> The Chamber of Commerce boasts about Oakland's busy seaport, its museum, professional baseball and football teams, and the beautiful sports coliseum. The politicians speak of an efficient city government and the well-administered poverty program. The poor know better, and *they* will tell *you* a different story.
>
> (2009: 12, my emphasis)

Because "they" are unlikely to have their stories heard by middle-class Americans, Newton's autobiographical narrative gives a voice to working-class black male experience for the benefit of the uninitiated. Also evidenced in the above passage, however, is the idea that competing truths are vying for ascendancy, something that calls attention to the rhetorical nature of the autobiographical genre. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have noted in this respect: "In autobiographical narratives, imaginative acts of remembering always intersect with such rhetorical acts as assertion, justification, judgment, conviction, and interrogation. That is, life narrators address readers whom they want to persuade of their version of experience" (2010: 7). This is also relevant to the immediate context of Newton's autobiography: his recent release from prison and acquittal for charges of murdering a police officer. The use of his autobiography and the invocation of experience as a shaping force in the lives of individuals and communities should therefore be read in relation to the need to convince a double audience of jury members and readers as to the veracity of his version of reality. In other words, beyond its roots in material conditions, experience is also discursive, it cannot be accessed by others outside of discourse. This is especially the case with

autobiographical narratives that try to reconstruct the past in light of what is known in the present. Collective experience, perhaps even more so than individual experience, takes on the character of a construction.

The concept of experience is, however, problematic, according to Joan Scott, in that it often presupposes a stable subject who exists prior to experience and who 'owns' her/his experience. Instead, Scott posits experience as that which in fact produces the subject: "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (Scott 1998: 59-60). This conceptualization of experience would thus tie in with Butler's notion of performativity in that it destabilizes the subject by resisting the essentialization of being.

Nevertheless, as Patrick E. Johnson rightly argues, the destabilization of the subject and of the materiality of experience is not an innocent enterprise, but something we should be wary of in a project of collective emancipation:

> we nonetheless cultivate collective narratives to strive toward articulating the very real pain and oppression that black bodies absorb in order to strategize political efficacy. Thus, while we must acknowledge the salience of construing 'experience' as discursively mediated, we must also recognize that the radical destabilization of experience simultaneously limits the ways in which people of color may name their oppression. (2003: 41)

Collective experience may well be a fiction, but one that cannot yet be done away with. Despite its problematic dramatization of the experience of black masculinity in the U.S., Newton's autobiographical narrative nevertheless represents a complex and challenging attempt to articulate a sense of collective belonging that can be translated into the praxis of everyday political struggle. It remains a powerful statement of black consciousness that still demands our critical engagement.

Conclusion

As I have tried to show in this article, the construction of black masculinity occupies a central role in Huey Newton's autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide*. The forms this takes are however varied and defy a clear categorization of Newton's understanding of race and gender. Newton, like other black writers before him, relies in significant ways on the idea that the experiences of some members of the African American

community are more authentic than others. Newton's focus on the "brothers on the block" as the privileged repository of authentic black experience, suggests that class and gender, perhaps more so than skin color, are fundamental elements in defining 'true blackness'. The rehabilitation of the brother on the block as a symbol of masculinity, blackness and political militancy serves an important purpose in that it seeks to undo the harm of systemic racism through giving black men—in particular of the working class—the status, dignity and pride fundamentally denied them.

Newton's reliance on working-class black masculinity is not unequivocally essentialist and exclusionary, however. Since, in some ways, authenticity presupposes inauthenticity—faking it—there is no tangible biological 'truth' (either their skin color or their genitalia) that qualifies the "brothers on the block" as being more black or more men, except through their performance. As I have argued, Newton shows an awareness of the performative nature of black masculine identity and performance in fact played a central role in the Black Panther's Party's political strategy.

More than as an inherent quality or a matter of performance, blackness in general, and black masculinity in particular, appear in Newton's narrative as the products of experience, more specifically that of the brutal racist oppression suffered by African Americans. Through his autobiography, Newton tries to create a sense of collective identity that transcends the individual and points instead to an awareness of the need for political activism. While attempting to bridge the racial and class-based gaps between experience and action, Newton's project remains a predominantly masculinist one. It is these ideological tensions between autobiographical subjectivity and the gendered consciousness of the male political activist that I have tried to tease out in this discussion.

The narrative contradictions in Newton's text invite further critical comparison with other autobiographies by Black Power activists, not least those written by women leaders within the movement, such as Angela Davis and Elaine Brown. Because of their expressed awareness of the gender issues related to Black Power, these female writers would without doubt provide a more complicated and challenging insight not only into the politics of the Black Panther Party, but also into the ways in which gender, race and class interact in the formation of individual activists and their political strategies.

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