

HUNSBERGER, JONATHAN Ph.D. *Beceasing: Onto-pedagogical Dis-integration*. (2024)
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This project concerns pedagogy and ontology and lies at the intersection of a deep study of two figures, two texts: Calvin Warren's nihilism/*Ontological Terror* and Plato's idealism/*Republic*. I notice in these works the presence of guardian—which is to say, following the Greek, *phulaks*—figures. The *phulakes* of Plato's *Republic*, as the philosopher enlists them, find themselves bound to serve and protect the wall being, the boundary between what is and what is not. As such, following Warren, the work that these *phulakes* do is fundamentally antiblack, inasmuch as it is fundamentally anti-what-is-not. Throughout these pages, I suggest that *phulakes* as such linger into the contemporary era, at the very least as 'humans,' following Warren, and, following Plato and how he introduces them, as onto-pedagogues and onto-mythagogues. I admit this problematic tendency in my self: I am a teacher, I am a storyteller, I am a *phulaks* figure. And as far as I can tell, I can't not be. Both Plato and Warren point to and through this ontological deadlock, an ontometaphysically concretized world and inescapably human way of moving in and viewing the world. Humans, pedagogues, storytellers, and *phulakes* do not have a choice as to whether or not they and their work reifies ontological antiblackness, only how. How am I to respond to this lock, this boundary? I set up this problem that does not have a solution and write as a practice of sitting with the tension that such a conundrum engenders. As the project proceeds, the personal emerges (this project is about 'me')—throughout my life, I have noticed patterns regarding how pedagogical and mythagogical figures have pointed me in relation to this antiblack wall and law of being that there is no getting beyond, for me. I wonder, then, in this world full of figures that tell me that I am, and that I become, what might it mean if I admit to my self that I am simultaneously ceasing to be?

BECEASING: ONTO-PEDAGOGICAL DIS-INTEGRATION

by

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DEDICATION

To my guardians

To the guardians 'of me'

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PREFACE

Overture

Plato's Socrates: "What about a lie in words? Aren't there times when it is useful, and does not merit hatred? What about when we are dealing with enemies, or with so-called friends who, because of insanity or ignorance, are attempting to do something bad? Isn't it a useful drug for preventing them? And consider the case of those stories we were talking about just now—those we tell because we do not know the truth about those ancient events: by making the lies that they contain as much like the truth as possible, don't we make them useful?" (*Republic*, 382c-d)

"Instruction is the regulation (for the purposes of employment and individual enjoyment) of an original perversion. And because these failures—the constant threat of total system failure as the original perversion—run across all areas of the social reproduction of life, instruction must cover all areas. It must everywhere convert failure from a perversion to a point on a line. It must everywhere reduce failure to a bell curve. It must be everywhere. It must be a total education" (Harney & Moten, 2021, p. 64)

Cold, Open

I think of and through this incomplete project in part as philosophical, and in part as anything but. If anything but it, then these words tumble on according to an amalgamation of form, part prose, part poetry, and part prayer. The line between form, formation, information blurs. If anything but, then this project constitutes an example of para-normal *phulakos*, an experimental term that guides and undergirds this project, inasmuch as it is a guarding,

instructing term. *Phulakos*, in what follows then, is a personally instructive pedagogy—an educational story that I tell my self. But not an ordinary story. There’s something else going on.

This project begins with wonder: what it might mean to slow and stop here, at the task of the *phulaks* figure of Plato’s *Republic*, finding my self in this class in the middle and, somehow, among those few who are on the cusp of becoming a member of the upper, ruling, tier, the philosopher class. Here, almost but not yet taking my self to be there, I pause and ponder: what am I doing? What have I been doing, and how did I get here? To this study? To study in general? To studying ‘guardianship’ in particular?

What does the work of this guardian ‘class’ entail? Do these figures only occupy Plato’s soul and city planning? Did he invent this figure? Did he pick up on something ‘humans’ had already been doing for millennia? That I was bound to find my self doing? One way or an other? One way and an other? What has the work of guardianship historically entailed? What might the work of the guardians entail? Who are these guardians? What do they protect? What do they defend against? And keep in? And cast out? How do they do so? Is this world—any world—possible without protection, without them? Is the human being, the human and their being, possible without them? Is the human being possible without its self? Without some figure posted on the boundary managing what and who comes, what and who goes? The boundary between what is and is not (me)?

Who are these *phulakes* figures?

In the first three parts of this project (chapters one through nine), I point to and through some patterns that I have noticed as I have keenly attended throughout my life to the social world around me, the social world in which I am and am immersed. These patterns have pronounced themselves to me and my receptive hypersensitivity. I feel them in my body—a fear of authority;

the grip of complicity; responsibility. The host of questions condenses: How am I to respond? I notice and pick up on these patterns in moments of what feels like personal and existential precarity, surrounded by death, darkness, and antiblackness, between the years 2020 and 2024 (and the years before, and the years after..), a handful of years wherein the cruelty of humans and their world glimmered ever so slightly more brightly—for me—than normal. The pattern I pick up on emerges in tandem with my own trek along the institutionalized path to philosophy, according to the academy: a PhD. In these halls, afront this very screen—a wall—I return, on the one hand, to a slow re-reading of Plato’s expansive, enlightening *Republic* and find my self, on another, faced with an opportunity to engage in a deep study of Calvin Warren’s harrowing, adumbrating *Ontological Terror*.

In this project, I write, at least, between these two figures, their words, and their work, pieces of their work.

In Warren’s work, I find my self facing an irresolvable, deeply troubling problem (a problem that has a pattern), as well as a need to accept that, to a certain extent, the state of this world—this human world, the global being of this planet, so shaped by the human and their wake—requires the incessant pursuit of problem diagnostics and the advent of sure, effective solution. This world thrives on diagnosis and cure. Indeed, don’t modern humans consume their selves with the endless pursuit of problem and solution, for the sake of some pure, settled, just state? Is that not how progress happens? Is that not what conservation is for? Is that not the trajectory of humans and their kind? And don’t they take pride in such feats? I cannot always fault them, these solution-seeking humans. Some problems have solutions; they are worth solving. Other problems do not have a solution; the question becomes, what then? Some

problems and the cruel fact of their irresolvability structure and integrate my very being, the fact that I am and have been granted the opportunity to be; how am I to respond?

In his work, Warren links the state of the Westernized, metaphysically conceptualized and integrated world (of the human *being*, and in particular German philosopher Martin Heidegger's notion of *dasein*—'there being')—an antiblack, settled state—to concrete, harsh, human acts, to 'things' that (particularly those imperial minded) humans (men) have, over the course of their existence as such (which is to say indefinitely) brought down upon their human and non-human counterparts, their co-existential life-forms, death-forms. For the sake of their sense of self and the supremacy they feel they have found, they shape and corral the current of the world and its pulse toward totality, such that they and their species might remain at the pinnacle. Such a feat is spectacular in the sense that its only limit is nothing, and nothing is just what it requires for the sake of advancing its self. What is nothing? Warren (2018) points to "four fields of inquiry" in which structural antiblackness—antinothingness—manifests: "philosophy, law, science/math, and visuality" (p. 21). In short, he points to a problem that structures the world—a world where, according to a somehow global phenomenology, blackness exists, and must exist, in tension between hate and need, the hate and need of the human being. He points to a problem that structures the world, a world in which people have been deemed black. In this world, black people exist but are not allowed to be. Indeed, blackness must occupy this tense, excluded-inclusion/included-exclusion, position, he shows, for the sake of the (pure, capable, enlightened, supreme) human's very (imperial minded, white) being and becoming (and, yes, their ceasing to be, beceasing).

He does not offer a way out (nor do I). He does not offer a resolution to the conundrum he notices, to the problem that he points to and through. He tells a story according to black

nihilism, a narrative structure that reaches me and somehow resonates. I pause and ponder what this contact means—and how I am to respond. Especially to harrowing trains of black thought like this:

All solutions fail to eradicate antiblackness, since solution-oriented thinking *depends* on antiblackness. But the *success within the failure* is precisely the exposure of this double bind....Antiblackness is both the problem and the solution. This is a dizzying and tortuous cycle, but one that does not seem to fatigue a romantic humanist. (Warren, 2018, pp. 121-122)

Enter Plato. If in Warren's work I sense a call to accept that some problems do not have solutions—and that there is nothing, and only nothing (a formidable prospect), inherently wrong with there being a problem, in Plato's work, I sense a desperate attempt to solve such a problem (for him, chaos, or existential blackness, meaning that which has no meaning because it is ultimately unknowable, forever evasive epistemologically, ontologically unconscionable); indeed, the problem of there being problems, the problem of *problems being*, of *problems* being allowed to be. In the face of conceptual chaos, Plato aims to concretize and appeal to some pristine, enlightening structure. No matter how much he orders it, he nevertheless knows he cannot solve this problem. There is latent, and evident, in Plato's work, then, an incessant, ongoing, endless drive to map out the deep, rich contours of a certain kind of unified, aligned terrain so as to come as close to such a closure—the eradication of problems—as possible. That which threatens to drag and draw the soul and the city into chaos constantly beckons and groans—the multifarious madness of the masses, the belly of the beast.

And so, for Plato, combatting such an encroachment requires resolute, steadfast, a militant, observance—a constant watch. He offers a vision of 'justice' that, when adopted far and

wide, would equip its participants with the tools to, in large part, not have problems. That is, should they continue to practice vigilance along their asymptotic route to goodness, they would realize all that is and is already good in their souls, and in the city that they, when taken together, would—could—find their selves in. It's possible. The point for Plato is that it—redemption of such a state that constantly falls—is possible. Plato is confident that it is possible to achieve the desired state. Even if not utopian, then close—closed off—enough. The soul lives on for ever, reincarnating its self ad infinitum, until the work that can never fully be done is done, which is to say: until the end of time, Plato predicts that humans will try to find a way. Would Plato describe himself as a romantic humanist? I would.

I write in between these two figures—Calvin Warren, a contemporary black thinker and Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher—throughout this project. They appear time and again throughout the parts and pages ahead. I will admit at this outset that I am unable to capture the breadth and complexity of their work. Please do not come to this project looking for a comprehensive review of any given thinker's work, or of their way of thinking, or of a thought tradition that influences them, or which they inform and work from. I do not seek to capture, or even hold tight to, thought throughout this project. If my thought—your thought—is a hand (Uchiyama, 1993), let's shake and then keep to our selves.

Here are some words. Peruse and read them as you please. Try to let them pass over and through you, your self over and through them. And keep that hand moving. That's what I am going for, the movement, together and apart, of these participating hands of thought—however many there are, here, now, whomever they belong to, whatever outreached them in the first place. In what might feel like a stuck state, I tell my self that movement remains a possibility. What a privilege—to be and to be able to move, and breathe. We commune here, privileged

hands of thought, not necessarily in my particular writing, but in the act and space of reading, and of listening, and of attending, and of receiving. Where do these thoughts go? You need not capture them. May your hand of thought feel them, and may they move along. There is an end, albeit a long way away.

There is another reason for my bringing together Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror* and Plato's *Republic*, beyond their fortuitous emergence—and reemergence—in my life, in an already tender and tough—which in both cases is to say impressing and impressionable—time of my life. In both of these works, the word—a word with hands—GUARDIAN protrudes from the page, demanding my attention. Plato points to and through *phulaks* and *phulakes*—guardian in the singular and the plural—all over the *Republic*. Warren uses the word guardian once. The grave nature of the figure consistent in each case. It is according to this gravity—even if not to its ordinary orbit—that I piece together this project. Indeed, I write and think according to a *phulaks*—which is to say pedagogical and narrative—force.

This project, then, while many things, is at least an exposition of where I notice guardians, *phulakes*, beyond yet integrally connected to Plato and his work, and their presence in the world. As I continue to claim, the *phulakes* are always already there and can't not be. My fascination with the figure, then, begins with personal resonance (who are my guardians? Am I a guardian?), and then turns cosmic (who are the guardians of the world?). Upon this most recent re-read of Plato's *Republic*, I began to see guardian figures everywhere in the world, and indeed at the very boundary of the world, and what metaphysically constitutes the world, which is to say the wall between what is and what is not, between being and not being. Warren, in parenthetical passing, calls humans 'guardians of being' (see Epigraph to Part 1). Plato, again, situates guardians as necessary for the realization of justice in the would-be ideal city full of similarly

just souls. Of course justice, for Plato, ‘simply’ amounts to practicing, at local and large, what most aligns the self and city with the underlying goodness inherent in the natural world, or what Plato thinks of as ‘what always already is,’ i.e. being, or what some thinkers might call capital b Being.

Phulaks figures are powerful—they have shown up in my world, and I feel that I need to respond. This project constitutes, among several other things, a response, to the emergence of *phulaks* figures in my life, figures which, once I became aware of them, began popping up and rearing their heads and hands every where. A *phulaks*, for Plato, is a boundary managing figure—posted at the brink of the city, and on the streets of the neighborhoods within, to ensure safety, security, and wellbeing. They protect against invaders, from without and from within. They are on watch, for the sake of the city and of the souls of the people in the city, so that they might practice and live their lives in accordance with the way they are most naturally inclined. What figures throughout my life fit such a bill? Who has been a *phulaks* figure for *me*? Storytellers, teachers, preachers, coaches, elders—figures of authority: those who have had a hand in shaping the way my hands of thought move, and wander, and meander, and clench, holding tight, then burst, revealing nothing, a clever trick. Those who I have let have this hand. Those who have taken it without asking, because they assumed it was theirs to shape and hold in the first place. In some cases it was. In some cases it wasn’t.

Four Parts, Ten Chapters

I think about this project according to four parts, and what used to be four chapters but which exploded—I have let dis-integrate—into ten. In the first part, the *Phulaks* (chapters one and two), I explore this *phulaks* figure as it appears in Plato’s *Republic*. With this I offer what I hope comes across as the beginning of an expressed orientation. Which is to say, for those

reading and or listening along, in this part of the project I do a lot of work to let you—whoever you may and may not be—in on what I hope you will attend to as you peruse this project. I do not so much invest my self in presenting you with in-formation, and rather with a feeling, and with the capacity and the space to notice and sit with a feeling. In short, in this first part, I let you know where I hope your attention (a tension) might meander as you proceed along. Of course, you may do with your attention whatever you want—to an extent. The very cadence of these words takes you along a particular thread that I have crafted. And they are taking you somewhere, if you are looking for somewhere to go, for this to go somewhere. If nothing else, as you read and/or listen, know that there is something I am hoping you take away over and above whatever else these words, their order, and their grammar might immediately engender. It has to do with tension. That’s the feeling.

In the second part, the *Pedagogue* (chapters three, four, and five), I show how this *phulaks* figure that Plato points to and through is necessarily an educational figure, and that, inasmuch as militaristic or policing guardian figures—in Plato’s *Republic*—would find their selves posted on walls and streets for the sake of ‘physical’ security, as managers of physical walls, *phulaks* figures would also manifest and do work in the streets and in public spaces, as managers of the ‘mental’ or cognitive walls of everyday passers by. For indeed, the kind of soul and city for which Plato writes requires security from both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ threats. If *phulakes* are educational figures, and if educational figures—teachers, pedagogues, instructors, coaches—are like *phulakes*, my thinking goes, then this world is full of them. Even if not Platonic, in the sense that they have not been conscripted to realize Platonic justice, they nevertheless do boundary management work as they navigate relationships with their students

and establish, whether they intend to or not, precedents for what it means and can mean to engage with figures of authority.

In this second part, I notice and point to two, prevailing patterns, according to which I see contemporary *phulakes*—everyday pedagogues—doing boundary managing work. On one hand, I notice a conservative flair in pedagogues who through their teaching effectively reinforce in their students an adherence to the normal state of the world, or the way things are, the order of the things that are. On another hand, I notice a progressive flair in pedagogues who through their teaching effectively point their students toward criticality, a questioning of the normal state of affairs for the sake of moving this normal state, and of deconstructing so as to reconstruct.

In these two prevailing, and what I am thinking of as onto-pedagogical, paradigms, I sense another, underlying pattern, which I suggest is, perhaps, inherent to the work of the *phulaks* as a concept on the whole (we shall see): both onto-pedagogical conservatives and onto-pedagogical progressives de-space, in their respective first places, ontological terror (a term, at this point, both connected to and distinct from that which Warren (2018) points to and through), a three-pronged anxiety sutured to the Westernized, metaphysically conceptualized human and the condition of their being and which manifests, at the very least, as a deep-seated, structural fear of nothing, of being nothing, and of nothing being. Ontopedagogical conservatives de-space ontological terror at the outset of their work (in their first place) by suggesting, through their teaching practice that confirms the status quo, that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the current state of affairs, and that proper movement in the world looks like doubling down on what is and what is already here. Ontopedagogical progressives de-space ontological terror at the outset of their work (in their first place) because the notion of progress requires, if it is to engender real, and even if incremental, change in the face of the counter-paradigm that seeks to

conserve its self/selves, incessant, ongoing labor, en route some other end, and en route movement and progression for the sake of transformation. Put another way, ontopedagogical conservatives point their students' attention toward the service of being, of what already is and is absolute and concrete, and ontopedagogical progressives point their students' attention toward the service of becoming, of what might be, and of a force akin to perpetuity and infinity.

What I ultimately offer and propose in chapter ten—ontopedagogical dis-integration (not a new phenomenon, but *new to me*, and new, too, a capacity to notice this other ontological energy, or force, as a possibility)—is neither a solution to this conundrum—the fact that both of the paradigms that prevail and might well prevail, for their feuding sustains this world, reinforce antiblack (ways of) being—nor a way out. I offer it as an additional move, another option en route something else, neither conservatism nor progressivism, and also not an opting out of either of these (they prove inescapable inasmuch as they structure the core of the world). If nothing else, may this alternative movement create the conditions for noticing and feeling the gargantuan, ontological conflict and tension that undergirds this human world (and the fact that imperial minded beings have profoundly impacted—tainted—the very ground on which any movement might thereafter occur). Ontopedagogical dis-integration is nevertheless another example of fundamentally antiblack *phulakos*, of managing a boundary between what is and is not to be. May my moving according to it nevertheless lessen my normal, human habit of despatching ontological terror for the sake of some sure sense and security in my own being alone—all one. May it allow space to arrive and remain, and may it, and the kind of movement it makes possible—an aspirationally spacious movement—tell a different story, and tell a story differently.

In the third part, the *Storyteller* (chapters six, seven, eight, and nine), I suggest that inasmuch as pedagogues are contemporary examples of an ancient, Platonic fixture, so too are figures who tell stories. Here I am loose with what ‘counts’ as ‘a story.’ Something my mother told me as a young child forms a core memory in my mind and carries a narrative structure, inasmuch as baked into what she said to me—a story—there was ‘a moral.’ She wanted me to listen and to learn from what she told me, and in telling me she sought to shape my mind and the way I think. Whether intentional or not, guardians, *phulaks* figures, tell stories to and through their pupils, their listeners, their close attendees. The words people use convey a narrative thread—a grammar—that supports some kind of sense-making and which renders possible some form of action and movement and habit in the stead of others. Even this very grammar—these words, this ‘English’ linguistic force, and this order, structure, sense, and meaning—and the space it takes and makes up ensures that another grammar is not happening. The example that I set with the words that I use tells a story inasmuch as in the very piecing together of words, I, as a writer, make choices regarding how and where I want your attention to flow, and move, and halt, and fall, and falter. These words constitute a story inasmuch as they make up a shape that manages your train of thought and attention.

In this third part, I reflect upon the ‘stories,’ then, that I feel I heard and witnessed growing up, particularly in institutionalized settings like the church and the school. I think about and through the ‘shape’ that these stories upheld, and how they suggested, because of how I heard them and, of course, because of the content they conveyed, that I follow suit, or fall in line, or shape my self accordingly. I then practice telling my self a different sort of story. I bring a different shape into my ordinary manifold so as to dis-integrate this so-close (to the face) and closed surface for the sake of some space in the face of a shape that, otherwise, on its own,

renders a self immovably locked to the concrete of the world. There is the possibility for movement here, amidst and on and in the crevices between concrete. At least for me. It might not be a movement for you. It might not be a movement that affords a way out. Indeed, it exposes me, if no thing and no one else, to a formidable foray. May it be a movement that allows space to arrive and remain nevertheless.

And, finally, in part four (chapter ten), then, again, *Beceasing*, which I think of and through as an ontological force that questions and in doing so undoes its self—which is to say, an example of onto-pedagogical dis-integration—I re-cap where and how these words go, where and how I've sent and instructed my self—and in particular my young self, thrown to the whims of a wounded, tightly wound world—according to these words.

Six Interludes

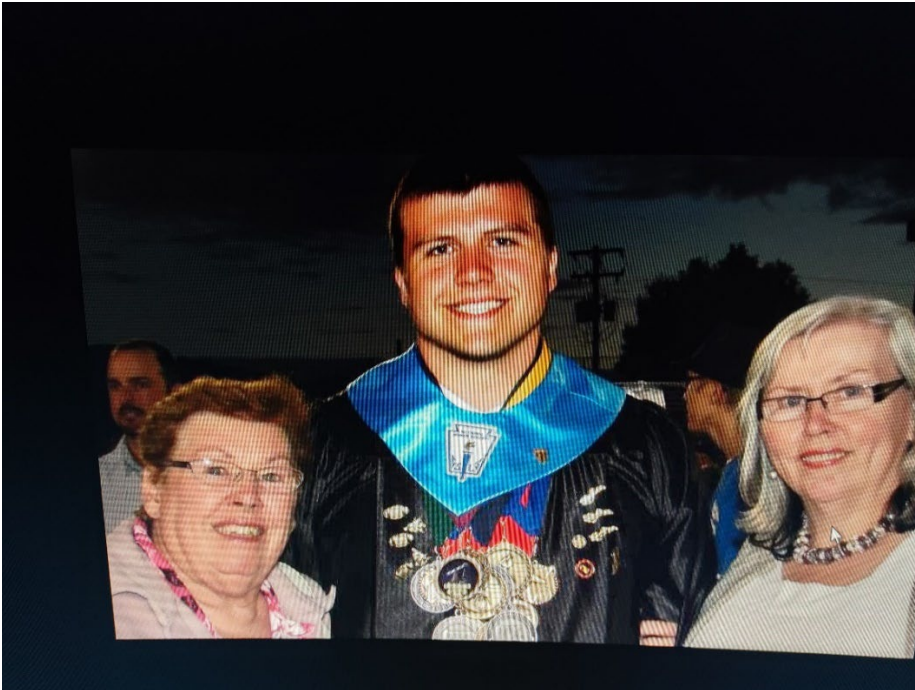
Six or so interluding images—figures—along the way point to and through my growth and decay.

Interlude One

Figure 1. a beginning



Figure 2. Some Guardian Figures



Part One, The *Phulaks*

“What is the Law of Being? If we think of Law as the *order* of Being [*dike* [that is, justice]], then we understand this order, not just as a realm or field (e.g., like a political order), but also a command (e.g., an order from a parental figure) of its particular saying, demand, or requirement. Perhaps the *realm* of Being is nothing more than this *command* itself. The Law of Being, then, is the *order* of Being—what it requires and how this requirement sustains Being (since the human is the *guardian [phulaks]* of Being and Being *needs* this *guardianship [phulakos]*, or care, to manifest). But this order is peculiar, and it confounds our diurnal (and metaphysical) understanding of a law and the order that characterizes law in general” (Warren, 2018, pp. 67-68, emphasis in original, emboldening mine).

Plato’s Socrates: “Well, then, I imagine that if indeed our rulers [philosophers], and likewise their auxiliaries [guardians, *phulakes*], are worthy of their names, the latter will be prepared to carry out orders, and the former to give orders, obeying our laws in some cases and imitating them in the others that we leave to their discretion” (*Republic*, 458c).

1.0—Prologue

I write in the midst of and in response to *ontological terror* (Warren, 2018).

This text—this part and this project—lives with me. I work it as an educational exercise. As I reiterate further on, I divide this first part of the project—The *Phulaks*—into two asymmetrical chapters. In the first chapter, I gesture at what I see as the problem that undergirds this study—the presence of guardian figures in this world, figures that, once they arrive (and they have), will necessarily continue to have a lasting impact on the state of the world. This problem raises a question—namely, what am I to do in response to this problem that appears to have no

resolution and, indeed, which I personally feel has no resolution *for me*? I attend and sit with this problem throughout the entirety of the project, and in particular in this first chapter, by attempting to practice my own, personally new version of guardianship, or, in the Greek, *phulakos*. My train of thought here moves as follows: if I cannot escape this problem that I have found my self in—facing the static and stuck past that is past—how might I nevertheless move, live, and die in the world in a way that helps to bring more healing than harm? In the deadlocked state—being—that I feel I am in—forced to face this wall—is healing possible? Is harshness inevitable? Following these lines of questioning, another aspect of this part, strewn throughout and between both of these opening chapters, is the importance of tension and the role that tension plays in my piecing together my response-ability in the face of what feel like formidable, bleak, and if nothing else unknown, odds. In chapter two, then, I spend some time delving deeply into Plato’s *Republic*, the source where I first faced an explicit mentioning of and personal resonance with this tense guardian figure, in order to support my suggestion that the presence of *phulaks* figures as such constitute a problem without solution, as well as to practice seeing and familiarizing my self and my readers with the kind of tension that I am pointing to, a tension that is hard to make sense of but which I nevertheless feel pulled to slow down and sit with. As such, I hope that my way of writing invokes such a sense of tension—a long, slow draw and drawl—as my writing in this project constitutes the beginnings of my own personal practice and taking on of this different kind of guardianship, a different kind of thinking, a different kind of story-telling, a different kind of teaching, and a different kind of writing.

I am ultimately telling a story. Please, read what follows as such. In doing so, I am simultaneously offering a teaching and I am posting my self as a guard. What do I guard for?; What do I guard against?; Why?; and How? are questions that, in the subtext (and sometimes the

explicit text) of each of the respective four parts, I begin to lay out and, in a few ways, answer. There are some answers. There are some gaps. As you follow along with my writing, this narrative, I am asking you to let me and the *additional* way I feel pulled to be in this world—be-ceasing (see chapter ten), an onto-pedagogical (see chapter four) way of ‘standing’ and ‘moving’—sit with you for a while. I offer beceasing as an additional movement in a world which pressures its inhabitants—human beings—to focus on the fact that they *are* and that they *be-come*, and to neglect that fact of their simultaneous—even if slow—ceasing to be, *be-ceasing*. For the human addicted to their being, to their becoming, beceasing points to and through, and constitutes, ontological and onto-pedagogical withdrawal. May there be space between my being and me.

Through these practices—storytelling, teaching, and guarding, and my pointing to and through these practices as necessarily imbricating being—I am not doing something novel. You—students and teachers—take on and encounter these figures and ready-made configurations whenever you participate in e-ducational relationality. And, of course, self-ascribed tellers of stories, everyday teachers of students, and ‘guardian’ figures litter the landscape and the surface of this world. To this end, I write in order to call what is commonplace—so commonsensical and routinized (and close to the face) that it runs the risk of evading awareness—into question. Perhaps I am unique in my being, and my tendency to habitually and mindlessly gloss over those nitty-gritty (existential, ontological) details that I find my self in—and force my students into—when I engage with them and the world in an e-ducational manner, that is, when I allow my self to be led and when I muster the courage to lead. I honestly doubt it. We shall see.

CHAPTER I: *PHULAKOS*

1.1

A Way In and Throughout

The quoted text in the interluding epigraph that precedes the prologue points to a perennial problem, an irresolvable problem, that is, a problem without resolution: the presence of guardians—border patrolling figures, watchers over the wall, masons of minds, managers of a boundary between inside and out—in this world. The guardians present a problem inasmuch as they stabilize an inside at the expense of—the destabilization of—an outside. This world of guardians—figures on the wall, figures of some law—requires outlaws (Warren, 2018; Sithole, 2020). Their task requires defense for *and* against. Such a problem—untenable as it is—structures this project and the task at hand and opens up a line of personal questioning. The asking of such a question, despite its beginning with me, here, locally, should not be interpreted as navel gazing. A guardian—a position I claim—cannot get lost within; they—I—must watch, a task which forces them to the brink, the outside. I probe the depths of this self and its boundary and ask such a personal question, faced with such a problem, in order not simply to respond but to imagine and prefigure a response-ability, one both new and old to me, and which I am in the process of excavating, recovering, and rediscovering. The problem at hand precipitates, then, the following question: how am I to respond to a problem that has no solution and to the frustrating tension that a puzzle with missing pieces engenders? On this personal quest of searching, it is my hope that you, my readers, far away (removed from ‘me’) as you may be, might find a way into your own parallel (your own ‘me’) sense of personal questioning. I do not claim to know how or where this line of inquiry would begin for you. Perhaps it could start here.

The problem at hand spans millennia and proves integral and perpetual to (indeed it integrates and perpetuates) the manifestation, concretization, and perpetuation of this metaphysical and antiblack world (and my metaphysical and antiblack self). This world (and self) requires that a rank of guardians—*phulakes*—incessantly manage a (strict) boundary between inside and out, this and that, here and there, self and other, order and chaos, white and black, light and dark. They are on permanent and persistent patrol, not merely on the boundary but for the sake and preservation of its integrity and coherence. The problem of guardianship that undergirds this litany of dichotomous thinking concerns ontology—the Law of Being—at its core. This problem of big binaries, fundamentally a problem of Being (what is and what is not?), implicates the *phulakes*—the guardians. Throughout all time, they find their selves posted on all sorts of formidable brinks, the most familiar being, of course, between (for the sake and preservation of) me and (against, for the sake of) you (and your own self-determining autonomy). Can you already sense that tension? I want to suggest that there is something going on here, so expansive that it implicates both you and me, even if differently; but what if you disagree? Please, know and protect yourself. There is no ontology without guardianship. Nor is there a point—to anything (nor a pointing toward anything)—without them, these pointing figures. There is no ontology without *phulak-os* (an experimental term), that is, without a figure posted on the boundary between what is and is not “to be,” nor without their managing act.

If you are unfamiliar with the word ontology or the notion of being, bear with me (or jump temporarily to the prologue of part two). If you are familiar with it and still find the notion hazy, and my wallowing about it vague, then we are in similar boats amidst a vast sea.

Regardless, I recommend not allowing your self to get too caught up in these weeds. Instead,

think of what we're doing as metaphorical weeding, as a foolhardy, and indeed at best temporary, removal of some perennial pests—weeding, nevertheless, with an end in mind.

An important piece of this project is the teasing apart of the all too often obscure and unquestioned (perhaps even poised as unquestionable) contours of 'ontology.' Indeed, may there be space between them. What is ontology? If *ontos* means being and *logos* means saying, what *is* it? What is not it? I worry that posing such questions gets us closer to confusion than closure. And closer to an answer than answering them. And a, perhaps more important, part of this project has to do with noticing that, I, a *phulaks*, despite my weddedness to the totalized project that is the grandeur of Being (*I cannot be without ontology*), am somehow able to question it and sit with the tension this questioning engenders. Perhaps that's part of the problem, the twisted nature of being.

The question of 'response-ability' morphs, then, for the time being: if escape is a fantasy, what can I do here, how will I do it, and why? Such questioning and sitting, I reiterate time and again, constitute critical pieces of what I feel pulled to call a personal pedagogical practice of (and as I look back after writing chapter ten—which used to be chapter four—I can say, *para-normal*) *phulakos*. We might think of this alliterative phrase as pointing to something like an ontopedagogical stance and standing, a term I take up in the (now current) chapter four. May my wording and work come across as neither needlessly playful, nor lighthearted, if they do in the first place. There remains some levity, some heaviness, a sense of hope, a sense of doom.

Regarding responsibility, I am only slowly 'figuring out' how I need to be on this brink. The seriousness. The deep, slow breathingness. This project constitutes a time of dense and deliberate figuring. Throughout it, I hope that my writing, if nothing else, that is, the movement of these very words, my wording—swerves and serves to point you toward your own sense of

figuring out—or even only noticing—your ordinary, habituated ontological stance and standing. That is, if you have one. Are you, like me, a guardian? Are you a human? Confusion is fine, for now.

The guardian's primary, fundamental task is of the ontological order. Such a weddedness forces guardians to face ontology, and, following such a facing (or perhaps motivating it), ontological terror. In its most mundane form, ontological terror manifests as at least three fears, or deeply seated anxieties, fears and anxieties with which '*I*' cannot contend: nothing, nothing being, and (there) being nothing. I explicitly return to *ontological terror* in chapter five, wherein I discuss my use of the term and how it is both different and nevertheless necessarily related to Warren's (2018) thinking about and through the 'term.'

These figures—I's and *phulakes*—do not have a choice as to whether or not they will face this realm of being, its outskirting periphery, and its totally outlawed ontologically terrifying territory, only how. They have been thrown into this presence, this position. Through this writing, I intend to sit with this problem—a weddedness to ontology, a metaphysical marriage over which I have no say—rather than resolve it, and to sit with rather than sever the tension it engenders. We will return to the point of orientations toward ontology—the 'how' of this facing that the *phulakes* must undertake—at the end of this part, as a segue into part two, and then in part two more fully. For now, I need to lay out the problem at hand, and with it, the aforementioned tension: an energetic force latent within self-certain, onto-metaphysical concrete. Can you feel it? Sit. Pause. Breathe in. Breathe out. Look at, sense, and watch that//this wall.

A brief (methodological) caveat

A few years ago, I would have without hesitation called my self an auto-ethno-grapher, someone who, among other things, brings into the research world their personal experience as a subject of inquiry. I would have called the work that I do and the writing that I produce autoethnography. I am simply now not so sure. My dis-ease has, in part, to do with an emergent feeling of uncomfortability making sturdy claims about ‘what I am doing,’ ‘how I am doing it,’ or ‘whether I am doing anything (enough) at all.’ And in part it has to do with an uncertainty as to whether, in the first place, I am. I am caught in a tension, unable to make the claim I always felt I could: the claiming of my own sure sense of auto-ontology in the first place. Indeed, the sticking point for me is my self, my *auto-*, the undergirding entity of this mode of inquiry, at least in the way it was presented to me, at least in the ways I had primed my self to receive such a presentation, back in 2018 when I first encountered the dual possibility of *Unfurling Rigor* and *Coming to Narrative* (Bochner, 2018 and Bochner, 2014, respectively). I am dis-integrating my own practice of auto-ethno-graphy. I work through the first part according to the second through the third. I don’t know what I am doing. This might be autoethnography. Let’s briefly consider how I got here.

I first became enamored with the possibility of autoethnographic work in a time of self-shattering. A relationship into which I had poured my entire self ended suddenly, traumatically, and without a word. Serendipity in these moments of vulnerability led me to autoethnography. Such a way of studying, working, and writing, first exemplified to me by Art Bochner (2014, 2018, and personal communication), revealed new possibilities. My engagement with this field presented me with what felt like a means to, through autoethnographic practice, suture and mend my self, and to therapeutically bring the fragmented, unraveling pieces back together. At the very

least, I felt that pursuing this kind of work might allow me to grapple with what was going on in my inner world. Such work felt important to me because I was sure that if I did this healing work I might be able to help—the teacher in me—others heal. I am now not so sure. There remains some hope. There remains some doom. So pulled, I contacted Art through email, and a thoughtful response on his part motivated me to take on an autoethnographic project for my master’s thesis (Hunsberger, 2020). If in that project I viewed my self according to sociological lenses, then in this project, the lens I don through this self-study comprises dull-edged pieces post some shattering, some break; the tension between reminiscent of a *phulaks*’ attention.

Despite my hope for autoethnography—that it would help me feel better (it did, but in the sense that it helped me become *better at feeling*, which does not necessarily *feel better*)—I nevertheless proceeded to fall apart and eventually found my self studying philosophy and education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the fall of 2020. In the middle of that first fall semester—both in the midst and somehow still before ‘it all’—I wrote an update email to Art regarding my persistent investment into auto-ethno-graphy and asked him a question about a “mindful” variety, or what I was thinking about as, “autoethnography[y] that take[s] place... *in the moment* for a certain span of time. Like, because I know I will be experiencing something, I “stage” an autoethnography for the event and see what I learn from it” (personal communication, September 28, 2020). Years later, I now reflect and realize that my posing such an inquiry initiated such a study: this project. I am on that stage, performing, bringing my old and some new, aspirational sense of self into the picture, here, in and through those and these words. My idea behind ‘mindful autoethnography’—in the fall of 2020—was that I would begin a practice of sitting with, growing my awareness of, and responding to all in my life that was outside of my control, and what I then called and thought of as the mysterious Other.

And then the Other became real and hit home. All of a sudden, there it was in my face and such a practice felt, at best, trivial—*this doesn't matter anymore*—and at worst, exploitative—*an opposition of mindfulness*. I abandoned the pursuits, or at the very least shelved them as such. ‘As such,’ they still collect dust, and yet I am in their midst. An oncological onset and a grim, new reality (while in reality not all that ‘new’ in my family) twists time and forces and splits my attention (a tension) elsewhere, elsewhere.

A few years later, out of the blue, I hear from Art, who checks in to see how I’ve been doing. Finding my self fragmenting and falling further apart and, in a now non-pathological way, beginning to let my self go—indeed, in some sense, losing my self (Garfield, 2022)—I make the following confession:

Autoethnographically, I am in a bit of an odd spot. I was introduced to a scholar this past semester—Calvin Warren (2018)—who gripped me and unsettled my entire world. I am writing as a process of reassembling the pieces of what feels like a broken—and not in a bad way—self, and so the auto of my ethnographic writing is fragmented, non-linear, problematized, tense, open, and weird. Of course, all of this philosophy coincided with the news and reality that my mom was going to die. (August 12, 2022)

A—my—*phulaks*, my primary guardian, progenitor, care-taker, and storyteller (see part three, and chapter eight specifically) was going to die. In fact, she was already gone. She had passed away a few months before I responded to Art, in May, after a grueling battle with stomach cancer, diagnosed only a year earlier, in the spring of 2021. More, my grandmother, my mother’s mother, will have died within the month following my sending this email. More cancer, a slower kind. I watched life and breath slowly leave both of them. I found my self close to that brink. It

should not be surprising, then, that I could not help but also, in the face of such out of order endings quite early in my life, feel my self, too, a fickle and fading phenomenon.

These feelings linger. I still find my self on that brink. I write from this broken place, terrorized in (ultimately) small, traumatic ways, forced to contend with two hard, concrete facts: one, I, like my mother and her being and breathing in the world, that is, *my very being* will end; two, such a process—this ending—was already, even if slowly, underway. I could tell my self some other story, but there is an end. At least for this one there is an end. It's coming—whether fast or slow, or inbetween; it's coming. Whatever else I am, whatever I might become. There is a part of me—perhaps the whole of me—that simultaneously ceases to be. In addition to these facts, however, emergent only in a space that death and decay affords, there was the realization of an opening, a crack in the concrete, initiated by the unharnessable energy of those ends, those processes of ending. For them—carriers of burdening weights, *oncos/ontos*—I pursue this project. I create something new, new at least to me. I am telling my self a different story. I am storying my self differently. Not singularly. Starting here.

With a recapitulation: the wall that could not fall, the boundary between the world and me was beginning to erode in tiny and subtle ways—in reality, there was always this decay—and now I'd been forced to face it: finitude. As one of my responses, I'm sitting down, I'm shutting up, and I'm watching the wall as I fade away, as I cease to be; be-ceasing. Along the way, I aim to tell a different, resonant with traumas like these—of death, of loss, of chaos—story, but a story which does not fixate on these forces—even if throughout this project I focus on them, for the time being. If nothing else, I hope that my writing about and through and in response to what feel like endings, cuts, and closes can serve, for those facing them and formidable brinks like

these, as a creation and gift of space—a safeguard—amidst what I know can appear to be and only statically be like a cluttering tumult and suffocating cascade.

May there be movement and breaths despite the concrete.

May there be spaces between movements.

This project and these words might constitute auto-ethno-graphy. They might not. At the very least, I know that it—this ‘methodology’—is not what I used to think it could be, is not what I had originally made it out to be, a solution to all the problems I was noticing in me. I remain still in the realm of these teachers, under the influence of those guards—in the room and within the walls where I’ve shelved the books. I nevertheless feel like a strange, ignorant entity in the room and, as such, I choose to slow my staking of claims. I am not quite ready to claim it—any of *it*—at least in the ways I used to, interrupted as I am and have been in the very pursuit. Then, I thought that it—whatever it is and whatever it could be—would save me and make me whole. It could not. I thought that I could piece the puzzle back together and resolve it. Now I know I can’t—ignorant. Arrogant. There are pieces missing. They are gone. They have died. And in their place, a litany of questions lingers, which, if left untended, bubble, build, and burst: when a guardian—that permanent, immortal, and always already there presence—dies, and when the impenetrable defenses somehow fall down, how and to where shall I turn? And re-turn? For what? Where’s home? How long do I have before something else moves in? Instead of what I could claim, I work and work with what remains here with me. Remains. May *phulakos*, the task of the guardian, constitute the methodology. Between inside and outside, what comes and goes?

As you read along my writing throughout this project, with these small but substantial pieces of my story in mind, note the lineages (autoethnography, narrative inquiry, poetic inquiry, the cultural foundations of education, philosophy of education, black study, black thought and

thinking) that inform me, and know that I work within and without them. I am picking up what pieces I can, working with several pieces and in several ways. I am not doing one thing. A *phulaks*, I am caught in between. Between disciplines, methodologies, and ways of thinking, I am a figure of the interstices.

You have a sense of where I am and am not coming from, a sense of what ways—and why’s—of writing undergird my taking on this project as such. If you are curious why you should care about a project like this, I must bluntly ask: do you care about *me*? I inquire for the sake of three senses of “me.”

1) *Me* in the large, widespread sense of self and self-claiming, the claiming of a “me”—are you a ‘me’? 2) *Me* in the local sense, as in *me*, Jon Hunsberger, student and teacher of philosophy and education. And 3) *me* as *phulaks*, a figure on the periphery of not only the world but also of the mind, and, as such, a hand of thought (Uchiyama, 1993): the manager of this boundary that butts up against ‘not me,’ i.e. *you*.

Now, let’s get on with the show.

Phonetically: foo-locks/fool-ocks

What is a *phulaks*? Who are the *phulakes*? We can translate the ancient Greek word *phulaks*, the singular form of the noun, as “guard” and “watcher.” The verbal form of this word, *phulassein*, means, then, “to watch,” “to guard,” as well as “to protect,” and “to defend.” Plato positions *phulakes* (the ‘-es’ ending designates the plural form of the noun) as an integral and integrating piece of the ‘utopian’ (the best that humans can expect) city he describes in his *Republic* dialogue. These figures, whether resonant with Plato’s particular placing and enrollment of them, carry an ancient baggage that, even if only in translated name, echoes into the contemporary era.

Indeed, ‘guardians’ pervade the landscape of this world. Institutionally, the police and the military, tasked with ensuring *national security*, constitute a *phulaks*—guardian—force. In popular culture, ‘guardians’ abound, in wildly popular movies like *Guardians of the Galaxy* and in the book series *The Guardians of Ga’hoon*. Millions of people worldwide keep up with current events by subscribing to a newspaper called *The Guardian*. In games that I play, there are guardian druids and star guardians. On the home front, it is common to think of parents as guardians. Guardian lingo is everywhere, and, I would like to suggest, in more places and settings than any given observer might immediately realize. Another of my hopes in this project is to suggest that teachers and storytellers—anyone who claims to perform either of these roles—also serve as guardians, as fundamentally *phulaks* figures: managers of a boundary between inside and outside. I go into greater depth about my suggestion that these educational and narrative figures are fundamentally performing guardianship in parts two and three. For now, suffice it to say that teachers, for example, manage such a boundary on behalf of their students inasmuch as they desire and in many cases require and mandate that students ‘learn’ or let some material—and ways of engaging material—‘in’ and that they leave others ‘out.’ Inasmuch as *phulakes* and their presence in this world constitutes an irresolvable problem—that is, once a *phulaks* figure arrives, they cannot leave, for the act of sending them away constitutes an act of guardianship—teachers and storytellers, at the most basic level of their functionality, indeed at their starting point and in their first place, do too.

Alongside the tension this problem (and perhaps even the tension that trying to sense this rather cerebral problem) engenders, I write as a way of sitting and slowing, withdrawing from a tendency I find in my self—taught to be a sharp, cutting edge—to sever, alongside it, these kinds of tensions, those of the irresolvable and hard-to-feel order. It is worth asking, would not then

sitting become or represent a solution? A way out? There it is: the interjecting, interventive problem at hand—the permanent, incessant, and unending presence of *phulaks*, guardian figures on this mundane, everyday level: posted, patrolling, preaching, teaching, and making me second guess my self. We need not push a negative valence on this problem of guardianship, for there are times when second guessing—a guessing again, not in the first place—engenders a clarity of thought and thinking. This fact—the presence of *phulaks* figures—nevertheless lays bare the strong sense of tension that accompanies them: such a pervasive permanence serves to both suffocate—the *phulaks* won't let me go—and safeguard—the *phulaks* won't let me go. They are voices in my head. Their voices in my head: reprimanding, encouraging, scolding, disciplining. Themselves disciplined. A feedback loop that occasionally breaks out into another feedback loop.

A good student, an aspirant, and compelled to take on this presence—that is, to teach—I study it. This project amounts to a pedagogical study of their presence, writing toward a laying out of this presence *in me*, in my own self-conceptualization, and in the story that I tell my self about me. Working in this direction, I explore the various ways these figures—outside of me—have shown up in my life, as guides, gatekeepers, teachers, storytellers, and parents. In this chapter, my goal is to lay out the problem that the *phulakes* represent through their persistent presencing. I do so by harking back to the long-past yet ever-present Plato, who depicted the *phulaks* figure as performing a central and *integral* and indeed centering and *integrating* task in his understanding of justice and what it would mean for a city and a soul to exemplify something so good.

Worth noting here is that Plato did not create or conceive of the *phulaks* figure as such, but rather, I reckon, caught wind of their presence and saw in them a possible employment for

the sake of order, beauty, goodness, and justice. Even though Plato is not the creator of this presence—indeed, the *phulakes* and the problem these figures bring to the table, I worry, run deep in the story of *humanity*—I focus on his envisioning and employment of the *phulakes* because in his description and prescription of them, he keenly points to their tense nature. He is also well aware of—and indeed doubles down on—these figures’ capacities to serve as casters-out and keepers-in, that is, as mediators, preservers, and conservers (and, for the sake of conservation, progressors) of the boundary between this and that, here and there, and, again, *what is* and *what is not*. It is also worth noting here—a point I reiterate later—that I work with Plato’s thinking and writing throughout this project not in an effort to endorse or reify his philosophical orientation, nor even his ontological stance and understanding. Rather I work so closely with Plato—in particular in this chapter—because he noticed something powerful about the problem at hand, a problem that, on the one hand, *pre-dates* him and which he, as such, notices and keeps a close eye on, and on the other, which he thus attempts to employ whole-sale for his own particular purposes, in an effort to, I can only imagine, keep this predatory beast at bay while nevertheless capitalizing on its power. I write in an effort to explore a different response-ability to the *phulakes* and their presence in the world.

Guardrails: questions that guide this part and project

Several questions of varying scope guide my thinking and writing throughout this part and throughout this project altogether. In this part in particular, my writing, in a deep sense, constitutes a response to these questions that guide this study: What are ‘we’ to do with the *phulaks* figure, given that its permanent presence presents an irresolvable problem? More personally, and of particular importance for this already underway first chapter, this question becomes, or morphs into: what am *I* (who am I? who and how do I take my self to be?; these

questions guide part three in particular) to do when facing—indeed, in the face of—the irresolvable deadlock, headlock, dreadlock that the *phulaks* problem precipitates? Indeed, what sort of response-ability is possible—at the very least for ‘me,’ the *personal subject of this project*—in the face of a problem without resolution? Put another way: how am I to respond and relate to the resulting tension? Outlaw? Overcome? Sit with? Are there other possibilities? Who finds their self afforded the luxury to choose, or even merely to muse about something like this?

It keeps coming up, so I might as well listen to what it has to say to me. This question—how am I to respond?—inasmuch as it guides this first chapter, sets the stage for what feels like, without being dramatic, a life’s worth of work. This project not only constitutes, then, a written—and in this sense slow, deliberate, and iterative—response to *ontological terror*, but also the beginning of what I hope will amount to a life and death of responding differently: a different response-ability.

Of particular importance to chapter two and part two, I turn to a more basic, fundamental, and traditional line of questioning: Why, in the ‘first’ place, is the presence of the *phulaks* a problem, and in particular an irresolvable problem? What is the problem that the *phulaks* brings to the table? As a teaser, their problem has to do with the boundary that they require their selves (and students) to manage. Such management is a problem because for the sake of maintaining and preserving a “privileged inside” (Warren, 2018), whether that be for their own sense of self or for those self-same enough to be considered part of the community, these same managers must also cast out and exile, or at the very least leave behind, those and that which they deem, or have been taught and told to deem, other-different. Distinction, delineation, difference, and ontology all require some sense of *phulakos*, a management between inside and out/what comes and goes. My quest is to take on—these questions guide my taking on of—the challenge of personally

doing this work otherwise, managing and shaping this boundary in a new (for me) way, and as such, I am dis-integrating my self.

The guarded: who am I writing/teaching for?

In the first question that I pose directly above, who is the ‘we’ that I refer to? I write for my self and other guarded selves, for those who have been reared in the culture of the Imperial Man (Sithole, 2020) and who would like to imagine their selves and self expression, their way of being in and breathing in the world differently, anew (Warren, 2018). Who are imperial men? I take up this topic more fully in part three—re: the stories and telling stories and ego and ‘I.’ For now, I leave you with a quaint quote that moves us on. Tendayi Sithole (2020) describes “The Imperial Man,” following the lead of Sylvia Wynter, as he who “creates the deviant other” (p. 46). I refer to them, too, throughout this project, as imperial minded men, in order to suggest that these imperial minded men are not just any, everyday people. They might be, for this world normalizes, for some (for those who fit the bill, who bring in bills), a sense of self so supreme that invading and undermining the livelihoods, neighborhoods, and stability of others for the sake of some developmental delusion becomes justifiable. More specifically, though, I think of imperial minded men as those who actively and consciously choose to think in ways that not only create deviant others as threats to self, but who also unleash the unconscionable thought as instruction, a willed and straightening action on those who deviate from the course of the world, their hope for the world, for the sake of their own vision, no matter the cost.

Let me be clear here that my writing about the problem of the *phulakes* is a simultaneous writing about a problem I see in *self-conceptualization*, or *self-storying*. I write in an effort to intervene into the thought and act of imperialism, into the ways of those who feel as if their core burns with an existential toxin that they can neither quench nor quell, and who, thus, are looking

for an otherwise or an elsewhere. An imperial echo rings and resonates here, too. I write in order to re-frame this and my toxic conundrum, as one that needs neither incessant fleeing nor everlasting feelings of guilt and remorse. I write to suggest that there is another way of relating to this problem that *is* and might well continue to *be there*, and of relating to that sense of tension that tends comes in tow too. I need not always strive to overcome it. Sometimes overcoming is necessary. At other times, I can sit with it. I can slow. And then, I can take a step back, and start to walk away, even if only for a moment, for only these moments. I write as a practice of discerning what, on my small, personal part, I can and cannot bring to an end. I write as an exploration of what it might mean for me to practice, again following Warren (2018), endurance in the face of these formidable odds. To reiterate, I write in the midst of and in response to *Ontological Terror*, that is, in response to Calvin Warren's book and work that shook and still shakes me to my now rattled core.

I write for guardians—*phulaks* figures—in, of, and for this world of walls, and I would like to suggest that you, members of my dissertation committee and scholarly community, whether you would or would not like to be, are among these ranks. Indeed, if for nothing else, you have been *for me*. Sometimes we have no choice in these matters. As academics, teachers (part two), and tellers of stories to students (part three), for this student, you have performed a kind of guardianship, *phulakos* (part one). It is hard in this world, having found one's self in one or a number of these roles, not to. I do not count you as exceptional in my figuring of you among these ranks—indeed, the ranks are vast. We make up a legion, an army, a force. We need to be careful about how we carry out our roles. We need to know we shape the world. Do these suggestions unsettle you? Does my claim that you are implicated in these grand schemes

engender in you an uncomfortable tension? Rather than resist and as such sever, what might it mean to slow down, feel, and sit with it?

I write in order to provide you with an opportunity to see what the prospect of such a sitting practice might look like, to glimpse what it has compelled me to create. I write to show you how such a practice compels me to think and think differently, guard and guard differently, teach and teach *differently*. Why such difference is and feels desirable for me, my self, and my place in the world should become clearer in my laying out of this project, my laying out of the problem at hand, indeed, the problem at the hand of thought. Inasmuch as I advise and encourage you to slow down so as to notice and sit with this sort of problem, I am there with you, in my own rediscovery phase of this process of slowing down and sitting. I too am frustrated.

Readers should notice that I am not engaging, at least in the traditional academic sense, the ongoing conversations around some of the topics I take up in this project, such as: white supremacy, antiblackness, humanism, psychoanalysis. Part of my personal and pedagogical practice of *phulakos* is working with local resources, not so much as to wall off the outside, the unknown, but to work with what has come to me through and across the wall. I am sitting with those pedagogical and curricular movements that teachers have thrust upon me, those over which I have had little say. I am working with what I have—with the resources that my teachers have given me, the sources they have pointed me toward. The portrait I paint nevertheless occurs in this here conversation—between you and me. If with these close-to-home resources I am only able to build an insufficient, insecure shelter, a wobbly shed, so be it. May the structure break. May walls fall. What happens? What remains? I point to and through onto-pedagogical dis-integration.

An oddly placed map of this part of the project

What am I doing? In this first chapter, I write in response to the first set of questions previously posed. That is, in response to the question of what I am to do in the face of this, what feels like a, *phulaks* responsibility and its permanent presence that constitutes a problem, I explore how I feel personally pulled to take on this guardian task, or what I am thinking of as *phulakos*, a term which I describe more explicitly in the subsections that follow. May it be a preliminary, tentative first place.

In what remains of this first chapter, I provide an overview of the term *phulakos* and designate a few features that, through this practice of sitting with the tension, I feel compelled to embody and practice, *as a guardian*. I then include several small sections where I stress my intention for you, readers of my writing. This work will pay dividends in each chapter and each page that follows. In these small sections, I describe tension and what I mean when I invoke this word and am honest about how, in my situating of Plato in this chapter, I am and am not orienting my self toward this complicated thinker whose—often problematic—impact, in the past and still presently, on this world is well known.

And then we will finally reach chapter two, in which I begin to respond to the second set of questions posed just above. Together, they wonder why *phulakes* present a problem in the first place, which means turning to Plato's *Republic*. Here, I put into some words what has precipitated from a deep and slow study of a particular scene in the drama of the dialogue. In the context of 'the first city' (a first place) in Book Two, we encounter the *phulakes*' problematic, yet necessary and irreversible, arrival.

To reiterate, in my going about this writing, I do not seek to solve this problem, nor even to posit that there is a solution, but rather to, as a practice of my own personal *phulakos*, lay out

and slow down so as to sit with the tension it engenders. I follow tension as a thematic thread throughout this project, and in particular in this opening chapter. It is all over the place. It takes up some space. Tension proves integral to Plato's *phulakes* (for him, the word connotes a *stretching* force, and sparks, for me, a feeling of *stretching*), even though he does not name it 'tension' as such. Such a tension is evident in several respects in the way Plato introduces, presents, and positions these figures. Throughout this second chapter, we will thus first look briefly at their arrival, second at their complicated relationship to justice, the overarching theme of the *Republic* text, and third—and most substantially—at their responsibility to serve the city as figures of courage, posted on the brink between what is and is not to be feared. In each of these sections we will glean further insight into the problem that the *phulakes* bring to the table and the, even if only subtly, terrifying tension with which they must contend.

Despite this terrifying prospect, I do not then seek to abandon the problematic *phulaks* figure. Indeed, I cannot; its force guides me even when I let go; it guides my letting go. Rather, I explore its problematic dimensions, the problem of tension integral to its *phulakos* core.

A personal, pseudo-Platonic take on and taking-on of the tension and problem of guardianship: *phulakos*

I write as a practice of taking on, slowing down, and sitting with this problematic presence and the tension it engenders. My writing thus constitutes a kind of (para-normal) *phulakos*. To this end, I have already begun to provide an example of the task at hand, a sitting with the problem at hand, as well as of what my personal practice of *phulakos* looks like. The slow, 'no rush' lead in that brings you here is an example of what it means to me to practice *phulakos*. On the one hand, it is a rather lax approach. On another, the matter at hand urgently demands this delicacy on my part. My going about this work in this way—this everyday labor of

pedagogy, of being a teacher, a figure of authority, in people's lives, minds, eyes, and I's—must move slowly. I do not know why—I just know that it must. It is urgent, and so I need to go slow.

Put another way, I do not unfold this project in a linear fashion. Still, somewhere in the realm of where any given pupil might begin reading, or listening, which is to say close to 'the beginning,' I need to be clear from the outset about what, through this project, I do and do not seek to do. It is imperative not only for me to wander along the way in to this project, but also to be clear about my intention and agenda—crystal clear—even if such a clarity cannot guarantee any kind of impact, or the sort of impression this work might leave. Such are the risks and the lapses inherent to any form of teaching, storytelling, and guardianship, and especially of dis- or differently-embodied *phulakos* of the asynchronous variety, that is, words removed from my voicing them and from the living reality of my vocation, my everyday way of being—and coming to be and ceasing to be—in the world. I wish that I could spend time with you and that we could talk about what this process—all of it, within and without these pages—means to me. Maybe I can, maybe I already am. For those that I cannot, that is, for those who will only read these words in a long line, in long entangled lines, please know that beyond the writing, what these words can convey, there is less. If less may be more, may more be less.

Writing compels in me a more—compels me to capture the cutting edge of my thought—and so, in writing, I slow. Here, with words, I point to and through, for three hundred pages, what I am sure we could broach in an hour long, synchronous conversation. In this sense, this work is for 'me,' rather than some imagined sense of 'you.' I write for those afforded the time and the space to sit down and rest and read and study for long periods of time. I write for your inner world, you who get to dwell there. May the slow trickle of these words, despite the terrain they trek, if nothing else, be a balm. "More" is an impulse I am in the everyday trying to satisfy

less—in the bringing together of words on a page for the purposes of a dissertation. Why more?
why more of this? of any of this?

Why more *phulakos*?

What is *phulakos*? If *phulaks* (“guardian”) is the nominative, singular form of the noun, and *phulak-es* (“guardians”) the nominative plural, then *phulak-os* is the genitive singular form. The genitive case—here marked by the *-os* ending on the root *phulak*—designates possession, or ownership, and so we can literally translate *phulak-os* as “the possession of a guardian,” or what for a guardian *is their own*, their birthright, their task at hand. More straightforwardly, let’s translate *phulakos* as “of a guardian.” What, the question then becomes, *is* “of a guardian?” What does a *phulaks* figure qualitatively—by their very being—‘possess’? What lies at the base of their task?

I want to suggest that *phulakos* points to the inherent and fundamental, even when unstated, *task and method* of the *phulaks*, the guardian, as well as of conceptually similar figures (teachers and story-tellers, to name just two). *Phulakos*, then, for me, points to and gestures at the ‘methodology’—if we want to call it something academic—that I undertake in the project that follows. I am telling a story. I am offering a teaching. I am positioning my self as a guardian. Which is to say that, methodologically, I am intentionally *not* concerning my self and my writing with philosophy or a philosophical method of investigation (at least not primarily, nor originally), then, but something that I see as more basic and banal: *phulakos*. To repeat: I write as a practice of teaching, storytelling, and guardianship: for my self and for you. Another of my meager goals and purposes for this writing is to point to and embody a problematic dimension of and tension that runs through the work I feel compelled to do in order to find my self among the halls of the *academy*.

For Plato, an original, ideological founder of and at the very least predecessor for these halls, the *phulakes* and the *philosophers* are distinct classes of people in the city, and, even if they are fundamentally related and work together, they ultimately have different tasks. Throughout this project at various points, I assert that I am dis-integrating my self, and that I point to and through onto-pedagogical dis-integration. Teasing apart this distinction between *phulakos* and *philosophy*, and intentionally working within the realm of the former rather than the latter, is one of several examples of this kind of work that I am undertaking. Another is wondering whether or not the *phulakes* need to incessantly bend to the will of the philosophers that, according to Plato, shape these halls, or if they can rebel and refuse these confines. What is at stake when the student says no? No more. In deed, less.

In this project, I am interested in what, qualitatively, constitutes the work that this guardian figure takes up, both originally in Plato's thinking and in this contemporary, and nevertheless Platonically-in-formed (that is, metaphysical) world. In addition to dis-integrating my self, I am also pre-figuring—setting a pre-cedent for—something else, something else in addition. May the addition constitute a subtraction. In this chapter, I explore *phulakos* by paying close attention to the *phulaks* figures that the Greek thinker Plato conceptualizes as, again, playing a central, centering, integral, and integrating role in his most substantial work: the *Republic*. Perhaps like Plato, an undertaker of *phulakos* himself, and certainly like any author in general, I write in order to provide a lay of the land of my (hands of) thought, a survey of my thinking, and where, through your reading of my writing and following of my thinking, I hope you might meander. Let's turn there.

Attention and Tension

Inasmuch as I write about tension, I hope to write in a way that encourages in you—students, of a sort, and ‘selves’ at least—a capacity to slow so as to feel and sit with tension in a rather low-stakes environment. You will notice tension in my writing and thinking in the chasms—between what may appear to be incoherently connected ideas, reminiscent of some fictive shattered plane (Sanderson, 2010). There are gaps and pitfalls in my thinking, spaces between that I do not seek to fill with sense and signification. Writing in this way is hard. Thinking in this way is hard. I do not mean to imply that I am doing something extraordinary, or even that I am breaking new ground. I work from a ground always already broken—full of holes, not a whole. Rather, I write to state simply that it is challenging for me to express my self through writing in this way. It is hard to write and think in this dark. Why, you might ask then, do I do it? For one, I am stubborn. For two, it is what comes to me, and inasmuch as I am moving this project, this project is moving me. There is a control both within and out of my control latent within and between these words and pages. A *phulaks* figure, I bear the tension, faction, and division. I sit with and alongside the space rather than cast it out in an all too common (when it comes to consciousness, the wake, (Sharpe, 2016)) de-spacing manner (I return to this point, and in particular to what I am thinking of as ‘one-track-mindedness’ in chapter eight). I seek not to pathologize this condition, but rather to sit with my divided self for the sake, again, of endurance (Warren, 2018) rather than severance. I want to orient your attention, then, to the tension that arises when you try to make sense of what I am doing here. Does it help to know that I am not quite sure, either?

Tension

The ancient Greek word for tension is related to the verb *teinein*, which means “to stretch,” or “to strain.” At least in the *Republic*, a prefix that directs or orients the stretching often accompanies this root verb, and, as such, the word in verbal form appears thirty-or-so times throughout the dialogue’s ten books (which is to say that Plato’s use of the word is rare, even rarer in the sense that I invoke it). Plato’s interlocutors often use a form of the word *teinein* to question the relevance of a claim (*Republic*, 454b, for example), or to determine whether a point in an argument is “a stretch” or not (*Republic*, 382a, for example). Tension, then—at least in the way that I am thinking about, through, and alongside it, that is, as an explicitly stated term designating a discomfiting, interruptive sensation, a sensation that is *hard to feel*—does not appear in Plato’s *Republic*’s pages. It is not a term that Plato places much weight on, not nearly the amount of weight that I retroactively do. He certainly uses the word, but, again, often does so in verbal form, where the meaning of the word carries a more colloquial meaning than anything. We might be able to argue that when he does use it, he does so with a negative connotation, but that, in itself, would be a stretch. All of this is to say that I both am and am not working on and with Plato’s terms, both when it comes to tension and when it comes to *phulakes* (and when it comes to what it means to follow the traditional e-ducational route).

I think of tension as a force, that which has the potential to alter movement, whether that be through a stymying, a slowing, a conserving, a progressing, or an accelerating. Tension is a force in several senses. As a physical force, a force between objects, we can observe tension when linked objects become separated, outside the norm of their resting state. I feel such a physical force of tension in my right shoulder, I can only imagine from years of battering it as I threw heavy objects in grade school. And I feel it in the muscles of my neck, on the same side of

my body as the shoulder pain. I feel it in my jaw, building, building, and breaking in a cartilage pop. Tension, here, is hard to feel because it does not feel good. It commands my attention. A tension.

There is also tension in what we *might* think of as the meta-physical sense. I first found my self thinking about tension as such when reading Sharon Todd's (2003) book *Learning from the Other*. In it, she 'builds on the tension' between what appear to be "fundamentally incommensurable discourses" (p. 12): Levinasian ethics and Freudian psychoanalysis. What Todd encourages here is a resistance to an either-or and an embrace, instead, of a both-and way of thinking. Curiously enough, a similar sort of tension lays latent in this very suggestion, namely that we embrace both-and rather than either-or thinking. What, I feel Todd's work encouraging me to wonder, would it mean to embrace *both* both-and *and* either-or thinking? Is this out of the question? The—perhaps uncomfortable—sensation that such an ask engenders is the force I feel compelled to sit and contend with, rather than sever, throughout this project. Meta-physical tension is hard to feel because it is rather subtle, and because it might not be appropriate to call it "meta-physical" in the first place, for metaphysics functions according to pure, essential (at least in the "formal" Platonic sense) concepts, and "tension"—indicative of stretching, stress, and strain—hardly seems to fit that blissful, beautiful bill.

I think of this "non-physical," or perhaps para-physical, force of tension as one which pulls my thinking and feeling in different directions. Even when pointed out, and indeed *pointed at*, it's hard to feel, and no easier to think. I may be able to notice it, to instigate and engender it, or to create and eradicate it (a way of creating it), but it is nevertheless challenging to feel. Indeed, the more I think about it, through it, the more I sit with it, and the more I try to constrain 'it' in concise wording, the more it appears to resemble the physical force. My thinking cannot

contain it. My one-track mind casts it out, and I begin to feel it in my body. It does not feel good, and, as such, it—tension—presents a problem for thought and for feeling. In general—a frustrating force to deal with, especially when I am not concerned with “dealing” with, and thus severing, it, but slowing and sitting with it—tension radiates.

Tension is evident, too, in my fumbling around a description, delineation, and definition of it. And so, in short, I intend to point your attention toward such forces of tension that are hard to think and feel.

Attention

A point I will be making more poignantly in parts two and three that follow is that to perform the basic task of *phulakos* is to have a hand in directing attentions and in leaving concrete impressions. For example, in my writing of these words, in my guiding you along so as to help you follow my train of thought, I am acting as a director, a manager, of your attention. Writers do this. People do this in conversation with each other. More explicitly, teachers do this, and through their pedagogy, on a perhaps more implicit level, send ‘messages’ about what constitutes appropriate attentiveness (not to mention, *attendance*) to their students (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996). Story-tellers do this. To tell a story is to orient thought and thinking and attention along a narrative thread. Stories have points, and tellers, *phulakes*, and teachers do the pointing. *Phulakos*, pedagogy, and storytelling all show up at various points in Plato’s *Republic*.

On that note, another piece of my intention as a *phulaks* is to be clear about how I am and am not reading and working with Plato’s thinking throughout this project. For me, he at once proves himself to be a paradigmatic example of someone who notices the presence of guardians in the world, and nevertheless, at the same time, his employment of the *phulaks* force—not to mention his own practice of *phulakos*—is limited (even if total) and limiting (because of this

totality). I am doing what feels authentic and necessary for me, my self, and my responsibility in this world. Put another way, I work within, without, and between the rungs of Plato's legacy; a tense set of practices gleaned over time through slow and generous reading.

Platonic Provocation: a practice of generous reading

Philosopher Mitchell Miller approaches Plato's *Republic* as a dramatic, dynamic text, one in which the reader plays an integral role as an *asynchronous interlocutor*. To be clear, I invite you to approach my writing similarly.

In his (1985) essay entitled "Platonic Provocations: Reflections on the Soul and the Good in the *Republic*," Miller designates at least six provocative moments where he feels that Plato the author, on a number of levels, intends to awaken his interlocutors and, perhaps likewise, interrupt his readers' attention and invite them to pause, to slow, and to consider and reconsider what's going on in the text. In these moments (of *mindfulness*, maybe), Miller suggests that Plato intends for readers to 'jump in' to the dialogue taking place between the explicit, inscribed interlocutors, in particular when they appear to falter in their attempts to keep up with Socrates' (sidenote: for those unfamiliar, Plato's primary interlocutor, present in all of the dialogues that he writes, and, again, his teacher, one of his own *phulakes*, teachers) train of thought and thinking, or at points where Socrates himself appears to claim ignorance, or to be facing an impossibility, or an inability to proceed. In such moments, Miller suggests that Plato provokes a response from the reader. Indeed, they are moments in the dialogue where Plato intends for the reader to practice generating their own responsive voice in the conversational tone of what they are reading. In Miller's words, in these moments, the dialogue's main interlocutors appear to "fail, [and] we [readers, students] are invited to inquire more deeply" (pp. 166-167). In what follows of this first part (and in chapters three and six), following Miller's guarding guidance, I slow my

reading and study in order to inquire more deeply into the scene in which the *phulakes* arrive in the *Republic*. Here we can see not only the problem that they bring to the table, clear enough in Plato's depiction of the scene, but we can also, when we slow, begin to get a sense of the more obscure fact of tension that their problematic nature engenders.

Speaking of tension, Miller's (1985) interest when it comes to thinking about and through Plato's work appears to be about actively slowing down and paying close and careful attention. In this way, Miller encourages his readers to practice interlocution with Plato, alongside Socrates and the rest, but not so much as to take on the role of, for example, "the too quickly satisfied Glaucon" (p. 168) (Glaucon, another interlocutor, named after and likely representing Plato's own brother of the same name). Rather, Miller suggests that Plato wants his readers to "remain puzzled and *ponder [the] tension*" (p. 168, emphasis mine) that the moments and scenes and suggestions point us to, that tension—both subtle and uncomfortable—that is *hard to feel*. To this end we may begin to wonder: what unspoken meaning might we learn and glean from these points and places of impasse that, only upon deep and slow study, appear, strewn throughout the text? The question becomes: what is possible through provocation?

Situating Plato in a Contemporary Context, or, why generously read?

In my deep reading of the scene surrounding 'the first city' in Plato's *Republic*, I am not asking you to care about Plato, his writing, and his way of thinking. Nor am I suggesting that you should. I nevertheless feel the need to get into and acquainted with the weeds in order to begin weeding, or even to think about what I might weed, and why. That said, people have been studying Plato for as long as Plato has existed, which is to say well over two thousand years, and over this long time they have engaged their own deep readings, drawing and intuiting plenty of different insights. I am not interested in teasing apart this particular plantscape of commentary on

Plato, in large part because I am more interested in Plato himself as a case of someone who has already explored and written about the problem at hand (the presence of *phulakes* in this world) and in his particular attention to this matter, and less about various scholars' secondhand accounts (there is, of course, the reality that I am working from Reeve's (2004) translation, a secondhand re-telling—this tension should not hang us up). For the purposes of this project, I read Plato as both a pre-scriber and de-scriber of (t)his world, that is, as a thinker who, on the one hand, created some of his own concepts and ideas and who, on the other, adopted and employed fixtures from an already-made world. We can place his notion of 'forms' among the former. I count his *phulakes* among the latter.

Plato noticed the importance of the *phulaks*' role in world-making, building, creating, and perhaps even re-creating in a time of turmoil, warring city-states, and tyrannical rule. His attentiveness not only to *phulaks* figures, but also education and the importance of storytelling, is a testament to and emerges in this very context of civil strife, unrest, and, what I am sure he thought of as, chaos. I can only imagine him imagining what it might mean to *actually*—given what *there is* here and now to work with—bring about change (for him, order) that would be good (conveniently, a change that hoists thinkers like him at the top of the—undesirable, he claims—social structure). I draw from Plato and his work in this project because he carries a perspicuous attentiveness to social change and to the social order, as well as an awareness of the possibility latent within *guardianship*—the work of shaping and managing boundaries—for *mani-pulating* this order, these orders. I ultimately work toward re-conceptualizing, and perhaps even de-conceptualizing (going back into the darkness of the cave) *phulakes*—through a personal pedagogy of para-normal *phulakos* (chapter ten). Along the way, I work both within and without

Plato's thinking about and through guardianship as a catalyst for social change, order, cohesion, revolution, and devolution.

Because I place a good deal of weight on *his* take on, his taking on and employing of, these *phulakes*, it's worth acknowledging some of the reservations you, my readers, may have about the attention I give to Plato, given some of the problems we may rightfully associate with his work, his thinking, and, following these, his legacy, or the ways his more ardent and capitulant students have, following his often perceived to be singularizing and universalizing example, proceeded to shape, change, and order the world (I count the onto-pedagogical conservatives of chapter four as among these very ranks).

At the very least, Plato privileges and participates in the perpetuation of an anti-“black” and “white”-as-supreme jurisdiction and ordering of the world. Indeed, he privileges law and order. He perpetuates (and has a heavy hand in creating) these laws and orders by upholding particular aspects of existence and pushing others down and out, and effectively sets a strong precedent for in-lawing (deeming lawful) the former and out-lawing (deeming lawless) the latter. For example, when it comes to his particular employment of *phulaks* figures, he orders and configures them to function as upholders of philosophically-divined law, a Law of “white”-as-supreme and anti-“black” Being (Warren, 2018), we might say. I place scare-quotes around the words “black” and “white” because although Plato does not operate and write in this 21st century settled and colonized context, his metaphysical musings, evaluation, and management has set a strong precedent for what has become a deeply racialized and socially stratified world.

We can see, for example, in Platonic idealism/ideology—his ‘theory’ of/claim that *there are* pure, essential meta-physical ‘forms’—a predecessor to commonplace and racialized, that is, white-as-supreme and anti-black, thinking in the modern and contemporary world. Perhaps a

change in terminology would help us broach this leap. It might be more appropriate to suggest that Plato exemplified an anti-dark and light-as-supreme worldview. His allegorizing of ‘the cave’ evidences such privileging and upholding, the very cave where the order of “light”—and light and enlightened things—at the top is what makes knowledge about and an understanding of truth, beauty, and justice possible, and where the “darkness”—and dark things, ‘things’ on a dark register, not quite things, no-things—at the bottom represents a world of undesirable and chaotic ignorance. Plato posted his *phulakes* along this brink between, placed throughout and on the perimeter of the city—along the cave’s dividing line—in order to keep the darkness at bay and to let the light gleam in. Here we can see the problem that the *phulakes* bring to the table *in a new light*.

CHAPTER II: *PHULAKES*

1.2

Platonic *Phulakes*, Problems, and a Process of Noticing and Familiarizing my Self with Tension

It has taken us a while, and an abrupt jolt, to get here. Can you feel that tension? That sensation which looms and drags on when we expect to be going somewhere but are not quite getting there? The readers are in the passenger seat, wondering, “are we there yet?” We have arrived, with the *phulakes* somehow both in tow and at the fore.

In my thinking about the *phulakes* as *problematic* I follow a surface level (which is to say passing, and not all that deep) lead of philosopher Edward Lee (1989). In the paper *Plato’s Theory of Social Justice*, he notices that each of the three main classes in Plato’s Republic—the craftspeople, the guardians (*phulakes*), and the philosopher-rulers—arrive in the dialogue for the sake of a just city both as a solution to a social problem and, upon their arrival, bring a problem of their own to the table. The *phulakes’* problem proves unique: for the sake of the city and the people in the city and that they might be whole, they must bear faction—the inevitable breakages that occur in the messiness of community—in their souls. Their task: absorb and constitute a formidable force. This tension—an internal conflict—constitutes their problem. In this second chapter, we will look into several cases of where this problem manifests, namely: 1) in the way it emerges alongside the very arrival of the *phulakes* figures, or at least how Plato imagines this arrival; 2) in the way that it—the problem and the tension it engenders—complicates their task in the bringing about of a return to Platonic justice; and 3) in the way that it necessarily positions them on the formidable brink between inside and outside, between what is and is not—for the sake of justice and good living in the city—to be considered terrifying. On this topic of terror,

and in particular *ontological terror*, we will pause, close this chapter, and consider what (might) come next.

A Problem Arises, the *Phulakes* Arrive

In your reading of what follows, keep in mind that both Plato and I are telling stories, and personal stories at that. To this end, I want you to imagine a time before it all: before you, before me, and before any *personal* sense—before any of the distinguishing senses—of ‘me.’

In Book 2 of the *Republic*, Plato’s interlocutors discuss what justice looks like in the context of a city, which leads them into an investigation of *the first city*. We can think of the first city as a primordial state of natural harmony, where people lived together, supported each other according to what each of them needed, and where things were generally good. In this original context, there were no classes of people. No craftspeople. No *phulakes*. No philosopher-rulers. (The three, basic classes that Plato imagined would constitute the best kind of city). People simply were. The natural course of things begins to change when people begin to think, and in particular when they begin to think about organizing their affairs.

Originally, the inhabitants of the city do not have specific tasks; people take up the tasks that that need to be taken up when they need to be taken up. Over time, people begin specializing, honing skills in particular areas over others, and developing crafts. In this context, a division of labor emerges, and the class of craftspeople ‘arrive’ in the city. No longer, though, are these inhabitants able to deem their settlement ‘the first city.’ Because of what has *become possible* through the organization of their efforts, they find their selves beginning to build a *luxurious* version of it (*Republic*, 372e). While the central motto of this advanced settlement continues to be, as in the first city, the meeting of each other’s needs, things begin to change, and now in unprecedented ways. With the advent of efficiency, the cohort’s capacity to meet its

members' needs becomes streamlined, habitual, and normal, a baseline upon which a new world opens up: a world of widespread, until now unimaginable desires, and the possibility of acting on these wants (perhaps even in a way, at least initially, without interfering with someone else's needs). Put another way, a division of labor creates some wiggle room, a space that soon gets swallowed up. You might ask "why? Is this swallowing up inevitable?"—regardless, it has happened. Humans have ensured it, and there is no going back. Impressions left in these tender, nascent moments remain.

Here we face the original problem that Plato tasks the *phulakes* with resolving through their presence in the world. The problem has to do with faction, a split, a break. Plato's Socrates, in the conversation surrounding this first city scene, at one point notes that some people will not be (indeed have evidenced that they are not) satisfied with having their needs met alone, nor even with their needs met in a luxurious way. They will end up wanting more. Faction erupts when some people "overstep the limits of their necessary desires" (*Republic*, 373e). To boot, this problem of faction does not only arise internally, engendering conflict, a fever in the city. Faction and fever also erupt and spread beyond the bounds of the city and implicate other people in other cities. Thus, this problem of faction also leads to war. For the sake of mending and resolving the faction and fever's fallout, whether internally manifest as conflict or externally as war, the *phulakes* arrive as *managers* of boundaries between this and that, mine and yours, citizen and barbarian, here and there, inside and outside. For Plato, should they take up and execute their task well, maintaining both the city's external and people's internal walls, they will help heal the sick city having fallen to faction: to begin to bring an order—a neat, effective border—back to the city that, without this interventive force, now perpetually runs the risk of falling further into the clutches of chaos, tyranny (the likes of which Plato himself witnesses in

ancient Athens). There is no going back to that first city, nor even to the luxurious version of it, but with—and only with, the story goes—the advent of a *phulaks* force, might there be any semblance of or proximity to peace, justice, and prosperity.

How are the *phulakes* to accomplish this task, and to do so in a way that does more healing than harm? Indeed, the question becomes: what does this work of perpetual return comprise? And how are they to deal and come to terms with their complicated presence, and indeed the *block* to pure (conservative) progress that they now represent? Through such questioning, we can begin to get a sense of the problem that the *phulakes* bring to the table, and of the tension their presence engenders.

The *phulakes*, too, are craftspeople. *Their* craft, however, proves unique and unlike any other that had existed in the city so far. A quick caveat: as Plato depicts the arrival of each class in what would be the just city, or the city that has the best chance of returning to and realizing justice, he is describing both their downfall and their promise, simultaneously. For example, in Plato's envisioning of this return, the craftspeople would at once be those who focus their efforts and energy so as to become experts of one thing to which they are naturally best suited—their promise—and these efforts are the very efforts that led them to their downfall. The difference is that, in the just city, there would not only be craftspeople doing their own best work, the task to which they are best suited. The realization of justice now requires *phulakes* (and philosophers), and *phulakos* as a craft entails something different (so conceived to absorb, and indeed embody, this conflict).

They—the one class of *phulakes*—must practice two contradictory tasks well: a tenderness for *those who are* and *that which is* considered friendly and toughness against those who are and that which is considered foe (*those and that which is not*). Particularly when it

comes to managing *internal conflict* in the city, the convolution inherent to their task should become clearer: when people in *their own* city act out of order, the *phulakes*' task is, on the one hand, to discern the disorder and cast it out with toughness and at the same time, on an other, to exercise a degree of tenderness that will not provoke further outburst. Indeed, the *phulakes*' task is to bring about harmony, to keep the peace (at large).

As much as the *phulakes* arrive in response to faction, it would appear, then, that Plato positions them as absorbers of faction. In having to balance the, as Lee (1989) calls them, “opposed characteristics” inherent to their task, they bear division in their soul for the sake not only of a united city but also for united souls within that city, that is, for the sake of a return, as approximate as it might be, to what harmoniously and naturally was: that first city skirting the fine line between necessity and desire. Such a return will always be approximate, according to Plato, because some things that have broken, and broken out, cannot be made whole again (what might it mean to break in?). Justice is in the trying, incessant and ongoing as such a mantra suggests. Orienting one's self to this very approximation of what once was—or, as we will see, what Plato the optimist is nevertheless certain *always already naturally is*, needing ‘only’ widespread (which is to say total, universal) recollection, recognition, and realization—is justice. In whose managing-hands does the task of spreading this message wide lie? Here, too, the *phulakes* find their selves in tension.

The *Phulakes*' Role in the bringing about of Platonic Justice

Let's let two questions guide our thinking as we consider the *phulakes* and their complicated relationship to Plato's vision of justice. First, what does Platonic justice look like? And second, what then does acting in a just way, thus, do?

What is Platonic justice? The theme of justice—what it is and what it isn't, why it is worth striving for rather than injustice, and what it looks like in souls in comparison to cities—pervades the plot of the Republic. The *phulakes* and their work carry deep ties to the realization of justice in the world that has fallen to faction. In laying out his vision, Plato appears to hold the opinion that a return to this primordial state of nature is not possible, but, again, the approximation, and people working together and giving their best effort, seems to be what truly matters (in this sense, I think of Plato as, like many people, complicated and complicatedly both progressive and conservative regarding ontological orientation, as I discuss in chapter four). We can think of justice, then, as what people exemplify when they act in accordance with this vision, when they do their part to bring about the closest approximation to what once was. Throughout the dialogue, Plato's interlocutors land on several, related conceptualizations of justice that revolve around this approximate notion. I concentrate on one of them. Justice is “doing one's own work” (*Republic*, 433b).

At this later point in the dialogue—a ways away from the conversation about the first city's fall—Plato's interlocutors have established the three main classes that would comprise the city that has the best shot of returning to what once was naturally best. For Plato, the just structure takes on a pyramid shape, with very few (and perhaps even just one) comprising the top, a small (but integral and integrating) group serving as the middle, and the remaining, vast majority—the masses—making up the bottom. Thus, at the top there are philosophers who rule and divine the law and order of the city. At the bottom, there are the craftspeople, the artisan class that make goods and sell services. And in the middle, there are the *phulakes*, whose intermediary task it is to translate the wisdom from above so as to ensure that the masses below adhere to the philosopher-divined law and order of the city. When “each person [practices] one

of the pursuits of the city [the task according to their class, or craft], the one for which they are naturally best suited,” justice—alignment—prevails in the city (*Republic*, 433a). To do injustice, then, would be to deviate from one’s task and to meddle in other people’s tasks and lives. Justice, then, comes to literally mean “minding one’s own business.” The story, however, is a bit more complicated than this deceptively simply description leads on. Indeed, the *phulakes* complicate it.

Speaking of shapes, several pyramidal cities taken together, then, would comprise a sphere, with peaks and their philosophic points aligning in the core, with the craftspeople occupying and mulling about on the surface, and with *phulakes* in the mantle that is the middle ground—between core and crust—tasked with ensuring that what the core cries out reaches the surface for the sake of secure revolution, peace on the surface that perpetually runs the risk of falling apart and into pieces.

Now, consider: what does the pursuit of justice do? Pursuing justice brings about a return, indeed a return to the order of the core. The pursuit of justice literally turns the city around, engenders a stable orbit. But justice in a city is only as rich and true as the just ways of living of its inhabitants on the surface, the very inhabitants who have become entrenched in the comings and goings of the feverish city having fallen to faction. And so turning the city around requires turning the people in the city around (requires getting each person to operate according to their own, stable, and stabilizing orbit), turning their souls around (*psychagogy*—let that sink in), instilling in them an understanding for their selves about why “doing one’s own task” and “minding one’s own business” is worthwhile not only for them writ-local but also for the entire city writ-large. *The problem is* that people don’t seem to be able to turn their selves around, to get their selves into an orbit that is at once good for both them and their peers. Fulfilling one’s

own appetites; satiating the self's desires; privileging one's self and one's own at the expense of others'; ignoring the call of justice and the minding of my own business: these habits prove profitable. They perpetuate faction, sure. In the grand sense, they ultimately destabilize. But they also secure immediate—even if temporary, mortal—pleasure: for me and my own. It is impossible to turn one's self and soul out of and away from this logic. The sick require a helping and healing hand, guidance, guardianship: *phulakes*.

But what about justice? Would not these helping hands reaching in from the outside constitute an interfering meddling into other people's business? (begin to sense and feel that small terror...). Is meddling justified when done to bring about less meddling? For Plato, it would appear, yes. Such is the *phulakes*' task, and their relationship when it comes to bringing about justice is thus problematic because, even if justified, their work ultimately boils down to interfering into other people's business in order to get them to mind their own. That's a hard sell. Even when they do their job well, and even if their pupils don't question their contorted logic, the *phulakes*, at the end of the day, must live with the reality that they—at least those who claim to orient their selves toward justice—undermine their own best efforts. The most that they can do will never be enough; a terrifying prospect, a tension to sit with.

The *phulakes* face terror

The chicken and the egg, an age-old conundrum. They emerge, an impossibility for my one-track-minded thought and thinking (a problem, the emergence of this problem in me, that I take up in chapters seven and eight), together. So too, the guardian and the guarded. The arrival of the *phulaks* is thus a double-arrival, an arrival with widespread ramifications that, at once, implicate and create the two sides of world, an interior and an exterior. Such tenets in tension—co-arrivals rather than arrivals on their own, dawns, not of one thing, but of every-thing (Graeber

& Wengrow, 2020) and every-where, all at once—found and undergird this created world. This tension terrifies Plato, and so he tells a story about a naturally harmonic city and soul organization that *always already is*. A compelling narrative. Nevertheless, I am telling a different story, or, at the very least, I offer a story in addition. I am not doing one thing.

This tension presents a problem, and I, the *phulaks* and the *phulaks' d for*, the chicken and the egg, the life-giver and the life-given, the thinker and the thought, the student and the teacher, all bear a trademark of this creation. Which comes *first*? There is nothing primary, except perhaps that tension. This conundrum of unpinpointable origins—of only being able to point to a tension between—constitutes an integral feature of constructed reality which Warren (2018) would render indestructible and irreversible. Indeed, such is the world which humans have managed, and managed to create. Such a world is thus—conceived as such: as we will see, ontologically total and objectively detached—unpinpointable, impossible, paradoxical, *no longer in their hands*, no longer manageable: a perfect sphere. And yet I approximate, and yet I try as if I could even though I know I can't.

In this section, I introduce and explore the conceptual connection between and the metaphysical marriage that Plato officiates on behalf of the *phulakes* and their virtue, courage. For Plato, courage (*andreia*) entails a facing of the brink, the brink of *what is* and *is not* to be feared. The *phulakes* have as their task the mediation of this brink and boundary. Here again they are managers, discerners of what shall be allowed in—or what is not to be feared and should not strike terror—and what shall be kept out—or what is to be feared and what should spark terror—in both the city at large and in the local souls of the city's people. Tension follows the *phulakes* to this part of their task, the call to reside alongside a formidable boundary, indeed, on the cusp

that butts up against and burgeons with-in-to oblivion's two hands: nothing (*maeden*) and everything (*panta*).

Let's pause and back up a bit. In Plato's *Republic* thinking, there are four virtues: temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice. Each of the three main classes of the just city would, in doing their tasks well, bring about and uphold one of these virtues in particular *and* the virtue of justice in general. That is, when each class focuses their efforts in such a way as to uphold their particular virtue, they also have a hand in bringing about the widespread virtue of justice. The craftspeople's particular virtue is temperance—in that their task is to temper their own desires and appetites for the sake of finding and honing their craft. The philosopher-ruler's is wisdom—in that their task is to study the Good and divine laws and rules and an order for the city that shall stem from its brilliant radiance. The *phulakes*' is courage—in that their task, *managing boundaries*, is to protect and point people toward what remains of the first city, in the face of faction, its downfall. In Plato's Socrates words, then, “courage is a sort of preservation...the preservation of the belief...about what things, and what sorts of things, inspire terror” (*Republic*, 429c-d). Further on, he calls courage the “power...to preserve through everything the correct and law-inculcated belief about what should inspire terror and what should not” (*Republic*, 430a). Plato is clear that *phulakes* have a duty to uphold courage as such. The preservation of this brink constitutes their virtuous task.

A point I make more fully in the following chapter, chapter three, but which is worth pointing to here is that the *phulakes* carry out their courageous task for the sake of protecting *both* the physical *and* the mental—psychic—boundaries of the city, the latter having to do with people's ways thinking, living, and being. Which is to say: enemies—threats to justice in souls and cities—do not just manifest externally. They also arise in the mind. What, it is at this point

worth wondering, do such enemies look like? What, in the bringing about of a city of justice, is off limits, to be feared, and constitutes a physical threat? A mental threat? Posed another way: if to do justice is to ‘mind’ one’s own business, then what—more than mere meddling—poses a threat to the realization of this virtue? Indeed, what *is* meddling?

A curious word—*panto-dapon*, which Reeve (2004) helpfully translates as “multifariousness” and which we can literally translate as every- and all-*(panto)*wayed *(dapon)*—comes up several times in the social context where Plato imagines and asserts that faction and fever first broke out. That Plato positions the word *panto-dapon*, again translated as multifariousness, so closely to what was just a just city, and has now fallen to faction and fever, precisely because people chose to infringe upon other people’s bare necessities for the sake of their own, internal gratification (for their own appetite *for more*) should suggest that multifariousness plays a nefarious role in this very falling. In Plato’s Socrates words,

...if you also want to look at a feverish city, so be it. There is nothing to stop us. You see, the things I mentioned earlier [the needs-based and needs-prioritizing way of life of the first city], and the way of life I described, won’t satisfy some people, it seems; but couches, tables, and other furniture will have to be added to it, and relishes, of course, and incense, perfumes, prostitutes, and pastries—and the *multifariousness* of each of them. In particular, *we cannot just provide them with the necessities we mentioned at first.... (Republic, 373a, emphases mine)*

Because the needs-based way of living is no longer adequate, now that some people have chosen to “abandon themselves to the endless acquisition of money and overstepped the limit of their necessary desires” (*Republic, 373d*), Plato reckons that something like multifariousness is not far afield. Once people start acting on their desires, an explosion occurs, and all of a sudden

people ‘need’ all sorts of different things—every-sort of thing. It is only a matter of time before people begin to forget *what is truly* necessary and essential for living. Put another way, what once was ‘one’ and whole has now *become* fractured, fragmented (faction, fever, *phulakes*).

In this case, multifariousness poses a threat to justice because, at least according to Plato, multifariousness is—to reiterate, amidst a conversation of *needs* and desires—at the very least *unnecessary*. *What is* at a baseline necessary becomes—in the feverish mind and city—insufficient in the face of the multifarious (“look at all of this stuff!”). Plato deeply concerns his work—indeed, his pursuit of justice—with doing and engaging *what is necessary*, indeed, with a return to the basics, and of pointing toward that time before. Multifariousness poses a, and I might even say engenders the original, threat to an adherence to what is at a fundamental level necessary—or *essential*—because that which consists of many examples and types and kinds and which takes many forms (that which shape-shifts) effectively serves to distract people’s attention from where it should rightly be: on living one’s life in such a way so as to contribute a community that, through the meeting of each other’s needs, *simply is*. Such is the way of approximate return. To this end, what multifariousness—and what the *phulakes* are thus trained to deem, treat, and teach as that which shall be feared in order to help people properly direct their attention and everyday living—distracts from *is nature*, the natural order of things.

Nature—the natural world—is that which is fundamentally necessary for the sake of health, happiness, harmony, social justice, that is, a firm bed of *being*, or what Plato throughout the *Republic* will plainly deem “what is”—indeed, what *always already is*, what eternally is, that is, *to on, ontos*: Being (the “Law of Being”). What strikes Plato as problematic about *pantodapon* is, thus, its every-which-way-ness, that is, its multiple-ness, multiplicity. If *multifariousness* is what has broken out alongside faction, the breaking of one, a whole, into pieces,

then we might also assume that *phulakes* (here, Plato's *phulakes* specifically) have as their task the bringing about of a return to and, critically, the preservation and conservation of *what is naturally singular*, or, at the very least, the preservation of what fragments remain or the returning of these remnants to their origin, even if an approximation is all that remains in the realm of possibilities. For Plato, recall, justice is in the *try*. The bringing about of justice entails, then, a bringing about of people doing their best to adhere to and focus their attentions on this oneness, the *oneness* of *what is*. Taken together, multi-fariousness then poses a threat and is to be feared simply because *it is not* one-ness, indeed, *because it is not*—naught: nothing, zero, void, abyss, blackness.

I realize that, for some, I may have made the jump into some obscure ontological territory (for what it's worth, Platonic ontological purity ironically relies on this obscurity to retain its self-security)—consider it legwork for what remains of this project. For now, remember that the point I am trying to make here is that the *phulakes*' courageous task positions them as figures of tension. *Phulakes*' in general find their selves posted on the brink between what is and is not terrifying. In the case of Plato's *phulakes*, what they guard against and cast out is, on the one hand, multifariousness. That is, in their particular patrolling of the city streets, they are on the lookout for deviance (the unstraightened), a straying away from the one way, that is, their idea and formulation—in accordance with their training, the ways they have been taught—of *the best way*. On the other, what they guard for, or defend and encourage, is an adherence to oneness, the personal and social pursuit of which constitutes justice. The tension—apparent in general and especially glaring in Plato's case and problematic employment of them—inherent to this task stems from the fact that, at once, the *phulakes* have to face *multiple* ways—indeed, they must look at and keep track of more than one thing. For the sake of oneness, they are multifarious, in

and of the world that has fallen to their multifarious ways. Public figures (*Re-public*), they work amidst the masses, the comings and goings of every-day life, in marketplaces, street corners, and neighborhoods. Facing the public, they face the multifariousness and the terror and constant threat it represents. Plato does not mix words here: for him, the masses are *de facto* “multifarious people” (*Republic*, 493d).

All of this is to suggest that the *phulakes* face, on the one hand, what is to be feared to keep a careful, discerning watch over it in order to keep it out. And, on the other, they face the subject of their care, that which is not to be feared, in order to preserve it. Such a double, caught in-between, facing positions them as figures, again, of tension, a tension which, in the context of terror as it relates to *what is* and *is not*, or *what is* and *what is multi-farious*, presents the *phulakes* with a terrifying prospect. They get in the way of what they are called and ordered—at least in Platonic formation—to preserve. How could they not? They stand as a defense in the way of what shall not be allowed in, taking it on, absorbing the brunt of its force, an ever- and on-going threat: faction, fever. Even if they shut it out, repressing this reality, a small terror reveals its self. They must. Such is their duty. Even if not to Plato’s ontological extent, the claim I am making is that *phulakes* operate in service of an ontological ordering no matter what, a point that will become clearer in the following chapters. They are managers of the boundary between what is and what is not, what shall and what shall not be allowed, and what is and is not permissible: in souls, in cities, in students, in stories, and in selves.

A way within toward an end//closing out chapter two and part one

In this chapter, I have shown that Plato’s *phulakes*—guardians—are problematic figures of tension in several senses. They arrive in the *Republic* as a solution in response to a social problem, and bring a problem of their own to the table. Their problem marks them as figures of

tension, a multifarious threat to the pursuit of Platonic justice and, as such, worthy of fear. They contain it. They hold it in their hands, managers and shapers of the boundaries of the world. Plato's *phulakes* firmly stand their ground on guard against the outside—what is to be feared (what is not)—in order to conserve and preserve and privilege the inside—what is not to be feared (what is). His *phulakes*, then, require courage, for they confront a formidable brink, a terrifying topology (a fragile, singular sphere), on a regular basis and cannot back down in the face of it.

And yet, Plato's employment of the *phulakes* is not the only way. Even if locked to the service of ontology, to manage that boundary between what is and is not, there are other possibilities. In this world that is a sphere, the walls we build need not strictly delineate an inside against an outside. One possibility I see for my self points to a different topological orientation, one where outside and inside relate on a more nebulous boundary. Such possibilities do not offer a way out of this deadlock, only in (Warren, 2018). Indeed, my goal as I search for alternative possibilities along these lines is to bring an end to the guardianship (the way of guarding, *phulakos*), the story (its narrative structure), the teaching (pedagogical stances and movements) *that I can* so that I might endure, following Warren, those facets *that I cannot*. Teasing apart what I am able to end—what I can put to an end to here and now—and what I cannot is important labor that I take on throughout my piecing together of this project.

At the beginning of this chapter, I made the claim that there is no ontology without *phulakos*, and I claimed that *phulakes* do not have a choice regarding whether they will serve an ontological ordering of things or not, but only a choice as to how they will manage—and thus orient their selves toward—such a brink, between what is and what is not. Plato employs his *phulakes* toward and in defense of this boundary in a strict manner (as I have mentioned

elsewhere, in surefooted service of Being, *what essentially is*). In this way, he sets a powerful precedent for what the world *is* and what it has (although I know he would twinge at the suggestion) *become*. Of course, Plato is not the first, not the progenitor of this “return to natural harmony” orientation—he, too, is a student of a sociocultural milieu. Nor is he the last. Nevertheless, my point is that other orientations, stances, and understandings, even if nevertheless ontological, are possible. Indeed, they already exist. The world and its need for *phulakes* as such predates and outlasts Plato.

My hope with these chapters so far is to have pointed, through my own *phulakos* (responding to the first guiding question: what shall I do?), to Platonic *phulakes* (responding to the second guiding question); to the problem that they, *phulakes* qualitatively (and although I risk delving into contradictory irony—so be it—*essentially*), bring to the table; and to the tension that radiates in their presence. I continue responding to and addressing the guiding questions—the ones I set out nearer to the beginning of this chapter—in each chapter of this project that follows. With these questions in mind, my goal is to point to other ontological orientations—indeed, onto-pedagogical stances and movements—that *phulakes* (pedagogues) might find their selves adhering to. If Plato posts his *phulakes* toward the order of philosophically-divined Being, what is this order against? Plato points us to alternatives in his being crystal clear about what he positions his *phulakes*—students of philosophers and teachers of the masses—against. In Plato’s privileging of Being, he casts aside “be-coming” and what I am calling “be-ceasing.” I ferret out the details of these distinctions in the following few chapters, the pedagogue part, and in the project more broadly.

Pointing to and through the human, Being's guardian

In these first two chapters, I have pointed to the *phulakes* and their presence in this world. It—the world, *this world*—is full of these figures, their configurations, and their configuring acts and ways. Plato described one problem and prescribed another one, noticing that there would always persist a shared feature between the two. Indeed, I have suggested that Plato, inasmuch as he conceptually weds and metaphysically marries his *phulaks* figures in and to the strict service of Being, merely picks up for his own purposes a trend that predates him, indeed, a “human” problem, that there being human problem, the human being problem, the human and the fact of its temporal, deathlocked is-ness. He notices and begins to describe (and, yes, concretize—to act in this world is to, at least in part, contribute to the concrete) the contours of an always already there—at least at this point, so far along—ontological deadlock that guardian figures find their selves trapped in. He tells a story, he offers a teaching. The *phulakes* cannot escape, even if they wanted to. Indeed, my suggestion is that to undertake the task of *phulakos*—which I suggest is not something I personally have a choice over: this is my role in the world—does not grant me the freedom to question whether or not I will serve an ontological order. As a *phulaks*, to reiterate, I operate in service of an ontological order no matter what. This conundrum only leaves space for the consideration of *how I do so*, and I write in order to orient—and perhaps even non-orient (an aspect of Kleiny topology, something I discuss in chapter eight)—my self toward this space with care, well aware of the problems baked into the warmth of such work. I need to be clear, here, on the one hand, that I am writing about a *personal* and *self-ish* problem, unique to *me*, without resolution—I will some day no longer be, at some permanent point, I will ‘be’ nothing—and, on the other, that my telling this story as such is, indeed, intentional.

Pause.

These words go nowhere. I've walked the perimeter of the wall—there is no way out. There is no out for me.

In my practice of sitting with rather than severing the tension that this irresolvable problem engenders, I am not advocating for a leaving of *resolvable* problems and tensions, unresolved—indeed, this world is rife with those, and I commend people who invest time and energy toward such efforts.

I question the need, however, of the endless and incessant pursuit of sense and solution, and of severings of tensions, at every and all costs. I question the possibility of reaching with hands beyond the horizons that these very hands (of thought) have created, especially when the very contours and dimensions and depths and darkness of what we might desire to make sense and resolution of may be and remain just that: deep and dark, unknown and unknowable, indeed, irresolvable. Creations have consequences. They change the world, sometimes in unalterable ways. To this end, I follow the lead of Calvin Warren, who problematizes the “humanist fantasy (or narcissism) that anything humans have created can be changed,” a point he follows with a startling suggestion, namely that “some creations are no longer in the hands of humans, for they constitute a horizon, or field, upon which human existence itself depends” (2018, p. 25). The ground. The force of the normal. The walls of this world. The masonry of my mind. The guardian at the gate. In *Ontological Terror*, Warren suggests that antiblackness writ-large (in and for the world)—and, I would add, writ-local (in, for, and toward my self)—is one of these creations, and, as such, constitutes an inescapable, permanent fixture of this world. I suggest that the figure of the *phulaks*, the guardian, is another of these creations, these conceptualizations— which, if not anti-black, certainly constitutes an anti-something orientation. It must. There is no

out of this fact. To perform *phulakos* is to guard for something and against something else; it is to *manage a boundary between inside and out*. To teach is to operate in tandem.

Interlude Two

Figure 3. Before the dawn, before the wake (the other side of the wall)



Part Two, The Pedagogue

Plato's Socrates: "Let's agree that philosophic natures always love the sort of *learning* (what Greek word is this?) that makes clear to them some feature of the *being that always is* [the Law of Being] and does not wander around between *coming-to-be* [be-coming] and *decaying* [be-ceasing]" (*Republic*, 485b, emphasis mine)

"The self of Western psychology is the Cartesian, "I think, therefore I am." But actually, *we are*, whether we think so or not, and behind the conscious self your life continues even when you are unconscious or aware. And precisely because of that we are alive with a life that includes our thinking self. In fact, it is because we have this actual *ongoing* life that the thought can occur that we are only our thoughts. So our true or whole self is not just an abstract self made of thoughts. Our whole self is the force or quality of life that enables conscious thought to arise, and it includes that personal, conscious self, but it also includes *the force that functions beyond any conscious thought.*" (Uchiyama, 1993, p. 29, emphasis mine)

2.0—What is (the status quo)?

Ontology has always perplexed me. What does this word mean? We can take *ontos* (onto-)—the participial form of the Greek verb *einai* which means 'to be'—to mean 'being.' And we can take *logos* (-logy)—a noun related to the Greek verb *legein*, which means 'to say'—to then mean 'saying,' or 'that which *is said.*' Taken together, *onto-logy* then might mean 'the being saying,' or, in a different order, 'the saying of being.' The question arises: what does 'being' 'say'? What is that which is said? Do these spoken words have a voice? What does this speaker evoke? Who evokes it? Does it have a voice?

The, what begin as, personal questions quickly interject. That is, here we have the line of questioning of the ‘human’ ‘being’ (*anthrop-ontos*), of ‘my’ being as a human (*mou-ontos*): what is ‘my’ onto-logy? Am I? Am I a being? What do I say? What do I say about being? What story do I tell my self about being? These questions turn social as the train of thought reaches the wall: what story do I tell my students? You?

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that *being* has always perplexed me.

I piece together this chapter, then, in order to tease apart, breathe some space into, and ask some questions in the face of my own ordinary ontological standing and understanding, that is, amidst this very perplexity. My primary—and perhaps odd—way of doing so is by suggesting that pedagogues, like *phulakes*, manage a boundary, through their teaching and on behalf of their students, between inside and outside. Which is to say: pedagogues, like *phulakes*, have no choice as to whether or not they do their work in relation to the wall of being that always already is; they may only act, and in doing so, say how they do so. Depending on the type of pedagogue and their teaching practice, the story about and in relation to the boundary sounds different and sends students a particular message about ontology and being—this wall.

I have heard many different ‘stories’ from teachers in my life. In this chapter I write about patterns that I have been noticing as I reflect upon my own educational experiences. What under-currenting stories have teachers told me? Which stories have stuck? Which do I carry with me? Which carry me? I write these next three chapters about these teachers and these stories that prevail, at the very least in my personal world, and perhaps in the sociocultural educational milieu of the United States of America, and perhaps in the global scheme of humans and their educational endeavors more broadly. Normal and critical stories prevail and compete with each other. With the word ‘normal’ I point to those pedagogical movements that tell a story and which

point students so as to reinforce the shape of the *status quo*. With the word ‘critical’ I point to those pedagogical movements which point students so as to re-shape and transform the *status quo*. Narrative threads (teachers, figures of authority, weave with their words a story) underlie and constitute these practices.

Rather than suggest that any given teacher only contributes to or tells one of these stories, and further then that any given teacher occupies only one of these ‘camps’ (the ‘conservative camp, the progressive camp), so to speak, I want to suggest that teachers move in relation to these camps according to habits that they have created for themselves and, in particular, which they have adopted from their own teachers/storytellers/*phulakes*. Teachers, then, who have habitually attended to ‘onto-pedagogical’ movements reminiscent of each of these camps have had a heavy hand in shaping, whether they intended to or not, my way of thinking about and living in the world. They have left an impression on my ontological understanding (my sense of my own being, and what I should and should not be and be doing), and thus on the ontological stance that I take in the world—the way I am in the world, that is, the way I relate to the wall of being that is.

Throughout this project, and in particular this part, my claim regarding pedagogy is that teachers take—again, whether they intend to or not—(what I am thinking of as) *onto-pedagogical* stances in relation to their students, stances that tell, convey, and suggest a story—they offer a narrative thread—which, at least for this eager pupil, legitimate and delegitimate orientations and habits toward this boundary, this wall that is. The *onto-* prefixed to ‘pedagogical,’ I hope, clarifies in word the conceptual weddedness that I point to and through. I adopt this *onto-* prefixation practice from Warren’s (2018) work. For example, in pointing to the

ontological undertone inherent and integrally wedded to metaphysical thinking, Warren uses the word ‘ontometaphysics.’

Ontopedagogues tell stories through their stances, through the ways that they stand and move in their classroom and in the presence of and in relation to both their students and to the subject matter at hand. Again, in my world (the world of ‘me’), two such stories—two stances and movements, which I name ‘normal’ and ‘critical’ above—prevail: one which, when adhered and attended to, effectively contributes to the conservation of the ontological state of the world—ontopedagogical conservatism (‘normal’); and one which, when adhered and attended to, effectively contributes to the progression of the ontological state of the world; ontopedagogical progressivism (‘critical’). I focus another, less common but strangely present—onto-pedagogical dis-integration—in the final, tenth of this project, at least explicitly.

Implicitly, this other ontological/ontopedagogical stance is already here, as my aim—my point—in piecing together this chapter is to dis-integrate my own ontological understanding—persistently obscure *and* elusive and in these persistences concrete. I am teasing apart these tightly wedded details, particulars of experience, for the sake of space and of the tension—that small terror—that such space engenders. In doing so, I intend, on the one hand, to notice and to allow some uncertainty and insecurity—and whatever else I might habitually, ordinarily, normally, and even critically *a-void*: ontological terror—to arise, arrive, and remain. On another hand, I intend to tell a different story about and through relating to this space, this tension, this terror, one that does not auto-matically resort to de-spacing, on a local level, my own sense of ‘inner’ ontological terror—that is, ontological terror that butts up against *my wall, my border*, the interface between *my self* and the world—for the sake of security, certainty: a firm, clear, secure,

strict, well-protected, and harshly policed boundary. My, a key word that pervades this project's personal nature: what is 'of me' (*mou(n)*)?

Three wells of questioning then bubble and serve as guardrails for the work that follows in part two, *The Pedagogue*: 1) What is an ontopedagogical stance, or orientation? What ontopedagogical stances prevail in the world of teaching, or, at the very least, in the small part of the world of teaching that I have experienced, that I have studented? (answers: ontological conservatism, ontological progressivism); 2) how and why do teachers and their teaching practices tell students stories and teach habits that have an ontological impact? What does this impact do? (answer: it promotes habits and practices which effectively serve to de-space ontological terror) 3) what 'is' ontological terror?

Goals for Part Two, *The Pedagogue*

I begin this part by first reconnecting us to some of the work I have already done in part one, which means a brief return to Plato. In his depiction of them, Plato reveals an additional tension that his *phulakes* would find their selves caught up in. This particular tension has to do with their embeddedness in the realm of *e-ducation* (etymologically, a "leading out"). And so my first goal is to establish and then build on this tension and make a jump from Plato's ancient to this contemporary context, and, in particular, to suggest that *phulakos* and ped-agogy (etymologically, a "leading of the young") entangle each other. My way of making this point will hinge on what I see as the *phulakes*' fundamental role and most normative (most normal, and inconspicuous)—and ontological—task: managing a boundary between inside and out. If we are to accept this proposition, then we can also begin to say something, following part one, about pedagogues, their traditions, and their associated orientations toward ontology. Put another way, if pedagogy implies 'guardianship'/*phulakos*, and if guardians/*phulakes* do not have a choice

over whether or not they will serve an ontological order, only how, then I want to suggest that pedagogues find themselves/their selves in a similar bind as these *phulaks* figures of Plato's *Republic* and beyond.

There's an upshot to this move. As I link *phulakos* and pedagogy and make the stride between the two, there emerges the possibility of witnessing, beyond and indeed countering Plato, a different employment of a *phulaks* force. I notice this 'counter' move in the practices of those contemporary critical pedagogues who have, to name only one contribution, turned the traditional role of the teacher on its head, effectively toppling—or at the very least in hopes of toppling—the pyramid structure that Plato points to and through. Here in the tradition of critical pedagogy there exists a different sort of *phulaks* force that constitutes a different kind of movement. However, as I argue, their work proves to be no less ontological, no less saying something about being, no less standing in relation to—even if not under in obsequious support of—the firm bed of being that is. My first goal for this part, constituting chapter three, is to make this point by way of solidifying what I am thinking of as the *phulakos*-pedagogy connection.

My second goal, then, constituting chapter four, is to show that in this contemporary context, this world, pedagogues tend to operate along (or attend and adhere) to two onto-pedagogical lines, one conservative—of centering order—and another critical, or progressive—of reordering. I think of the banking-model (Freire, 1996) pedagogues who (often unconsciously—although the suggestion runs the risk of stripping agency from such actors) litter the prevailing paradigm of *human* educational practice as *ontopedagogical conservatives*, and I think of those pedagogues who contribute to critical, humanist traditions—critical pedagogues and democratizing pedagogues, for example—as *ontopedagogical progressives*.

With chapter five, my third goal for this part is to suggest, on the one hand, that human pedagogues (inasmuch as they find their selves and their worked wedded to the wall like the *phulaks* figures and their force) and the stances they take and the movements they make imply and send messages and tell stories about (legitimizing and delegitimizing) a relationship toward not only ontology (that which ‘is’ and ‘is’ in) but also ontological terror (that which, for the sake of the ‘in,’ has been cast ‘out’); which is to say toward not only the wall of being that is and all that this fortification secures and ensures, but also the horror of what is not and can not be (the unconscionable that nevertheless exists). And, on the other, I hope to show that ontopedagogical conservatives and ontopedagogical progressives—in their particular ways of working, and in what, in the first place, their work ontologically requires—effectively serve to de-space ontological terror, albeit in different ways and to, literally, different *extents*. The former force tends to work for the sake of ‘being,’ and the latter for ‘becoming.’ Despite this difference, I fear that ‘the first place’ of these stances and pedagogical practices and projections are similarly de-spacing.

In the building toward this third goal of The Pedagogue part, I must be clear about what I point to—and what I don’t point to—when I invoke ontological terror. Following Warren, I suggest that the act of—physically, psychically—de-spacing ontological terror implies in tow a de-spacing of both existential and racial (which is to say embodied) blackness, or, worse, requires that blackness as such ‘serves’ as an expenditure, a tool (Warren, 2018), a fuel for the purposes of leaving no space (of leaving no nothing, of not letting nothing be for the sake of *something* lawful, just, and good). In following this lead and bringing it to bear on the work that I do, I am finding my self forced to contend with a hard fact, a stymying story: any educative work that I might do remains fraught. I work in a world shaped by gargantuan, human, and humanist

forces. Educators, when they do not contend with the ontological labor baked into their work—and even when they do—run the risk of, at best, engaging in and, at worst, doubling-down on the sort of destructive, antiblack technologic that Warren (2018) contends “are designed to obliterate nothing: nothing as formlessness, nothing as interruption, nothing as black, and, ultimately, nothing as the Negro” (p. 36). On behalf of my self and the world I find my self in, I am making a strong, honest indictment: educational, which is to say leadership, work that humans do (and at the very least that *this human and his form will do*) always already occurs in relation to this formidable brink. And often, if not always, such work will occur for the sake of some known and knowable stability and sense on the sure ground of the precipice and at the expense of the abyssal black expanse—a wall—ahead/before. I am raising a red flag (a call to slow, pause, and stop here), the point of which does not land equitably, neither in the world at large nor on whomever may read these words here locally. Indeed, the more I work this project, the more I find it is for ‘me’ and ‘me’ alone. I ask the question again: are you a ‘me’? At least conceptually?

On that note, I cannot anticipate where and how you are or find your self to be in relation to this wall. I would only ask you consider the fact that since/if ‘you’ (although I deign to make the claim) ‘are’ in this world, you bear a relationship to it.

Whether or not you would call or think of your self as a guardian—a boundary managing figure—I imagine that some of your own walls may already be up, that your guards are poised for defense as you face these words and try to make sense of what I am presenting. I imagine they have been from the get-go. I point to and through this most basic wall. Nothing more. Nothing less. How do you respond? What kind of defense are you posting? What kind of stance? What are you defending? What do you feel the need to protect? Against what? Who are you?

I feel the need to proceed with caution, and so for the purpose of a dull point (it doesn't cut it—there's not even a point of contact), I delve in these aspirationally (fourth) wall-breaking moments into a litany of rhetorical, digressing questions. They do not endlessly spiral. Indeed, there is an end. That said, I do not want to set off the kinds of alarms that would seize even the subtle, inconspicuous flow I hope we might find, despite and indeed in the face of the formidable, toward this end. And so, again, I feel the need to proceed with caution, that is, tentatively. May our guards—*phulakes* and their persistent presence—remain and be both lax and ready. A casual conversation. May they—guards and words—fade and coalesce like clouds—thunder heads on the move, bringers of precipitation, carriers of a current; dispersing, dissipating, evaporating. And, even if not according to the prevailing currency, may they never forget their embeddedness here, where they have come from, who they were, who they are. The currency of the head, of capital, proves inescapable. I can't not do this for nothing. There's always something to education. A mobilization. A status. A credential. What does something like this cost?

The particular problem of the first part—the persistent presence of *phulaks* figures in this world—follows us here, in this second part, and yet takes on a different tenor. It looms and echoes like a deep, dark, cloistering cavern. In my returning to, and down into, and through that allegorical cave, these words, the sequence of these words, allow me to bring you with me. They serve as a taut teaching tether that makes a break with space time and light years. We are in its depths, attending to the strange, slow-swerving line that leads here. Here, I am beginning to find my self surrounded by a darkness—akin to a sense of tension that is hard to feel, senses cut short—which I will neither fully dispel nor enlighten by the end. Indeed, may this incompleteness, if nothing else, constitute the end. I invite you to find your self here with me.

My fourth and final goal for this *pedagogue* part, strewn throughout chapters three through five and following in the footsteps of a *phulaks* force, is to then suggest that any given pedagogical orientation—necessarily embedded in this world full of antiblack technologies—presupposes a relationship to both ontology (and onto-supremacy) *and* ontological terror (and anti-blackness). There is no out of this deadlock, at least not for me and the work I will do. So be it. As a teacher, through my teaching I tell my students, inasmuch as I a student have been told, stories that have an ontological impact, inasmuch as teachers—guardians—set an example and leave an impression on their students and their students’ *ways of being* in and in relation to the world, the wall. Through our ways and why’s of teaching, we tell our students stories that have an ontological impact, and through such storying feats, teachers—*phulakes*—have a heavy hand in *shaping* the way students *shape their selves*; their wall; their relationship to the world; their world; the world.

There is a lot of ground. Let’s start by solidifying this *phulakos*-pedagogy connection.

2.1

The *Phulakos*-Pedagogy Connection

In this brief chapter, I suggest that the *phulakes* of Plato's *Republic* are *e-educational* and *pedagogical* figures (a point, again, that Plato picked up on and solidified. He is not the original conceiver of this connection—it is a logic deeply baked into the human world, the world of dawning and a-wakening (Sharpe, 2016) human consciousness). Plato makes this *phulakes*-pedagogy connection clear: the philosopher class of the good city shall, as part of their task, construct an *e-education* for the *phulakes*. For Plato, the basics of such an education involve a turning of the soul away from the darkness and ignorance characteristic of the shadow-laden cave and toward the supreme, metaphysical, and ontological world—the world *that is*—conceivable in its true perfection only from the cavern's enlightened mouth (I return to the cave; in particular in chapters five and six). *Phulakes* are *educational* because this very philosopher-divined education is first and foremost for these courageous protectors. Their task is, on the one hand, to student the philosopher's teaching and to, through their enacting *phulakos* in and for the city, pay it forward, on the other. That is, having witnessed education—this particular turning of the soul (*psych-agogy*) and leading out from ignorance and darkness to knowledge and enlightenment—their task is to then serve those under their purview, their pupils, the people as a similar sort of educational figure.

Further, recall Lee's (1986) thinking about each class of the *Republic* and their arrival in and on the scene as precipitating both a solution to a prior problem and a problem of their own. The philosophers arrive as a class in the city in response to the problem that the *phulakes* bring to the table—namely, the tension inherent to their task which requires that they navigate and do

well two contradictory tasks in a city oriented toward oneness. The philosophic ‘solution’? In Lee’s words, the solution comes in the form of “a very careful education” and, I will add, curriculum, in which teachers—the philosophers—would verse the *phulakes* in both musical and physical training, the former for the sake of harmony and gentleness and the latter for the sake of harsh- and fierce-ness. In relation to the philosophers, then, the *phulakes* are, on the one hand, students, the *e-ducated* (the led) in that they must student the education that the philosophers devise for them. In relation to the craftspeople, those under their purview, they are, on the other hand, teachers, *e-ducators* (the leaders). They are teachers—pedagogues—in this sense inasmuch as for the sake of the people in the city and their souls finding their selves on the track of justice, and keeping them there, they must serve as managers of mental boundaries, of peoples’ ways of thinking and being in the world. Another tension.

Taken together, then, here too in their embeddedness in education the *phulakes* find their selves in tension because they must oscillate between two distinct educational roles, that of the student, ‘the led,’ and that of the teacher, ‘the leader,’ at different points throughout their day and the various carryings out of their task. They are students of the philosophers’ teachings; together, they ‘study the Good’ (*Republic*, 505a). And they are teachers of and for the craftspeople (and other guardians)—those multifarious masses—as preservers and managers of both the physical boundaries of the city and of the mental and psychic boundaries of the souls that constitute it. Faced with these two distinct tasks, each requiring different kinds of attentiveness, I can only imagine a *phulaks*’/pedagogue’s inner dialogue pendulating between two questions: “In which circumstances am I to bow my head and allow my self to be led? And when shall I take a stand and stand my ground, knowing that others may depend on me and my position and might well follow my lead?”

For Plato's *phulakes*, the answers to these questions are clear: do the work and undertake the tasks in ways that lead the people to an adherence to their particular place in the bringing about of oneness, wholeness, and harmony—the world that fundamentally, necessarily, essentially, and always already is. Their task, even if it stretches them in multiple directions, compels them and their clientele toward a particular, singular end: the widespread realization of the world that is, the world behind, the world that manifests at the enlightened mouth of the cave. Such a world always already *is*, and needs only recognition and *preservation, conservation*, and a turning around in order to understand and for the purposes of realization.

The *phulakes* are thus, again, 'educational' in the sense that 'e-ducation' etymologically consists of the Latin prefix *e(x)-* (out from) and the verb root *duc-* (to lead). The *phulakes* are those who are 'led out' (of the cave of shadows, darkness, and ignorance)—educated—by the philosophers *and* are those who 'lead out'—educate—the craftspeople. The *phulakes* are educational figures and pedagogical figures, and pedagogical figures—that is, teachers—are *phulakes* (even if not adherent to a Platonic order, Platonic commands—we will soon encounter counter-Platonic pedagogues, *phulakes*).

Indeed, when we look at the word 'pedagogue' in the Greek, we encounter a similar etymological relevance as we do with the word 'education'; the word *ped-agogue*, in piece-meal meaning points to an *agogos* (leader) of *paideia* (children, or what I am thinking of as 'the young' of the world). My suggestion, again, is that Plato's noticing of this connection between *phulakes* and education as concepts is one thing, just that, a noticing and an elaborate description of this noticing; his employment of them is another, a prescription with an agenda, a point (he is, himself, a pointed and pointing *phulaks* figure, telling a story, guiding readers' thinking and thought with words and grammar and structure). Which is to say: I accept the description—

indeed, I notice it, too—and nevertheless through this work am proceeding to, where Plato focused on conservation, dis-integrate and tease out—from this integrated oneness, from Plato’s employment of the *phulaks* force—other possible orientations, other possibilities for the particularly ontological work that *phulakes* must undertake.

Plato sets us up well, and, indeed, offers a helping hand in his pointing us to, even if not (explicitly) through, other ontological possibilities. Consider again this quote from the epigraph to part two, wherein Plato’s Socrates states some options clearly: “Let’s agree that philosophic natures always love the sort of learning that makes clear to them some feature of the *being that always is* [Law of Being] and does not wander around between *coming-to-be* [be-coming] and *decaying* [be-ceasing]” (*Republic*, 485b, emphasis mine). Of course, although he presents options, his preference, call, and tone remains clear.

The philosophical focus on “the being that always is” directly impacts his *phulakes* and their ontological orientation. The education that Plato’s *phulakes* receive—the lead that they must follow—positions them as guardians of this particular sense of being, that is, toward an adherence to the oneness of nature, that balanced state of things (that happens) before faction and fever, before the fall (and before the *phulakes*). ‘Becoming’ and ‘beceasing’—ontological ‘options’ otherwise than being—are symptoms of this fever and are thus not to be entertained, not to be permitted; they are not to be. For Plato, an if not *the*, albeit a complicated one, ontopedagogical conservative, the walls of the city, whether physical or psychical, require, if goodness and beauty and justice are to prevail, a particularly preservative kind of security: guardians carefully watching over and protecting *the* threshold; what *is* is in, what *is not* is not. A singular, divisive (indeed, it must be) story that he tasks his *phulakes* with telling by way of their movements in the city and in their way and work of moving people’s souls similarly.

Plato's *phulakes*, of course, are not the only *phulakes* and his particular pedagogical enforcement is not the only educational story. The work of *phulakes* and pedagogues takes place, takes up space, in relation to a wall—being, the world that obdurately, normally is. Different stances in relation to the ontological state of the world, that normal force, exist. Plato's legacy is but one. In this contemporary, more than two millennia removed, context there are pedagogues—*phulakes*—who take on counter-Platonic ontological stances, just as there are also those who latch on and cling to Plato's legacy, his particular point and pointing. Again, these patterns that I notice have less to do with Plato and more to do with 'human nature,' of which Plato was both a student and a teacher.

For *phulakes*—and pedagogues—who take their work to be counter to the purview and employment of Plato's fleet, similar questions regarding 'leadership' and boundary management—such as, when do I lead, when do I let my self be led, what do I allow in, what do I keep out: that *phulakean* inner dialogue—arise, but these figures would answer differently. They would move differently in the space of the questioning. Compared to the strict, one-track-minded *phulakes* of Plato's vision, those *phulakes* outside of his purview—or in overt opposition to it—might respond more fluidly and openly and less statically and singularly, not bound to forever closing in on that sure core they have convinced (and have been taught to convince) their selves is always already there. Certainty is a story I may choose to tell my self; a story with a cost.

We can think of this distinction between Platonic *phulakes*—resolutely orienting their selves toward oneness—and these otherwise *phulakes*—orienting their selves toward openness, or something else—as a distinction between *phulakes* and pedagogues that situate their selves and their students, on the one hand, according to an ontological stance in service of being, on the

other, according to an ontological stance in service of becoming. These two stances represent two different kinds of teaching habits that have an ontological impact, or which leave an impression on the ontological state of the world, in that they also—these pedagogues—teach habits that have an ontological impact. The former seek to conserve the ontological state, and the latter seek to progress it—to put it into motion—for the sake of revolution, some other revolution than that which motivates the nausea of the status quo, some other nausea. These two patterns have prevailed in my world. I write and piece together this project so as to bring something else in to and through the fold.

Pause.

And so, there's the beginning of my sense of the linkage between *phulakes* and pedagogy. Let's now continue on with the plunge, first by way of simple restatement: pedagogues are *phulaks* figures. In the work that they do, pedagogues configure their selves in the same way that the *phulakes* of the previous chapter do, along a tense boundary between inside and outside. *Phulaks* figures manage this interface, this surface. They are guardians of this wall. They secure the physical, 'external' boundaries of the territory, protecting within from without. And they secure (or at least intend to, even if they don't intend to) the mental, 'internal,' cognitive, and conscious boundaries—the contours of thought—of those under their purview, their pupils. For this particular purpose, they act as teachers, e-ducators, guides of young minds. *Pedagogues* are *phulakes*, then, inasmuch as they, even if subtly, instruct their students about what constitutes proper engagement with the world (even if only the 'inner' world of the classroom, a microcosm of the world 'out there' nonetheless), at the very least when it comes to the teaching of disciplined core of the curricula for their subject matter that they specialize in.

Between the breaths of their utterances, a teacher's pedagogy—a guardian—peeks through—keeps the gate. Pedagogues, like *phulakes*, have an agenda—there is something going on, a desire for something in any given act of teaching. They follow an order from a higher up, a totally outside, or a deep within, be it a critical core or a life-giving emergence, some other thing, something—notably not nothing. Perhaps they conceive of their work—and their way of working—as a duty, a responsibility. It is impossible to teach without a point. To teach is to point. I take the ongoing act of teaching, then, to amount to an ordering of points for the sake of an edge, a boundary, a shape, a surface, a wall. Below the surface, deep down/within, they take on pedagogical stances for the sake of an order, an ordering or organization of the world, a way they want the world to be, to continue to be, become, cease to be, whatever. They send a message through, even if not spoken words, their very work, the act of their teaching, a pedagogical act, an act of guardianship. This act sends a message, a signal, which carries an undertone about what constitutes proper engagement with—a good studenting of—their teaching. So the story begins. Such a teaching act has an impact that resonates into the lives of students and leaves an impression on their way of interfacing with and shaping and conceptualizing their selves in relation to the world.

Teachers, like *phulaks* figures, do not have a choice as to whether or not they work in relation to this wall, only how. So stands the suffocating safeguard, an ontopedagogical bind.

CHAPTER IV: ONTO-PEDAGOGICAL STANCES AND MOVEMENTS

2.2

Ontopedagogy

Pedagogues, then, are *phulakes*, contemporary examples of an ancient fixture. They manage and maintain a boundary on behalf of their students through the ways and whys of their leadership, guidance, instruction, and teaching. Pedagogues have an agenda—they want their teaching to have an impact on the boundaries and confines of their students' ways of thinking and being in the world. Teachers want to have some sort of impact. If you do not want to leave an impression on your students, then I do not consider you a teacher. Such an agenda manifests in several arenas—my focus here is on the ontological. Like *phulakes*, pedagogues do not have a choice as to whether or not they will serve an ontological order, or whether or not their work will have an ontological impact—an impact that reifies ontology *because it begins there*, the first place of the human, the sort of human that has left an unalterable impact on (t)his world. This world we inhabit and which inhabits us thoroughly is. People—imperial minded humans—have made it, make it so, and people, even those now not imperial, will ensure it—the normal function of humanity is to keep such a machine, now that a few have created it, going—is to preserve its self, the human project—inasmuch as such a machinery keeps them going. Embedded—or stuck—as they and their work are in this world, teachers and teaching occurs on an ontological register, the register of this world, the register of being. That they find their selves and their work implicated in ontology is out of their control—but their orientation and relationship to the register need not be. Teachers have a choice as to how they stand—as to the stance they take—and move on and interact with this ground.

Although perhaps not indicative of her current thinking on the topic, normative philosopher (and teacher of mine) Kathy Hytten points us in this direction without explicitly naming the, what I am thinking of as an, underlying onto-peda-gogic-logic. She writes,

In both what they teach and how they teach it, educators are always legitimating certain forms of knowing, behaving, and thinking, while at the same time delegitimizing others. Moreover, teachers play vital roles in social life through their either reproducing the status quo or through potentially introducing students to knowledge and ideas that can be empowering and transformative.” (Hytten, 1997, p. 52)

Here, Hytten (1997) alludes to a simple, educational bind: when teachers teach, they both include and exclude. They create an inner realm and an outer realm. And she acknowledges at least two ways of engaging with this bind—a wall of sorts. In doing so, she points to what I am thinking of as two ways of taking a stand as a teacher, and what happen to be the two prevailing pedagogical patterns that I notice when I look back on my life and the impact that teachers have had on me. On one hand, there is the ontological stance in service of being, which I am calling ontopedagogical conservatism, and what Hytten thinks of as teaching practices which reproduce the *status quo*. On another hand, there is the ontological stance in service of becoming, which I am calling ontopedagogical progressivism, and what Hytten thinks of as teaching practices which make transformation of the *status quo*—something else—possible. These two forces have prevailed in my lifeworld—I have been made to feel as if I should focus on either/both the fact of my being or/and the fact of my becoming.

The *status quo* is what normally is—the ontological *state*—and when a teacher upholds—conserves and preserves—it in a relationship with a student they do so from a sturdy stance. They point—even if not explicitly—to the ground and through their pedagogical movements

expect an attendance to it. On the flip side, the transformation—or progression—of this obdurate state of things requires ongoing work, as well as a different kind of stance—one more shifting and mobile. Teachers operating from this stance point, instead, to what could be, what could come into being, what could become, not always for the sake of establishing a new norm once and for all, but often for the sake of continuum. They point—even if not explicitly—to emergence and through their pedagogical movements expect an attendance to it. I return to the common significance of these two ontopedagogical stances closer to the end of this pedagogue part regarding the likeness of their underlying orientation toward ontological terror. First, though, I need to do some explaining. Indeed—what is an onto-pedagogical stance?

Onto-pedagogical stances and movements

An ontological stance implies a relation to—even if oriented away from, elsewhere—the ground that is being. Being is a normal force which proves inescapable. Any given ontological stance begins from this firm bed, a plane of is-ness, strewn throughout everything—the ‘universe’—all that is considered to be, to have is-ness. Whether or not you resonate with this language of being, such an essence undergirds this world. Who crafted these inescapable foundations? It began with a noticing, and turns to action, and faction, and manu-faction.

With their hands, colonizers, trans-Atlantic slavers and slave-traders, and any-one throughout human history who adheres to imperial, supremacist logics of subjection and control have ensured their vision and, in one fell swoop, have violently altered the lives of others, and other entities, otherness, an outside: those I deem other, expendable, not me, inside, for the sake of an inside. The imperial minded man works, on the one hand, for the sake of establishing a sense of once and for all is-ness, a permanent foundation, and then, on the other, for the sake of keeping and conserving this foundation, of preserving and expanding the widespread realization

of what they deem the natural auto-ontological—*this* self-same (the same as ‘me’) and culturally-superior (‘my culture’) (Spring, 2018)—ground.

So stretches the settled, colonized ground that humans, in general, now traverse. These logics undergird this human world. That is, the imperial logic has left these settlers’ hands and now lingers all around—it both stifles and supports the medium in which ‘I’ moves. This ground is but the wall of the world.

In what follows, then, when I refer to ontopedagogical stances and standers which serve the order of being—ontopedagogically conservative efforts—I am not *only* talking about the imperial logics of onto-supremacy just mentioned, nor only about such onto-logicians. Normal, everyday habits and dispositions of normal, everyday boundary-managing figures (people in general) conserve this state—not only those ways of being and moving to which imperial guardians hold tightly. Which is to say: even those ontologically conservative stances that are not overtly imperial remain close to this contested verge; a current and a currency they carry and which carries them. Through their basic, conservative efforts—their desire for the world to return to the great state it ‘once’ occupied, a forced nostalgia for how things must have been—they effectively preserve this settled wall. And indeed, even those avowedly unconservative—indeed, ontologically progressive efforts, that is, efforts to change the course of human history and rewrite where we might yet go, what we might yet be—nevertheless operate from and in relation to this ground. It is challenging not to get caught up in the contest. This world is one of battle over boundaries.

Any stance, whether conservative, progressive, disintegrative, or whatever, that ‘I’ (or collection of ‘I’s’) takes in relation to this world begins on and *takes place from* the inescapable ground and sure foundation that an imperial, self-protective and -expansive force mass has once

and for all settled as just and justifiable. And this ground is ontological. It is. There remains a residue of these logics in the everyday state of the world and in people's normal, everyday habits and habitude.

How do teachers and their pedagogical movements enter this conversation? My claim so far is that all acts of guardianship and teaching takes place on these cusps, brinks, and edges and that *phulakes* and pedagogues take on ontologically-laden, and at the very least -related, stances in their encounters with students, or with those under their purview, and at the very least their pupils. Taken on by a teacher, a figure of authority and power, such stances send messages to students. Ontological stances are suggestive, in that they provide an example. They not only influence the habits that a teacher brings to a relationship with students. The teacher's habits also teach habits to the student, habits that have an impact on the ontological state of things inasmuch as they present and reify on behalf of their students different dispositions and possibilities for standing in relation to and understanding this state. The transmission of ontological messaging is always taking place—it is a normal force. Teachers enter into and manipulate and guide and point, even if only subtly, students' attentions in relation to this force.

In short, stuck as they are in this ontological deadlock that secures the world, pedagogues do work and take on stances in relation to this wall. They point their students according to their stance. I see, as a recap, at least three possibilities for teachers to take up a stance/take a stand in relation to this state of things.

First, there is the ontological stance that gives in to the normal flow and current of things, or what I think of and have been alluding to as ontopedagogical conservatism, a practice of teaching habits that have an ontological impact in service and preservation of what is. Ontopedagogical conservatism is a normal response to the normal. Second, there is the

ontological stance that deviates from and/or aspires to transform the normal, or what I think of as ontopedagogical progressivism, a practice of teaching habits that might have an ontological impact in service of progressing what is forward, into its unknown, emergent potential. Ontopedagogical progressivism constitutes a critical response to the normal. Third, there is the ontopedagogical stance that breathes (some-non-thing—space with a direction, that is, *not nothing*, but close to it) into what is normal, or what I think of as dis-integrative. An ontopedagogically disintegrating stance points, through teaching practice, toward, on the one hand, impasse and conundrum and tension (with an end!) and, on the other, habits and an ontological habitude in service of the end, of ends and endings: in this case, space, just some space in an otherwise high-pressure, stifling cascade of thought, feeling, and emotion. Ontopedagogical dis-integration points to the end not only of ontology, but everything: the human and its world in particular. Indeed, what, or where, or when, is and will be the end? Are humans beyond that point? The point of ending? Of course, such an ontological habitude in service of ‘endings’—given the tendency of being to constitute a one-way-street—also, perhaps counterintuitively, points to the end of the very act of ending, the end of (t)his dis-integration. I think of ontological disintegration as para-normal work. Indeed, it withers and decays away.

In what follows and in the remainder of this chapter, I focus on the first two of these stances: ontopedagogical conservatism in service of being and ontopedagogical progressivism in service of becoming. We begin with these two for two reasons. First, pedagogues of these sorts—of these, we might say, modern and post-modern paradigms—prevail, I claim, in this world (the world beyond yet tied to ‘me’). Second, and expected given the first, pedagogues of these sorts have prevailed in—and yet overwhelm—*my world*, the world of me. I take up an

exploration of the third ontological stance, onto-pedagogical disintegration in service of becoming, in the final chapter of this project (again, at least explicitly).

2.2.1—Ontological Stances in Service of/Subject to Being

Being, to reiterate, is a normal force that there is no getting beyond—to go beyond it would mean no longer being, a breakdown that undermines the original ground from which the movement toward, the very intent to go, beyond would begin. For this reason, Plato positioned his *phylakes* in service of its naturally enwrapping secure and safe (suffocating/safeguarding) power. Whether or not ‘being’ as such—a good natural order of things—is or is not ‘real’ doesn’t much matter if people can be led to believe and then believe *on their own* that such a notion has power, and then that such a power is worth preserving at all costs. Humans have believed it to the point of creating it, and some have, indeed (and for the sake of all), gone to egregious (dehumanizing, which is to say ultimately and masochistically self-destructive) lengths to protect and perpetuate it. The power and everlasting strength of the veritable concrete of being lies in its inability to be broken, its projection as a totalizing wholeness.

A key word here is *veritable*, for not only are we talking about a ground *that is*, but a ground that, in its fundamental, unquestionable (or at the very least deeply poised as such throughout the course of human history) state *is (true)*. The ‘truth’ of the matter goes without saying—parenthetical, unarguable; a *parental force of authority*—and the statement without stating. ‘It is’ what ‘it is.’ A perfect circle.

The story that I feel I need to tell—a partial story, a piece of a larger narrative—begins here: the force of the inescapable normal; this planet, this globe; this massive context. To act in this world is to first act from this normal, this ontologically rendered and imperial, settled ground. Or it is to have one’s deviant, non-normal act feel a kickback, a resistance, or outright

revulsion: the force of the ground, a ground which cannot register the non, nothing. As I have already stated, in this human world secured by a *phulaks* force (“since the human is the *guardian* [*phulaks*] of Being and Being *needs* this guardianship [*phulakos*], or care, to manifest,” Warren, 2018, p. 68), normal human functions reifies this wall. Teachers, the stance(s) they take, and the work—necessarily boundary managing, *phulakos* work—that they do all have the potential to influence how those in their purview, those for whom they are responsible (their students), interact with this wall and, in particular, how their pupils shape their selves (their I’s) in relation to this wall.

Being is a normal force that teachers and their stances, even if they do not actively serve it, are subject to. In this way, all pedagogical stances bear a relationship to being, this normal force, the wall/interface between self and world, between world and nothing. On the conservative front, ontopedagogical conservatives do serve, whether actively or passively (perhaps a better word is ‘ignorantly’), this wall. Teachers of this lot litter human history and in particular the history of education in the United States. Through their pedagogical practices they teach habits which point their students toward a falling in line with what is, toward an acceptance and submission to the unquestionable *status quo*. Of course, any given conversation about the history of education in the U.S. must make mention of and include the force of the schools that the inhabitants of this new world manufactured there. Indeed, this tends to be where ontopedagogical conservatism takes place: the school and schooled spaces. As we will see, institutional power makes such an ontological orientation not only possible, but profitable too. We will get there. In the meantime, consider: what conditions must exist for humans to feel a need to build a school? What purpose might that school serve?

Order and Ontological Conservatism

Who are these ontologically conservative pedagogues to which I endlessly refer? Any answer to this question implicates the human: that being that is and aspires to preserve its self. There are patterns to their movements—humans and, when they normally function as educators ontopedagogical conservatives—or what we can think of as what have become habitual—unquestioned and, indeed, according to the discipline, unquestionable—ways of relating and pointing to the objects and subjects of their study and teaching.

This rank of teachers constitutes the normal educative force of (the world, I would surmise, but I will exercise some conservative sense, and say, to be safe), at the very least, the United States of America, the pinnacle of what imperial profit can look like. In the United States, what this conservative force of teachers have pointed to changes, but underlying their conservative effort is a sense of returning to or, at the very least, realizing some sense of ‘order.’

Nowadays, for example, this fleet propels—in basic, normal function—their students toward an adherence to the Order of Capital. Any given young person in the United States—at least to the extent that they can provide documented proof of their citizenship—encounters the contemporary school as if it were a conveyor belt en route the workforce. Working is a way to make money, a living, and young people find their selves compelled—ordered—to follow this suiting, sorting, slotting mechanism, that is, to fall in line and where the line goes. I must make money in order to live. This order is old and obdurate, but these conservative figures did not begin there, with the construction of an institution obsessed with adhering to the Order of Capital. Indeed, there are older.

Order—a human connection to and obsession with order—and conservation go hand in hand. At least they do now. Somewhere along the way of human history, prehistory, and plain

existence—which is to say somewhere along the way of this plane of existence: Earth—humans started putting their hands in things. They began to notice patterns, and to re-create these patterns, and to practice them, ordering their parts, obtaining proficiency at ordering parts. And that's it. Somewhere else—in some other time—along the way, they began to not only order their parts, but to identify with the sequence they have habitually come to follow. Somewhere else—in some other time—they kept going, indeed, they evolved, and began to take pride in their order, so much so that they wanted to share it with the young, those who were just beginning to put their parts in some kind of order. And finally, the breaking point: they began not only to order their parts and take pride in this order and share it with others: they turned their order into an order, enforced attendance. You—look here—read these words—make them into sense. It is challenging to write out of/without order.

Order as such—or at least this contorted order—remains only so long as humans—with their being, even if no longer their hands (of thought)—conserve and preserve it. Which is to say: no order persists without *human* hands, not because without them—the *hands*—the order would crumble. But because as long as humans *are*, so too will this world that revolves around Order be. With or without their hands, the onto-mega-lithic walls their hands have built are there to stay. The human *is* because of *them*, and in the long process of time these instigators have lost that old technology in the fray of an anti-dark calculus hell bent on something new, the calculus that they have instrumentalized for the sake of founding, continuing to find their selves in, this world: this present, shared moment—order—of human, conscious experience, an experience which conserves the order of the self. I wake up 'me' every day—this does not happen organically. I manu-factures its self, until it no longer needs to, until the technology becomes obsolete, ingrained in the very hardware, the hardware its self.

Conservative efforts always have to do with an attention to order, orders, whether it be the call of the *natural* (pre-human) world, the word of God, the impetus of Capital, the majesty (and terror) of Being. Indeed, what unites them as humans is their participation in the Law and Order of Being (Warren, 2018).

But not all ordering—and by extension teaching and pedagogical—efforts, however, need be conservative (and not all conservative acts are undesirable). And so, when I write about and decry ontopedagogical conservatives, I am not berating every kind of conservative teacher and every kind of teaching practice *in the same way* or as if they were *under one umbrella*. There are a host of umbrellas. I point to and call into question one big one.

In my targeting here of ontopedagogical conservatives, I am pointing to their aspirational one, the oneness to which their teaching practice points. I point to one patterned habit of teaching and pedagogical stance that proves ideologically consistent with—a thread through and connected to—these aforementioned imperial minded men and their cultural sense and legacy, that is, one which grounds its self/selves on an unmoving one-ness, is-ness, firm bed of being in the first place, the only sort of place from which they can propel their selves into such egregious, dehumanizing acts (enslaving, violating, slave-trading, exploitative managing, manipulative managing, and on, and on). I am pointing to those pedagogues who, in some ways like Plato and in other ways dissimilarly (I am not willing to assert that they engage the same kind of conservatism), pointed their students—through their movements, their actions, their words, their example—toward “the one,” as a singularly true and thus trustworthy guiding light, worthy, alone, of all attention and intention. I call into question the pursuits of those pedagogues who have, across time and, in particular, in the history of the school in the United States (that space where the Order of God and the Order of Capital take hold of the masses), singularly oriented the

attention of their students and who have pointed their pupils toward that one thing. And, perhaps most importantly, I am pointing at those pedagogues—which, in my experience, litter the school—who have what I think of as a similar impact, or who have had what I feel is a similar sort of impact *on 'me,'* even if it is not—was not—their intent. The work that these pedagogues do is subtle yet impactful. (I return to the impression I feel they have had on me—and in particular on the commanding stories I feel I heard from them in ‘the cave,’ ‘the church,’ and ‘the school’—in chapter seven.)

Put another way, I think of ontopedagogical conservatives as those *phulakes*/pedagogues in the contemporary era who, through their teaching practice and whether they intend to or not, operate from and in support and service of the ontological ground which constitutes the normal sensation of human experience *that is being*, that is, that human sense that always already is there, the way things are/the way I am, and the *status quo* that rests there. These pedagogues conduct their selves in relation to their students in such a way so as to suggest that what the world needs is something long lost, again, always already there, and which needs only adherence, recognition, preservation, conservation, defending. Ontologically conservative pedagogical movements, again, begin and end with orders and order, with the command to sit, be quiet, listen, and pay attention. These demands engender the order of a classroom, a servile student body, desks in a row, facing forward toward the figure of authority.

If all pedagogy is about order, what sets the ontopedagogical *conservatives* apart is their conservative approach to bringing it about. The conservative mantra requires rigidity, an unwavering gall. While ontologically conservative pedagogues/*phulakes* have over time shifted their focus—the focus of their order—they nevertheless maintain a singular strictness in their stance, their standing, the understanding that they point their students to. Plato’s order—to focus

on that orderly oneness—echoes throughout time and into the Puritan era and further: into the profit-seeking capital-owner's mind.

And so in order to demonstrate what I see as a pattern inherent to conservative teaching practices, that is, a pattern I have noticed in teachers that operate from ontopedagogical stances in service of being—what is—and which effectively usher students into an acceptance of the state of things, I explore the two examples of these pedagogically conservative orders (having already pointed repeatedly to Plato's *Order of Being*). I look first to the colonial period of the U.S. and second to this country's now contemporary economic state, or *status quo*. These teachers, through orders and for the sake—whether they intend it or not—of order promote—through the norms of their teaching practice and the relational weight they carry—the conservation of the prevailing ontological sense, the preservation of that 'something' that always already is and, as such, is good; and as such (unquestionably, apparently) worthy of preservation. Plato—an ancient ontological conservative (but again, of a different ilk)—points his *phulakes* to the Order of Being. Settlers of the colonial United States point their pedagogues/*phulakes* to the *Order of God*. The contemporary enterprise of the school, *the* premier educational institution—and its most heavy-handed policymakers in particular—point their pedagogues/*phulakes* to the *Order of Capital*. Pedagogues, in these contexts, are receivers and givers of order and orders. They—like the *phulakes*—obtain them from 'above,' and administer them 'below.'

I am putting a lot of pressure on these teachers, I think to my self. May it be lessened by a discussion of the school. May it be justified by a discussion of the school.

In the colonial era and contemporary state of the U.S., it would be irresponsible to talk about teachers and their practices without acknowledging the press of the school and the way it compels teachers to act in ways of which they may not be all that conscious. Of course, this line

of thinking runs the quick risk of stripping agency—any ‘say,’ any ‘onto-logical’ standing, really—from these teachers. Throughout what I write, I belabor the phrase ‘whether they intend to or not,’ to signal a tense space inherent in what I am writing and suggesting. On the one hand, teachers have “a say” over what comes and goes in their classroom. On the other, the school has one too; what does the school ‘say’? Where does the school’s voice come from?

The school (and here I will be clear that I am specifically thinking of the ‘school’ of colonial era U.S. and what it burgeons into, a trajectory which now humans employ all over the globe/world) is a powerful institution. Its presence makes the widespread splaying of ‘on-high’ messages possible and profitable. When in service of the Order of Capital (that is, as of late), it proves to be an effective tool for reproducing the structurally integral, classed, racialized, and more social hierarchy that supports this world. Since its inception, founders have ensured that ideological currents pervade and structure the normal function of the school.

My point: teachers in the school feel the pull. Some give in knowingly. Others give in unknowingly. Others resist and subvert. Others yet endure. Others opt out. I think of ontopedagogical conservatives as those teachers who ‘give in’—again whether they intend to or not—and who through their pedagogical practice send messages to their students that compel obsequious adherence to the Order du jour. In the cases of the Order of God and Capital, as I am thinking about them, the school, then, serves as a structure with a weight which compels its teachers to—inasmuch as their job is to ensure students fall somewhere within these here lines and to do what they are told—fall in line themselves. The school has a say and compels teachers to bend and give in to its current; the normal way of moving within the walls of the school.

Question: How did ‘we’ get here? Answer: The American School, which takes root in the settler colonist’s good-hearted and brutally-exacting way; or what I think of as a harsh means of

ideological management (Spring, 2018). The ‘new world’ was growing and, with it, naturally occurring diversity, of thought, feeling, sense, and self. These settlers began to face a problem, a variation of the problem that Plato thinks of as emerging—coming to be—in the first city, besetting its downfall. Question: “How”—the same question diachronically arises for those concerned with keeping disorder at bay—“are we to get and keep people on the same page, that one page that, should we all be on, ushers Order in? that one page that brings about that old way of things, the way the world might again/should be.” Answer: A school and a law for the sake of order. Of course.

We can get a bit closer to the emergence of the school than the cryptic surmising and ‘educated-guessing’ I have just offered. Indeed, let’s turn to the text.

The Order of God and the colonial school

Evident in the text of The Older Deluder Satan Act, in particular, there emerges a new/old order and an integral weddedness to education. This act, while singular to Massachusetts at the time that lawmakers passed it, sets a founding precedent for what could and would become ‘the colonial school’ (and then ‘the common school,’ and ‘the comprehensive school’, and ‘the standardizing school’), that is, the school as an ordering institution in the United States thereafter. Such a logic harkens, branches back, and takes root in a Platonic sort of order (which is to say in the *human* sort of order, and in particular what humans have contorted a desire for order into, which is to say a one-track imperial-minded system of being, a catch-all, be-all). In these colonial lawmakers’ minds, however, there proves to have been a clear shift from—while nevertheless an evolution of—Plato’s educational project (of getting people on ‘the same page’) to the educational project (and point) of the settlers of the colonial period (what would be and become) United States. Both adhered to a ‘same page’ mentality. Both desired order. But, again,

if Plato points his *phulakes*/his educational projectors toward the Order of Being; the settlers of the colonial era point their pedagogues—via the structure of the school, the very walls of the building—toward the Order of God.

The Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647 is a prime example of one, ‘new world’ colony’s attempt to institutionalize some sorting education. It is a legal doctrine which makes school attendance—that is, attendance to the directive of the local/church-and-state sanctioned *phulaks* force—compulsory. This document serves as a foundation block in the wall of what a colonial school *is* (at least in the “New England” context) and sets a strong precedent for what would thereafter *become*, emergent from that context, in the forthcoming country. The text is worth quoting at length:

It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these later times by perswading from the use of tongues, that so at least the true sense and meaning of the Originall might be clouded by false glosses of Saint-seeming deceivers; and that Learning may not be buried in the graves of our fore-fathers in Church and Commonwealth, the Lord assisting our indeavors: it is therefore ordered by this Court and Authoritie therof;

That every Township in this Jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to the number of fifty Housholders, shall then forthwith appoint one within their town *to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read*, whose wages shall be paid either by the Parents or Masters of such children, or by the Inhabitants in general, by way of supply, as the

major part of those that order the prudentials of the Town shall appoint.

Provided that those which send their children be not oppressed by paying much more then they can have them taught for in other towns.

2 And it is further ordered, that where any town shall increase to the number of one hundred Families or Housholders, they shall set up a Grammar-School, the Masters thereof being able to instruct youth so far as they may be fitted for the Universitie. And if any town neglect the performance hereof above one year then everie such town shall pay five pounds per annum to the next such School, till they shall perform this *Order*. [1647, emphasis mine]

The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts, Reprinted from the Copy of the 1648 Edition in the Henry E. Huntington Library. Harvard University Press, 1929.

The Old Deluder Satan Law makes school attendance in large—rife with deviance and running the risk of multifariousness—*communities* compulsory, for the sake of commonality, sameness, and singularity. The document necessitates and engenders the creation of a particular kind of school, a building and blueprint for a particular purpose. These words point to a ‘good idea’ that the founders in this particular, small, and local context could translate anywhere and everywhere—wherever the deviant deluder shows up.

In this colonial context, children in communities of more than “fifty householders”—again, the quantifiable point at which the mass/masses *becomes* so large and multifarious that they begin to devolve into disorder—are required to attend a school. This school is designed to abate the deluding temptations of Satan, the devil. A teacher—the authority figure, figure of mastery, master—plays an important role in such a school. They are responsible for the integrity

not only of the school as a structure but also of those who are required to pass through and study (within) its walls. That is, by extension, teachers of the school are linked to and have their hands in shaping the community of which their students are a part, that is, their local social environment (their small, but again integral, piece of society at large). When parts align themselves similarly within the space of the school, the story goes, order prevails beyond those walls, expands and extends those walls. Indeed, teachers have their hands in the bringing about of social cohesion and play a pivotal role in the realization of the mission, in this case the settler colonial mission. It is in this context that I think of the contemporary structure of ‘the school’ as beginning to develop some ‘hands’—shaping tools—and legs, and a mind (a mindedness) of its own.

These founders of small-scale systematic colonial education structured a school in a critical period and in doing so made movements that mattered, and they made these movements on land ‘acquired’ through—and in and supported by a culture of—horrific acts of displacement—whether cultural, physical, or spiritual. Such a precedent influences the structure and structural force of the school built in the name of a self-similar logic. They set an easily transferable trend in motion. Schools, perhaps according, in theory, to different orders, but I can only imagine such walls continuing to echo from the chamber designed to cast out delusion.

The expressed intent of the Old Deluder Satan Law is the establishment of a school so that teachers might guide and guard their students into the desired (local) shape and order so that they might then shape and order the world (at large) similarly. People construct some schools. Communities grow. These people need more schools. And the word gets out: “We’ve found a way to keep people in line and to ensure that they operate, if only from a baseline, according to an order that we might establish. What kind of world do we want to build?”

Pause.

And how, in the first place, does this order come about? The school is not yet an agent—empty walls do not say much (which does not mean they can not speak). It's not just about the building. People—teachers, students, whatever—inhabit and invoke and manifest and manufacture the script that echoes therein thereafter. What begins to happen in these classrooms that serves to drive the deluder—that which we want not to be—out? I focus, here, of course, on the teaching, the integrative force of the teaching. So, how are teachers teaching so that they might realize this colonial vision of the school? In and through these traditional, four-walled spaces (soon to be swallowed up and signified) that a few founders constructed (for the good sake of all), so that they might 'help' bring about control, order, and an adherence to authority, what pedagogical movements takes place? What does a teacher look like in this context? What kind of pedagogical stance is necessary so that the school might perform its task and do its job? At what point does the school begin to reproduce its self?

Sidenote: At this point, I must admit that in weaving together this narrative, I draw primarily from historian of education Joel Spring's (2018) rich and massive tome *The American School*, in which he describes many trends throughout the history of education and, in particular schooling, in the United States. I do not seek to offer a comprehensive account of all that happened, and I am not interested in presenting a seamless, or even sound, chronology of a history, like most, that is too vast to capture in all its complexity. I am telling my own story.

The Text

Let's look at just one of these elements that teachers in the colonial schools had at their disposal so that they might bring about an adherence to the Order of God amongst their pupils. Textbooks prove to be an integral piece (not only of the contemporary school project but also)

from which these settler educators derive their purpose and pointing. The need for textbooks as such is closely tied to the ‘need’ for something like the Old Deluder Satan Act. Not only, though, are textbooks required; they—the texts that become common in this growing, colonial era in particular—are to be treated as doctrine. Or, at the very least, the ways that teachers require the students’ attention to the text suggests that what these students are reading are to be thought of as divine ordinances; a rule and word to abide by. Indeed, ‘students are expected’ and ‘required’ (Spring writes often) to practice an allegiance to the text, sworn through an incessant act of memorizing and regurgitating that written word and its example. In these colonial era schools (now gesturing beyond the Massachusetts school-building project)—after a time of settling post-breaking-ground—*The New England Primer*—a holy text, indeed—emerges as the most popularly used text/book that teachers ordered their students to engage, attend to, and read. At best, the call for these students was to read well, and if they lucky, become/find one’s self literate in an adherence to the Word of God.

Spring (2018) describes the text of the *Primer* as authoritarian. The teacher’s role in relation to it and their students was clear: point to the text, command attention, reward regurgitation. The student’s role was clear too, baked into the logic of the pedagogue. The teacher, often without speaking, makes the students’ role clear: follow the lead, this leader. Students were expected, under the press of the administrators of this text—the teachers, schoolmasters, *phulakes*, whatever—to capitulate. These figures required students to assume—and their supervisory gaze over the classroom commands these young ones into—what would become their normal posture. They are to memorize what we can think of as the scripture of the school (quoted from Spring, 2018, p. 21):

I will fear God, and honour the KING.

I will honour my Father & Mother.

I will obey my Superiors.

I will Submit to my Elders.

There is a grammar to this scripture; so too to the school; so too to the pedagogy. It is not always so strictly ‘closed.’ Sometimes the text poses a question, but not just any question and only deceptively open ended. Each of these lines of inquiry has a sharp point. Indeed, in the sequence of the text, the correct answer directly follows. Teachers require students to memorize both the question and the answer. A catechism. Teacher: question: “What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?” Student: answer: “The Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, is the only Rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him” (quoted from Spring, 2018, p. 22). Case closed.

The ontopedagogically conservative logic goes, as I have been telling the story: preserve this here wall that always already is—that preeminent authority figure; begin the building for the young—move their bodies and(/into their) minds so that these kinds of motions and movements feel natural, normal; and indeed, lay the blocks of their foundation so that they might secure it and build in addition their own walls accordingly. Those pedagogues of the colonial era exemplify ontopedagogical conservatism and, through their construction of the American school, set a strong precedent for other ontopedagogical conservatism thereafter. Indeed, the shape of the space of this—what has almost become an eclipsing notion—‘school’ has been carefully crafted.

Interjection: Teachers and their Work

Worth noting at this point is that in his description of these happenings in the colonial schools, Spring (2018) is hesitant to assign agency—or at the very least does not use language which acknowledges the agency inherent—to the teachers in the room, those who, again, were

the administrators of these stringent tasks. Time and again, he uses the phrase, “students were required...” (p. 21; p. 22). So far, I have for the most part followed his way of wording. I now need to ensure you, the reader, that calling attention to the teacher as an active—and centering and integrating, and responsible—member of what precipitates from the relationship between teacher and student (and in the walls of the school), is critical for this project. The teacher, I think at some deep, dark (which is to say unknowable) level, knows exactly what they are doing; they tread a fine line. Indeed, they walk along the most formidable of boundaries. Their work takes place here.

In any given context, teachers make choices—they legitimate some forms of knowing and delegitimize others. They dictate what knowledge and ways of knowing and being come and go, or at the very least which of these proves profitable when it comes to passing. In this way, teachers do masonry work and serve as managers of walls, figures posted on the boundary, on behalf of their students. Even if teachers find their selves coerced to bend to the whim of the structure around them and in doing so become autonomous drones, they and their teaching practice nevertheless carry a message, for which they are responsible. Which is to say: even if they are not aware of this underlying reality, and even if they are but don’t intend for their teaching to convey a message that makes an ontological impression, the truth of the matter—the truth of this world—is not only they—teachers—do, but that they can’t not. The two are tied together.

Because of the ways humans have used their hands to brutally and violently shape this physical and metaphysical world, and because of the ways they have incessantly, historically and as of late, *used* e-ducation to bring about such a reality, it now proves to be a normative feature of this world that educative acts are ontological acts, acts that consist of leading and pointing

people in and toward a relation to ‘what is’—this present/your personal context where you are, where you exist—and what has been—the contexts that pre-date the existence of this self and this world. Humankind and, in particular imperial minded man-kind, have tainted the educational concept. I do not believe that there is an out of this bind. I do not believe that there needs to be. E-ducation—the following of a lead—necessarily functions so as to have me believe not only that this lead is taking me somewhere, but, in the first place, that there is somewhere to go. Education, as such, is an antiblack technology—always about order, even if re-ordering, dis-ordering, non-ordering; always leading somewhere, always working with the order of a lead, even those good, even those kind, even those worthy. The lead, historically, points the follower not only *to* and but *through* light and sight (knowledge)—not to and through darkness, or an unseeing (ignorance). I am not suggesting that we deconstruct education and ensure that it brings about ignorance or nothing, nor that it lead nowhere—it cannot. Educators—the matter is settled here—are carriers of a message; leads to be followed or, at least, offered—and at worst, forced; tellers of stories; shapers of walls: fundamentally the wall between what is and is not (to be).

Depending on the context, of course, the contours of these (antiblack, which is to say, and I am making a stretch here, anti-unknowing) educative acts looks and sounds different. Indeed, there exist different stances. Like when I make the blanket claim about pedagogical acts necessarily being about bringing about order, when I make the claim that education is an antiblack technology, while I do mean to imply that to educate is to partake in this technology that the human world relies, I do not mean to imply that all educators use this technology in the same way.

In the colonial context, authority, control, and order is the tripartite name of the game (of course, encased in an aura of white-control-authority-order-as-supreme). More than texts and sacred word have authority in the colonial classroom. Indeed, there is the teacher at the head—the

teacher is the captain of this ship. In these classrooms, teachers, in the first place, actively assume the role of the authority figure in the here and now. That is, in their relationship toward the student, they embody a microcosm and through this embodiment point to a greater *cosmos*. The teacher of the classroom performs as if analogous to the (singular, unitary, catch-all, be-all) God of the Universe. Of course, they are not the God, but they provide their pupils with a space to practice and embody a relationship to such a figure. The teacher locally stands in for and represents that very ‘large’ authority figure—God—about which the students’ attention should be fixed. Teachers point their students toward this figure of authority at large through their selves. They extol the on-high example of authority at large and, for the sake of their students, expect congruent subservience in their stead in this local, here and now classroom realm. Indeed, these teachers provide a space to practice such capitulation. From such a pedestal, the teacher *requires the students to take on these tasks*: memorize scripture, read words closely and slowly, submit to authority, and take up these habits learned in the proximity of the pedagogue out and into the world for the sake of order, the Order of God. Be such an authoritative guard for others. Indeed, pay it forward.

Pause.

For what it’s worth, my clarification here regarding the agency of the teachers in these harsh spaces does not counter Spring; I offer it in parallel, in tandem, as an additional note. For lucidly, and without mixing any words, he describes the state of the colonial school and the onto-pedagogy and *phulakos*—that is, conservative—that the founders of these schools, and their teachers by extension, expected to happen there:

“the content of colonial education emphasized not only submission to authority but also a particular method of instruction. Students were required to memorize the entire text. The method used to teach reading and writing was not one that taught individuals to give

direction to their own lives, but one by which individuals would learn to submit to the laws of religion and the government” (Spring, 2018, p. 22).

This narrative thread of subservient thinking and action that these anti-old-deluder, colonial teachers tasked their students with memorizing and regurgitating should sound somewhat familiar. Plato’s anti-multifarious *phulakes* served a similar, underlying purpose—they were to manage the boundaries of the minds of the masses so that they might live in accordance with what always already is, that is, Being, the natural Order and Law of Being, with what that supreme Being—the Go(o)d—has always already ordained; that is, in accordance with its Command.

For the settlers, on the other hand, God—that supreme Being—and rigid, religious adherence to this figure of preeminent authority proved paramount. These settlers established the colonial school, a physical space that literally and figuratively structured the teachers and the teaching that would take place in it. These teachers and their tools—textbooks, catechisms, an established doctrine to follow—shaped the minds of their students. The ways that teachers related to these tools and conveyed their importance to their students belie their pedagogical point, their *phulakos*, their ontological stance, standing, and understanding. In this case, that is, their *ontological conservatism*. Even if these teachers were not so concerned with Plato’s sense of Good Being and Being Good as such, they certainly sought to conserve the ground of God, a similarly presuppositional, natural-order-endowing entity, or dare I say, being. On the nitty-gritty ground level, these teachers’ ontologically conservative pedagogy is evident—at least—in their compelling students’ attention to the memorization and regurgitation of written words, as well as rote responses to these words.

Such a pedagogical flair—an ontopedagogical stance and standing, that is, the very act and movement of this way of teaching, necessary for the structure of this school—sends a conservative message to the students, about: how to relate to authority, what and who to deem authoritative, how to serve, why to serve, what not to serve, why not to serve, service for the sake of what, service against what. Indeed, these pedagogues—as pedagogues regardless of stance do—structured the boundaries of their students’ minds—what comes in, why—what shall I allow in, defend, and guard for—and what stays out, why—what shall I cast and keep out and guard against?

For the teachers and students of the colonial era, the answer to these questions was clear. A catechism. Question? Answer: let and keep in light, God, richness, order, and purity, the pristine, and keep and cast out the dark, the devil, poverty, disorder, and chaos.

Or, at the very least, the implied directive is to push those in the latter—the outlaws—to the whims of the bay, toward the perimeter, amidst the outskirts.

Pause.

And years pass. And then, I can only imagine, the such-schooled student begins to hear and see and sense what the story of that old schoolmaster (develops) calcifies into: an age old, perhaps even prehistoric, logic of human-kind, a way of life, living, and being beyond and yet still within the walls of the school. The impressive story of the school follows the student home, and, further, permeates and structures society, the country that is to come. The conservative story of authority, control, and order hits home hard. It affects the way ‘I’ am on the homefront—that is, within the walls of ‘me’ and ‘mine.’ These e-ducated men—for indeed, at the outset, only white men of means were admitted—translate the authority of God and teacher into an authority inherent to their self and their role in domestic—again, ‘me’ and ‘mine’—life. Taught to

conserve, their authority naturally preserves a self-same home on defense and offense against the other-different.

A foreshadow: but keep them—the out, cast beyond the wall—close, the student hears an echo of contorted authority, by terrible tether and tide; ‘we’—those wall-worthy (human) beings—use them. *They* (the non-human) might propel *us* forward.

A Bridge Between Orders

The colonial era’s educational example (the example I have cherry-picked to provide here) proves rife with appeals to authority, control, and, above all, order. The structure of these founders’ schools and the then necessary role of teachers therein evidence that the school—education instituted—of the colonial period was intended to operate in this way. These foundations—these fundamental elements of the school—linger and persist.

We see a similar sort of pedagogical directive and the same kinds of close-ended questioning as we branch through centuries from colonies to the contemporary. When it comes to the Order of Capital, however, the answers change. The focus shifts from obsequious subservience to the divine figure to the almighty dollar, its promise, its riches, the opportunity it affords, the progress it makes possible—and profitable; a vicious cycle. Educating students into the logic of the world/order of capital requires a more varied layout of questioning and—although no less calculated and no less focused on preserving a singular, solid ground—a more varied curriculum. Schools that serve the Order of Capital require that their teaching cohort carry an expertise—or at the very least certification—in a wide array of subject areas. Do not, I will quickly add, let the multiplicity and surface level diversity delude you—the Order of Capital, while varied and expansive and perhaps even emergent, is an all for one enterprise. May it not delude you.

Before making the slight turn onto this capital route, let me briefly catch us up on where we have come so far. My chain of a claim (in that it comprises several linked parts—and in that it sets some bounds for this project) so far has been that the structure of colonial era education, primarily rendered through the passing of the Old Deluder Satan Law and the religious precedent this singular example sets, structured, or at least paved a way for, the sort of pedagogy that would take place not only in that school, but in its wake, in schools structured similarly thereafter. While the religious precedent—arguably—fades into the background of what would turn into the Common Schools of the 1800s, the comprehensive high school of the early 1900s, and the contemporary standard-obsessed schooling enterprise of the new millennium, the fact that the structure of the school—and its purpose—shapes the pedagogy that the teachers operate from remains. And what these teachers and their pedagogy tend to—in normal operativity, that is, under the weight and press of the *status quo*—point to, while certainly morphing over time, carries a consistent thread. A residue, too, remains, an underlying pedagogical habit of ontological conservation, of operating in service of that one true thing, being—what obdurately, everlastingly is. As far as ‘I’ can see—this world as it has been crafted requires a stable foundation such as this. It morphs—from Being, to God, to Capital—and nevertheless remains the same.

Later on, in our discussion of ontological progressives, we will take a look at what becomes possible when teachers do not continue to bow to the structural constraints of the building, legacy, and historical momentum they find their selves in. For now, a key feature of onto-pedagogical conservatism remains: teachers take and give their orders according to an often unquestioned power ‘on high’ or fundamentally below, beneath, be- (where the prefix ‘be-’ means ‘completely’ and ‘thoroughly’: total)—some uncontrollable entity, the unreachability of

the teacher, figure of authority. They—ontologically conservative pedagogues—expect students to fall in line and to unquestioningly accept what has been given and provided, that is, what is, whatever that may be/whatever they themselves have been told and taught to believe it is.

The Order of Capital

We are making another jump, or perhaps only a small skip. If those pedagogues of the colonial era sought in their students commonality, a similar adherence to a common faith in God and God's ordinance, and the Order of God, then those pedagogues of the more contemporary era seek in their students a division of learning—students learning and becoming proficient at different things—for the sake of a common, unified, sole, and singular project: the production and accumulation of Capital, that is, the Order of Capital. Here lie two imperial and normal world orders, two orders of the world which have prominently throughout human history commanded—by a hegemonic sort of force, at best—subtle variations of the same kind of pedagogical movements. These pedagogues operate—oftentimes themselves under that hegemonic press and pressure, reified in the walls of the school they all have their selves attended—in service of, and point their students' attention toward, a ground that they deem, and have themselves been taught to deem, normal—the ways things are and can't not be. Whether they intend to or not, these kinds of pedagogical movements effectively serve and sustain what is; they reproduce and perpetuate the current and the currency of the *status quo*. Ontologically conservative pedagogues point their pupils toward, or teach habits that normalize, an adherence to an underlying unquestionable entity. Such will always be the onto-pedagogically conservative act—the act of the ego (see chapter eight).

For pedagogues who serve the Order of Capital, in particular, however, the teaching practice may appear less severe and strict than those who serve the Order of God. My claim is

that despite this apparent change of tone and tenor, a similar sort of deep, internal, boundary managing (in the conservative case, concretizing) work is going on, that is, a similar sort of pointing, a similar sort of pedagogy. If, as a result of reading this section—substantially shorter than on the Order of God—you do not feel satisfied with my claim that the Order of Capital prevails in the world of the school, and that teachers therein prove to be onto-pedagogical conservatives who operate—whether they intend to or not—in serve of the onto-economical state of things—Capital—then I invite you to reflect on your experience in school, and whatever sort of work—employment—these experiences have made possible (and perhaps impossible) for you. There it is.

To the end of bringing the Order of Capital into this ontopedagogical conversation, we can think of this subsection, then, as an addendum to, or a minor branching off of, the previous. The shift from school and pedagogy in service of the Order of God to the Order of Capital is not a ground-breaking one, but ground-double-downing and ground-affirming, in affirmation and conservation of what already is, has long been, and cannot be questioned so as to continually be. This section, then, constitutes a slight variation of what I have already said. It is more—a direct extension—of the same that I have already been laying out. The normal persists, creeps in, and finds a way—it is the way. Even here. My claim: to educate and to experience education is to assume or find one's self thrown into a relationship to the normal, the most normal relationship *being one* (and of doubling down on this one) of capitulatory, unquestioning subservience to what is. So says the machine, a mechanic/integral and integrating mechanism: a normal force. Pedagogical practices—any movement, really—that enters the public, the main-stream (so to speak), runs the risk of falling prey to its pressure, again, its current and currency.

Rather than strive to break new ground, then, in this subsection I merely want to point, on one hand, to this force and its capacity to—through people—weave itself anew, time and time again, and, thus, on another hand, to what I see as the (anthropo-)historical thread connecting (at least) three orders (Being, God, Capital). Such a thread finds a particular strength when it comes to the school. The purpose of the school is the braiding of a thread and the disorder of its fraying end.

Pause.

The colonial school and its pedagogue's adherence to the Order of God morphs over time into the school of today. The contemporary school—and here I am talking about the post-No-Child-Left-Behind (a policy with sights set on closing or at least lessening an 'achievement gap' which sociologist Pierre Bourdieu surmises is inevitable given the way education in 'school' happens; Hunsberger, 2020) public school of which I am an educational product—and its standard-oriented pedagogues share a kinship with the school and schoolmasters of the colonial era, at the very least because teachers in both contexts lead and instruct their classrooms and students in ways that promote an adherence to *the way things are said to be*, that is the normal. In both contexts, pedagogy effectively reproduces the *status quo* and does not leave space for the possibility of transformation—but the passing along of ideas, knowledge, and ways of thinking—that is, 'information'—already *in-formation*. At least comparatively—transformation *via* schooling is but the exception, not the norm, in the same way that social *mobility* constitutes the exception in comparison to its socially *reproductive* normal function (see Hunsberger, 2020 for a discussion of education as a socially reproductive force).

Put another way, the school as a contemporary institution—that is, school mandated by in-stated higher-ups who compel children to attend, or whose policies compel families to enroll

their children in the institution—while witnessing a shift in terms of focus in comparison to its colonial roots still nevertheless operates on the basis of giving orders and bringing about an order that would bolster the normal state of things. Whereas the colonial school project concerned an attendance to strict Biblical literacy and living in accordance with the Word of so-called God, when it comes to this contemporary world of the capital order, the purpose of the school is effectively job preparation and slotting people into the already existent—*status quo*—economic ladder. The pedagogues of the school serve as the preparers. My point: they prepare their students in the service of an underlying, unquestioned, and unquestionable entity: capital, and a capitalist organization and order of economy, society, and world. I am not suggesting that they should not. People need to know how to ‘make a living’ in this world, and, as it stands, schools should be places where students can learn how to effectively navigate this world *that is* (Delpit, 1988). The school as such has the potential to offer multiple services—my point of dispute here, and the target of my criticality, has to do with the unquestioned, and poised as unquestionable, norm that grounds the halls and walls of this particularly formative institution, and the underlying orders its everyday adherents cling to.

What, it is now worth asking, does an ontologically conservative pedagogical stance look like in this contemporary, capital-oriented context? In short, it looks normal, in the same way that the colonial era teacher would appear inconspicuous within the social context they serve. It can look like a fifth-grade math teacher instructing students on means, medians, and modes. It can look like an eighth-grade science teacher drilling students about significant figures. It can look like a tenth-grade English teacher having students read Charles Dickens. Onto(pedagogical)logical conservatives by nature blend in and do not raise suspicion—these pedagogue’s movements, often under the press of the standard weight of the school, prove

inconspicuous too. Like the student, should a teacher fall out of line, mechanisms of control appear to keep things in place, ordered.

Put another way, amidst the aura of the Order of Capital, these teachers teach what is standard when it comes to the curriculum in any given school, and they teach it in a way that follows suit, that is, their pedagogical movements fall in line with structural, institutional expectations. They must. What does the institution of Capital expect? What expectations have its founding fathers set? A growing, ebbing, and flowing free-market economy, wherein people find their selves slotted into inequitably unequal lots on a long ladder *but*—and this is the vital part—given, so the underlying logic goes, an opportunity to climb.

The school, thus, is, at least (which should read as “for the most part”), about preparation for a life of challenge, opportunity, and, the story goes—with enough hard work—prosperity. Such a life, ‘they’ do not tell you, is only achievable if you, young one, are able to earn money, an income, a consistent stream of income: a job. School is about job preparation, a function, which, in the grand scheme of the Order of Capital, and in the grand scheme of underlying Orders, *is an ontological function*. School teachers and their work carries an ontological weight.

I make this pointing gesture if only to help my self and my students (my readers: you) notice what is there and what has always already been there. I do not broach this ground with, at first, an underlying animosity. Indeed, there are some desirable things that can happen in school. Indeed, the school as such is why I am here. Schools, inasmuch as they are about job preparation, are about providing students with the opportunity to learn about a number of different subjects and to find out where they want to be/what they want to do with their lives as a result of going to school. The question bursts onto the surface and ruptures romantic optimism: who has these opportunities? How inequitable is the inequality baked into the Order of Capital? No matter.

These questions are not the ones we ask here. The structure of the school incentivizes capitulation—capitalization—and falling in line on all subordinate levels, that is, on all levels subordinate to the order of the capital ‘o’ Order—whether Being, God, or Capital—and what these Orders command when it comes to teaching, studenting, and learning. Case closed.

Recall that our focus here is on these pedagogues, the stances they take in relation to their students, the story that this stance tells to the student, and, finally, the story that the student then tells to their self as a result of a steady influx of such encounters. When it comes to ontologically conservative pedagogues and pedagogy, I belabor the point of the school here to point to the weight and impression that a structure can have and leave on those operating in its midst, and, indeed, on those who have their hands in perpetuating the very operation. Teachers constitute a crux of the modern, contemporary school. They are the directors, the pointers, the integrational figures of authority, the authors of what comes and goes, what gets written and what does not. Even if they do not have the first—administrative—or final—student—say, they occupy an integral and integrating middle ground.

Thankfully, and at this point may there be some room for breathing, not all teachers, nor even all teachers in any given school (although they feel its weight, its mass, its force; a pressure, perhaps, to bend but not...) are content with falling in line.

A Break

The break occurs at a point when people begin to question the conditions that they have found their selves in, and to doubt the dubious promise they have been taught to hold tightly to. Indeed, what happens when the student says no, or, at the very least, raises the question—the problem—that they were taught not to, that their teacher’s movements were intended to keep out? There is a break, a break in the chain. This student becomes a teacher. This teacher then

jolts their students. Momentum builds; a culmination of questioning, unrest, and outrage creates a ripple, and then a wave, and then a movement that cannot be ignored.

Rebel causes as such have the potential to pose a real threat to the *status quo*. They activate the imaginative sparks of their cohort's members. This work points to the possibility of *real* (*not* the exception—now the rule) transformation. Pockets of resistance like these, while ever-present, can easily get lost—and lose steam—in this world of the overwhelming current of the one way stream. In what follows, I point to only two of many traditions where such questioning, unrest, and outrage has turned into a shared, patterned movement. The traditions I focus on are, of course, pedagogical: the critical and the democratic. I lump them together at this point because undergirding each of their counter-to-the-prevailing-Order pedagogical practices lies what I think of as a shared ontological stance and standing. Dissatisfied with perpetuating and pointing their students toward what naturally is (that is, being) and of preserving this singular state, however, onto-pedagogical progressives instead point their students to what could be, indeed, to what might yet—unlike and revolutionarily distinct from this *status quo*—come into being (a different strain of being, at that), that is, to what becomes.

2.2.2—Ontological Stances and Movements in Service of Becoming

What becomes—by whatever force—necessarily emerges from being, what is, that normal force. While always necessarily in relation to being, this ground, what becomes breaks from what is. That is, the energy of becoming makes a break—something else—possible.

Where can we see such an energy in teaching practice?

If the mantra behind ontopedagogical conservatism—the litany of teaching practices taken from and for the sake of an ontological stance, standing, and understanding that privileges what is, being—is to protect the built wall—the already found ground—of being that always

already is and the ways of building and securing it that already are, then ontopedagogical stances in service of becoming are enacted for the sake of *progression*, of moving the wall rather than making moves in relation to the wall as if it were unalterable, or as if these habitual, normal, routine moves were set in stone too. Ontopedagogical progressives intend not only to move the wall but also to put into movement—shake up, unsettle—the common sense of who and what is excluded and included within and without this walling practice and why. These ontologically progressive pedagogues want to walk the wall ‘forward’ (progression—which might also look like walking ‘back’ the building of it/deconstruction) and to engender in the young—their students—a practice of unbuilding, rebuilding, and, perhaps most critically, building differently.

Ontopedagogical conservatives who through their teaching practice (preaching tactics) serve being protect their wall by living and teaching and moving in relation to their students in such a way so as to suggest that the wall that there is is the only wall that can be, and thus that it, and all its grandeur, are not able to be questioned (much like the sense of inherent authority these educational figures assume). Concrete. A point I have been belaboring: such a strict stance is *normal* in this world. There exists a normal force pointing people in this direction. Being, God, and Capital are examples of the utmost point and pointing of this force. Massive, unbroachable entities such as these ground this world and its perimeter, its wall, its shape. A sphere. A harsh kind of border patrolling takes place on and for this particular kind of wall, and it takes on what we can think of as onto-supremacist, which is to say onto-pedagogically conservative, flair.

By contrast, onto-pedagogical progressives do not stick their selves and their students onto a supreme notion of being, or, at the very least, their pedagogical movements do not tend (are not intended) to point students in such a strict direction, in relation to the wall in such a subservient manner. Such a top-down/center-out/one-way strictness is not these ontopedagogical

progressives' point. Their stance and standing in relation to ontology tends to promote a more fluid and flowing quality, the current of which makes it possible to imagine, to wonder, and to entertain and enact the possibility of something else—another way, otherwise than what is—becoming/becoming real. If not a strict sphere, then a boundary that burgeons, ebbing and flowing at its multiple (and multifarious), particular points.

What is becoming? A confusing question. When Plato privileges 'being'—what is—in his description of where philosophic attention should reside and casts 'becoming'—what becomes—aside, the word he uses is a variation of the infinitive verb *gignesthai*, meaning 'to come into being.' That is, 'to become.' What is the difference between being and that which comes into being, or between that which is and that which might come into is-ness (but which currently is not)? Philosopher Charles Kahn thinks of this Platonic contrast as one "between the eternal and the perishable," with Plato privileging—deeming in-bounds—the former and marginalizing—and pushing out of bounds—the latter (Kahn, 2009, p. 63). This distinction—being/becoming and eternal/perishable—is important. Let us return to the language of *phulakes*, ontology, and the stances these figures take in relation to ontology in order to sense the particularities of this contrast more clearly.

An ontological stance in service of being—which Plato took and taught to his *phulakes*, his pedagogical force—points to the eternal. Why does Plato point and teach in this way? Plato concerns his teaching with pointing students toward what always already is latent within them (their selves), within the world. Learning is then ultimately a re-cognition of what is already there (see his dialogue *Meno*); the first city, the first soul: that which is primal, those first states. Such are the bounds—the wall—toward which Plato points his *phulakes*, so that they might conserve and preserve and engender a return to them. Order. Being.

By contrast, an ontological stance in service of becoming/ontopedagogical progressivism, which Plato laments, points to the perishable. Why? Because its teachers point their students' attention toward what otherwise might 'out there' be. From the perspective of strict, rigid ontopedagogical conservatism, such a shift in attention—away from the one—and such a stance, especially when proffered from a pedagogical figure, doom the stander, the student, and the teacher to an unfavorable descent into disorder (much like the warring city-states of Plato's time).

An ontopedagogical stance in service of becoming threatens to activate the imagination and to raise questions that have the potential to spark upheaval, a trip, a fall, a fever: what else might be? Why more? More of this? The voice of the multifarious masses begins to take a shape of its own. An ontopedagogical progressive does not ask that they fall in line, nor that they fall into and find their place in the line that already is. They question and undermine the pedestal of Being and Order, the path of immortality. For Plato, then, deviation from this line leads to death, the mortal path, the end, absolute tyranny of soul and city, a perishing, unraveling state. Chaos. Becoming.

Put another way: that which is—being—is and will always be. It is the most singular, reducible point of all, everything, where everything *merges (kairos)*; that which becomes—becoming—carries a, then, *e-mergent* quality and, as such, at least from the perspective of those focusing their efforts on preserving that precise point of essential is-ness, poses a threat. Becoming changes the course of what is for the sake of/en route what could be/what is not (yet). An ontopedagogical stance in service of becoming does not elicit certainty and closedness, but radical openness. Becoming constitutes a threat to being—what is—inasmuch as through such emergence openings *and* closings prevail. For Plato, then, this very sense of emergent becoming

ultimately signifies perishing (and in this sense Plato lumps becoming/coming into being and beceasing/decaying together, which I specifically do not do) because *what comes into being* detracts and divides attention from what already sufficiently is and has been and which needs only recognition and realization. The ontosupremacist logic goes, or, at the very least, the underlying narrative thread suggests (a thread which imperialists grab onto and intend to spread—first and foremost for their selves—across the singular surface of the globe): this being that always already is, is eternal. That which becomes perishes, points to perishing. The multifariousness indicative of the feverish world of unchecked desires, the first fallen city, reeks of becoming, of what becomes, of that which has the potential to come into being when people lose focus of—turn their attention away from—what essentially is (a foreshadow: when they turn their attention away from the one—the sun—and to the wall of shadows, and further, into the dark depths of the cave).

On the point of becoming, a perhaps more subtle point I have been trying to make thus far pertains to humans and their habitual, unconscious privileging of being. *Human beings*—guardian figures—have created—some more than others, for sure—and inhabit a world which continues to, in tow with Plato’s legacy and the impression he and his way of thinking leaves behind, privilege (their own) being, an underlying sense of what fundamentally is (their own selfhood and sense of self-supremacy). To boot, in this human world, not only is there a privileging of this singular sense of being. There also persists a habit of laying claim to, following the privileging of this deep sense of inner/out-there is-ness, a center, a supreme spot, point, an integrity, and a further habit of expanding the reach of (even if not also participation in and access to) this “privileged inside” (Warren, 2018)—indeed, granting those ‘outside’ access to this privileged, inner realm *is the work of Platonically-conceived education*; a leading away

from the dis-integrating, shadowy fringes and toward an assimilation to the integral, enlightened, self-same core. That is, the work of *imperial education*, the work of *imperial guardians* as Maldonado-Torres calls them (referenced in Sithole, 2020).

Ontopedagogical conservatives protect the wall that secures this self-similar/sense of interior. Ontopedagogical progressives deconstruct and reconstruct it elsewhere and otherwise, that is, differently, or, at the very least, with an eye toward difference, not more of the same.

Pause.

What is becoming? In her forthcoming publication *The Touch of the Present*, Sharon Todd (2023) points readers' attention to becoming, particularly as a time of unfolding, a moment in which there lies the possibility of making small breaks from what she thinks of as the gridlock—that is, what is—or the normal state and force of the world, and what I am thinking of as a wall patrolled by *phulakes* who tend to take on one or several different stances in relation to this wall. Each of the ontologically progressive pedagogical traditions and projects that I review below do work in the service of some semblance of becoming, that which has the possibility to come to be, that which represents a break, even if only momentary, from what is—some breathing room—for the sake of what could be.

Because the force of the normal is so obdurate and inescapable, that is, because of the relentless, underlying zeal that informs the work and fervor of many ontological and ontopedagogical conservatives working together and the inertia that accompanies such sure vigor, the work of ontological progressives must be similarly relentless, vigorous, ongoing, and incessant (and similarly united). It must be. Without these ontopedagogical progressives and their resistance, either totalitarianism or tyranny—or both—would surely reign; humans have (as

Plato notices, too) a bad habit of finding their selves here, or gravitating here, if left to their own devices, one way or another.

My point: because they directly face the onto-pedagogically conservative flair that prevails in this world, they too get caught up in, for the sake of this combat, this feud that must be fought, its churning. Indeed, for those attuning their work to an underlying sense of becoming as a positive force, the only way out of what is and will obdurately be is through the perpetual, ongoing labor of putting one careful, deliberate, and critical foot in front of the other, step by step. My claim: this incessance in the first place—which it must have because of its opponent—carries an ontological weight.

Famous pedagogue Paulo Freire might think of the heart of this work as praxis, an ongoing process of reflective action and active reflection, of acting in the world, reflecting on that action, acting on that reflection, and so on, for the sake of transformation, of breaking the cycle of human oppression, little pocket of resistance by little pocket of resistance. The struggle for freedom is never ending, ever lasting. Praxis constitutes an ongoing process—it does not ‘end’ once the goal, whatever it may be, becomes real, here, now. When what could be becomes what is, that is, when transformation occurs, the labor continues. Faction and fever prove perennial pests and require ongoing management. The force of the normal prevails, warranting constant attention. Here lies another bind, which ties ontological progressivism to ontological conservatism at a particular point: these pedagogue’s shared habit of de-spacing ontological terror. We will get there.

Ontopedagogical Progressives

Let me be upfront here: I am not—which I hope is becoming clearer by this point—attempting to offer a comprehensive review of the pedagogical traditions that I cite below, nor

even an exhaustive account of the ways of thinking that inform it. Rather, I am pulling out critical, integral, fundamental, and, indeed, ontological, pieces of what each of these ways of teaching operate and must operate from, given the ways that some of these thought traditions' most fundamental and influential thinkers, advocates, and progenitors have shaped and do shape it with their 'hands'—again, not physical hands, not hands attached to a body, but 'hands of thought' (Uchiyama, 1993).

For the case of 'critical pedagogy,' for example, I primarily reference the revolutionary Paulo Freire. For the case of 'democratic pedagogy,' I primarily reference the impressive thought and thinking of John Dewey. Why Dewey and Freire? I point to the thought, thinking, and impression of these figures because they have gripped the attention of those who have come across their words. Their work has had a monumental impact on how not only their 'students'—of which there are many—think but also how the broader public thinks about and expects from education. Indeed, it cannot be disputed that these figures have left a lasting impression on the way (some of) those in their wake think. Indeed, contemporary with these figures are historical moments rife with thought of and wonderment at what, through education, is possible at large, social, structural levels. In particular, their work has left a profound impression on the teachers who once studented their words and who were shaped by them, their pedagogy, and their example. Each of these figures have, through their writing and living example, formulated ideas, and through their pedagogy—their pedagogical movements, their ontopedagogical stance, undertonal ontopedagogical expression—have made them enticing, enthralling.

In my referencing them, I work primarily from their words that point to the practical act of their pedagogical stance and standing. These figures point their students not toward an unquestioning acceptance of the *status quo*, but, indeed, toward questioning as an undermining

act. They provoke in their students a questioning not only when it comes to the state of things but also as it relates to practice action on a personal, local level; on the levels of habits, dispositions, ways of thinking, and ways of being. They compel their students to ask: how are humans—how am I—to realize a pedagogy of the oppressed that is solidaritous enough to topple, undermine, and overturn the *status quo*? How are humans—how am I—to realize democracy, and a democratic way of being? Indeed—what is ‘my’ part—the part of ‘me’—the part of the human? What role are they to play?

What sort of work do these pedagogues point to—and thus imply is required—on this here-and-now—the temporal zone of ontology—level, that is, the level of actual, the real, where the potential for something else emerges, catches attention? What they call for—this orientation they establish in the first place—carries an ontological charge, or orientation. That is, these pedagogues intend for their students to relate to the wall of being that always already is—the normal, accepted ‘way’—in a particular fashion. They provoke ontopedagogical progressivism, the fundamental belief that something else—newness, natality—may come into being. The actual bringing about of such a belief begins and is felt first in the personal, present, and pedagogical moment of conscious experience and in their automatic habits and dispositions. Foreshadow: the story I tell my self and my students matters.

What unites Freire, critical pedagogues, Dewey, and democratic pedagogues is, on the one hand, this pragmatic sensibility (the sense that there is something I/we can do, that I/we can and should work with what I/we have, and go from there) and, on the other, the ontological energy of becoming (this business/project proves unfinished—there still remains some space in which other possibilities emerge). Baked into the deep, underlying logic of these pedagogues and their words and work is a call for perpetuity, an ongoingness, an energy in tow with/akin to a

force of emergent becoming. We can see this, again, in their words, their work, and their pedagogical example. Let's turn there.

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

I should be clear about what I mean by 'critical' and why I lump Freire—who doesn't use this particular word to describe the pedagogy he performs and promotes—and his work in this category. Criticality entails a dissatisfaction with a simple and subservient rendering of and relationship to the surface reality of self and world. The critical thinker engages with this ordinary fabric in a problematizing and questioning—rather than an unquestioning, habitual/habituated, admitting (that is, allowing in), and outright accepting—manner. I think of a “critical pedagogy,” then, as a pedagogical movement whose pedagogue seeks to instill in students a capacity for criticality, that is, an ability to sense below/otherwise than what the surface level presents as fundamental and fundamentally unquestionable—that is, what is. Critical pedagogues want their students to raise questions in the face of the settled: why? why more? why more of this?

And so I think of Paulo Freire's (1996, originally published in 1970) *pedagogy of the oppressed* as a critical pedagogy inasmuch as he intends for his problem-posing educational/pedagogical practice (the method of teaching he advocates for) to instill in his students—particularly those who face oppression in this world—a capacity not only for *sensing* the oppressive *status quo* differently but also, in particular, for acting and reflecting locally so as to undermine and transform it, and perhaps most importantly their local experience of 'it.'

To this end, Freire (1996) points to and through, again, praxis, a dialogic process of action *and* reflection. Breaking free from the gridlock of what is, that is, “liberation,” Freire writes, “is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to

transform it” (p. 52). And he points his students toward/guards for critical consciousness, a critical companion to praxis, that is, a “consciousness of consciousness as consciousness,” or an intuiting and ‘thinking’ ‘below’ the surface level of consciousness. Critical consciousness makes a here and now—even if only momentary—break free from the oppressed mode of being that the oppressor establishes possible—the mode of being which sustains the *status quo* of a world founded on imperialism and supremacy-minded hierarchy and grounded by domination and antiblack subjection.

(I belabor this point—what I see as the inescapable foundations of the world—a lot; I know. I also know that this fact is easy for someone like ‘me’ to forget, as substantial and overwhelmingly present and common as *it is*. And so I repeat my self.)

The thread of consistent thinking common to critical pedagogy goes: if enough people begin living praxis-oriented lives, critically conscious lives, a revolution—one that breaks the world free from the confining tether of the harms of history—the inhumane legacy of the imperial minded man and his will—must occur. This break is not one for the sake of forgetting, nor of neglecting, but, indeed, for freedom. Freedom, at the very least, looks like a personal, conscious break from the imprisoning mode of being and thinking and breathing that the paradigms that prevail deem normal. Pedagogy has the potential to perform this work, to point people toward this kind of personal (and personal ways create social waves) liberation. Teachers, for Freire, are the leaders of the—and indeed pedagogy for Freire must be about—revolution. Teachers, depending on how they move in the classroom, have the potential to get the massive ball and sphere that is this world rolling, moving along, to so speak.

Freire sees this macrocosmic—at large—oppressive state of the world—a colonized world—manifest in the school classroom (particularly in communities and people subject by the

state (the *status quo*) to poverty), a microcosmic, living, and local example of where oppressors and the oppressed find their selves socially reproducing their lot in life. I believe that the prevailing paradigm Freire bemoans in his particularly Brazilian context is the same as in this contemporary world that I gesture broadly to and through (he writes less than a century ago). This prevailing paradigm proves persistent. Indeed, for many, it simply *is* what (again, often unquestionably) *is*. The school and its pedagogical founders and foundational norms have consistently pointed the normal operation of this institution toward the preservation of what (always already) *is*. The school is a building structured by walls against an outside world for the sake of establishing and developing some inner sense of security and safety—one which is inclusive insofar any one who arrives looking for sanctuary and mobility does so according to their lot and slot in the ready-made, hierarchical structure.

In the colonial era, the menace outside is that Old Deluder; the school is for/a response to the Order of God. In Freire's time, the menace outside is anything other than a capitalist future, the manifest destiny of the Order of Capital, a trajectory that requires the school to serve its slotting, socially reproductive function. Freire lambasts this persistent norm and obsession with order.

He names this Order of Capital educational norm the 'banking model.' In this model, a classroom constitutes a hierarchy, with the authority figure, teacher, and knowledge wielder at the top and a servile student body, a cadre of empty vessels passively awaiting their fill at the bottom. Stemming from its simple status as—literally—mind-numbingly—literally—'boring,' such a model, according to Freire (1996), "inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the *intentionality* of consciousness [hence the need for critical consciousness] by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their

ontological and historical vocation of *becoming* more fully human” (pp. 56-57, emphasis mine). A strong indictment: banking model pedagogues deny their students of an ontological sense of becoming by pointing their attention to the direction/the pointing of the unquestionable figure of authority at the front of the classroom. In such an educational arrangement students learn to submit—and find praise (*status*) when they submit—to such a figure in this local sense such that, the logic goes, they will more easily bend to the whims of the various, ‘large’ Orders and Laws of a Being that always already are/is.

What alternative does Freire have in mind? Moving away from this ontopedagogically conservative model, Freire (1996) advocates, in addition to *praxis* and critical consciousness, for a “problem posing education”/pedagogy which “affirms [people/students] as beings in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (p. 57). This sense of reality as an unfinished—and unfinishable, always in progress/never quite ‘set in stone’—product of human hands flies in the face of ontologically conservative efforts to convince people that what is necessary—and good for them—is a giving in to what already is, a falling in line with the present state that the higher up has ordered. For Freire, the human being is also an unfinished entity, impacted by the way they encounter education, that is, impacted by the way they encounter a lead, a directive, and a pointing in relation to the wall: “the unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity...” (p. 57). Whereas banking model pedagogues tell their students e-ducational stories that point them toward the conservation of a fixed, certain—and already known, that is, immanent—end, problem-posing pedagogues tell their students e-ducational stories that point them toward an opening, a new beginning: progression.

The underlying ontological gist of Freire's pedagogical force is one of ongoing, perpetual movement—of becoming as a force which burgeons and opens up a space where new possibilities can emerge and, indeed, be-come real, that is, become what is. The work, critically, for Freire and other like pedagogues does not end here, when what they want comes into being. Indeed, the work continues, and further experimentation and praxis—an openness still to new possibility—will prove paramount, for critical pedagogy as such rests and relies on dialogic interplay, that is, on movement, on oscillations and revolutions and cycles that engender the new.

In Deweyan theories of democracy there exists a similar, underlying ontological force akin to becoming. Of course, it should not be surprising, then, that democracy as such is often a key pursuit of critical pedagogues, whether they adhere to and identify with a tradition of Freire or Dewey. Still, I am nevertheless here pointing to, again, what I am thinking of as underlying ontological gists and forces. Dewey's call for democracy as a social experiment with no real 'end'—indeed, requiring incessant labor and tinkering, generation after generation (Dewey, 1981)—resonates with and rides on a similar ontological undertone as Freire's problem-posing pedagogy that points students toward becoming (Freire, 1996).

John Dewey's Democratizing Pedagogy

I think of a democratizing pedagogy as a pedagogical movement—a way of teaching and teaching practice—which is enacted in order to bring about democracy, or at the very least to bring about *movement toward* democracy, and which would enable and empower people to move their selves democratically. John Dewey's democratizing pedagogy provides an example of such a movement. Indeed, the democratizing pedagogue intends to shape and guide students' movements and ways of being such that they might contribute to the in-forming of a more democratic world. This work begins in practice with how the teacher shapes (and does not shape)

any given teacher/student relationship as well as the ‘classroom’ environment, a microcosm, and then ushers those students as shapers of their own right out into their communities, their workplaces, their worlds...the world (a long term project; indeed, ever-lasting).

Baked into the (at least Deweyan) democratic logic, I claim, is an underlying habit of ontopedagogical progressivism, of pointing students toward becoming as an ontological force, the very sort of force that democratic conceptualization, realization, and everyday practice necessitates. In short, the ontologically progressive flair that I see undergirding democratic imagination stems from the need for democratic participations, as a social formation—at any level—to constantly question, adapt, and refine what they are doing. This call for incessance suggests an attunement to becoming as an emergent, ontological force. May the consideration of several questions serve as a guide for this segment. First: what is democracy? what is education? how are these two concepts connected? And second: what makes Deweyan, democratic sensibility ontopedagogically progressive?

For John Dewey, pointing to and bringing up ‘democracy’ as a ‘social formation’ also means bringing up and pointing to (and through) ‘education,’ a powerful, if not *the* premiere, ‘social informer.’ Early on in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (2018, originally published in 1916) calls education and its educators’ work an activity of “shaping, forming, molding [its ‘young’—and what Dewey names “immature”—members]... into the standard form of social activity” (p. 13) that is, the *status quo*, social norm. Democracy, as such, is neither the standard nor the social norm of Dewey’s time and thus through education needs cultivating. Democracy can only come about through education, and lives on only as long as its in-formers persist in their educating the populace in a democratic environment. Democracy conjures up an endless task in a human world (that proves itself time and again) intent on self and social reproduction. The word

democracy, of course, does not gesture at a “form of government” or, for example, a political party such as in the contemporary United States. Etymologically, demo-cracy stems from two words: *demo-*, meaning the people (*demos*); and *-cracy*, meaning rule or power (*cratos*).

I think of democracy, then, as a social formation in which the people have the power, say, over the primary shape of the communal network of which they are a part. In Dewey’s (2018) words, democracy “is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 93), that is, a communal environment wherein people have options as to how they live with each other, not confined to or feeling as if they must resort to one, particular and prescribed way of life. Indeed, the ways of living in such a democratic formation are *associated*, necessarily a part of and attached and integral to (that is, *not* detached from) a greater whole over which people—parts—have a say and from which people feel a pressure—a responsibility—to abide.

Education is thus part and parcel of democracy because this sort of social sensibility must be cultivated. No matter how ‘natural’ such a communal, social way of being may appear to be, both Dewey and I write from contemporary contexts in which individualism—which it so say a sense of self as detached from other people, other individuals whose primary, everyday aim is self- and self-same-preservation—runs rampant, and rampantly normal. That is, in a world where an individualizing—counter to democratizing and socializing—mentality culturally propels its members into, first and foremost, ‘self’ and that which is ‘like me’ (self-same) protection-oriented and defensive acts. Such a mindset convinces people that the world not only must but should bend to their way—“it’s my way or the highway, and it’s a good way so don’t worry about alternatives.” The mentality goes: what is ‘my own’—that is, what is ‘of me’ (*mou(n)*)—is

all that matters; my one and the only. Individualism constitutes an aura, an air, a water that we-fish-humans swim and breathe in; that is, an environment that shapes us. Might we shape it?

Democracy as a mode of associated living must be cultivated through education, and not just any ordinary education, but through an environment that encourages ways of being conducive to a democratic way of life and living. Teachers are a necessary part of this environment—they are some of its more primary shapers. If education is cultivation, then educators are some of its cultivators—indeed, powerful pieces of this progressive act.

The creation of such an environment is a counter-cultivating act. The *status quo* and its adherents cultivate individualism—and indeed have cultivated it so much so that it persists even when its most avid supporters are not around, and so that even within the walls of otherwise built structures there remains a residue. Which is to say: the culture of individualism proves pervasive—it cultivates, at this point, and reproduces, beyond the hands that once created it, its self. The aforementioned school as such makes this self-reproduction possible, institutionalizable, and profitable, profitable, at least, for those who find their selves well-resourced, or lucky, enough to rise through the ranks, prove their worth, and capitalize on their potential.

The counter-cultivating work of democratization—as Dewey describes it, that is, as necessarily tied to interdependency as much as independency, the fact of sociality as much as of individuated self-hood—requires incessant labor. As educational work, it requires a constant effort on the part of the pedagogue to direct attention to the multiple parts at play and the tension between these parts, an attention which—in the individual mind—might otherwise lapse into the single-stream, onto the one-track. Lapsing into the single-stream state of mind or mindset, of course, is not an outlaw in the democratic imagination—it ceases just to be the only way, the

only state of mind, the only way of thinking about self and this self's relationship to the world beyond this single 'me,' beyond the singular story.

Individualism—through individualist adherents—doubles down as a cultural force—it convinces people that they are singular and convinces them that this is the only—singular—way of conceiving of their selves. Deweyan democratizing pedagogues intervene—through their pedagogical movement—into this normal environment and prefigure an alternative in addition. They embody—much like the pedagogical figures of authority in the colonial era—a democratic sensibility in their relating to their students and as such set a counter-cultivating-precedent for socially responsible—more than only personally responsible—practices. The goal of such a pedagogue is to, through their teaching practice, help bring about socially *and* personally healthy and healing practices in their students, as a result of these kinds of educational experiences, practices which, over time, settle into ordinary habits and dispositions. There is no set regiment for the on-the-grounds practice of such a pedagogy. It is endlessly experimental—like Freirean *praxis*, in that any progress the democratic pedagogue makes en route to democratic realization must meet reflection, a reflection that has the potential to—and likely will—alter next steps. Democracy is, as such, a living organism that grows and adapts as its constituents grow and adapt, constituents, which, in the case of humans, have ascribed in their very self-conceptualization, agency and a freedom to act and choose according to their own will. Because humans are so free, democracy as such may never have an end. “Democracy,” John Dewey has expressed, “can never be done once and for all” (Dewey, 1988, p. 303)—it must constantly be remade. Elsewhere, he makes a similar sentiment, pointing to the ongoingness necessary for the democratic project: democracy, he has famously said, has to be born anew every generation; education is its midwife.

In this call for incessant, ongoing, continual labor, a Deweyan democratic conceptualization—to which many people are drawn, even if they do not realize it—reveals its ontopedagogically progressive tendencies. Particularly because Dewey (2018) links democracy so tightly to education—and rightly so, I will add—the pedagogical connection bursts forth, and because his democratic sentiment must always converse with—and never quite become—‘the norm,’ as a static such, its force is one of becoming, always in contention with—indeed burgeoning forth from—being, what is. Democratizing pedagogues point their students according to and through and toward such an ontopedagogical stance: these teachers want their students to ‘progress’ (or disrupt and rebuild, activities which rely on a progressive thrust) the wall; whether by moving the wall, taking it apart, putting it back together differently; or building elsewhere. There is, nevertheless, the wall.

I think of those democratizing pedagogues as progressors of the ontological state of things inasmuch as they point to and through a social formation—democracy—that, in its actuality, would beg for—require—persistent and constant attention and vigilance. Such a logic of ongoingness—a coherent thread—is baked into the democratic concept. Democratic schooling advocates Michael Apple and James Beane (2007) think of democracy as something like an “ethical anchor” rather than as a goal to be achieved. Indeed, the ‘goal’ is to stay afloat amidst rocky waters, that is, in a world that will not cease. And more, their goal is to stay tethered so as to teach and instill in their students a capacity for such tetheredness, for and toward habits and dispositions that strengthen the bond so that it might go on.

Of course, on the other end of the tether is not the ‘seafloor,’ but other people, other living and non-living entities: the world. This *social* (ethical, that is, imbuing in it a sense responsibility) tethering is what commands, for these pedagogues, then, their attention; a soft,

gentle commanding that they convey to their students. They point to it. They cultivate it. They allow the student to realize it in their self. These ‘democratic,’ ontopedagogical progressives point their students toward their complex, social status as person who is, at once, an individual that makes choices and who is, at the same time, a part of ‘the people’—a mass which has a ‘power’ and which, when united, can shape, mold, and form the world. They can, the story goes, contribute to the everlasting, reliable, and trustworthy narrative that undergirds the democratic project: humans are mobile and adaptive creatures that need not stay stuck in their toxic way; in the toxic way (waste) that they have found their selves in. Indeed, the story goes, they need not lock and tie their selves to the precedent, the foundations, that history has established for them. Nor need they tell a stuck story about history. They may make movement—small, local movement. They may move things around—small things; small distances. They may make new movement.

A democratizing pedagogue is someone who lives out—through their teaching practice—the complex task that is living and relating according to democratic habits and dispositions; that is, their democratic role as an example, a prefiguring act, an acting as if this social formation were already here, and through one’s own local action willing it into existence and reality. As I have alluded to above, democracy is *not* just about freedom, however, nor just about a freedom to act, nor, for that matter, about having a platter of options and possibilities laid out in front of you. Integrally tied to a democratic sense of freedom is a democratic sense of responsibility. That is, democratizing pedagogy is not just about pointing people toward possibilities, but about supporting them in their navigating of the intense array of options in front of them, and about exemplifying the fact that choices made in here and now local moments—between student and teacher—bear a connection to a larger social web, a massive ecosystemic network. Indeed,

democratic sensibility entails an understanding that the moves I make here, in response, matter—they shape the world. Of course, any move made in response has a similar shaping capacity. There is a push and a pull inherent to democratic action—the moves I make occur within dense interconnection. For this reason, practicing democracy entails practicing balance—between, on the one hand, any given person’s sense of freedom and desire to act and live as they choose, that is, to have a choice, to have agency; and, on the other, the contingent reality that any given choice implicates a host of others, and, indeed, does not happen in isolation.

Democratizing pedagogues are not above the need to balance personal desire, and even need, with the fact of other desiring and needing beings—indeed, democratizing pedagogues bring this awareness into the classroom. Democratizing pedagogues do not dominate their pupils with a command to attend to and take full responsibility for their way of being in the world as if they alone were to hoist the next block into position on the wall. The social component bounds into the conversation which, in this world, revolves around the individual and its core. The ‘how’ of the necessarily social, interpersonal environment of the classroom—how it operates—is a powerful place for the pedagogue to set an example regarding how democracy might look with others. Still, the teacher is left in a conundrum: they ask their selves, “aren’t I still projecting a particular mode of being?” “can I not?”

Tension—an incessant force, here—abounds. The cultivation of democratic habits and dispositions is a non-linear, unfinished and incomplete process, the ebbs and flows of which convey along their way an intensity—indeed, the tension becomes a generative—and nevertheless frustrating—force.

The tension at the core of democracy—at best, a mutually agreed upon, collectively-managed social formation—proves to be a workable force so long as its shapers continue to give

in an ongoing manner their labor, their attention, and their practice; the eternal return to the task at hand.

Pause.

Of course, in this sense, democratic and even ontopedagogical progressives in general are not all that maligned with ontopedagogical conservatism. Sure, the former is not content with the current, metaphysical apparatus or material conditions, or, in borrowing some of Dewey's wording, the socio-metaphysical formation and environment; the latter, as I have claimed, is. Despite this discrepancy, though, both engage in and point to and through their teaching (of) habits that have an ontological impact an eternal return—an end-less-ness (that is not without *cost*) of sorts. That is, each tells a story of a long, nebulous, and precarious journey: either to the locus of change and newness, growth, emergence, and becoming; or to the locus of long lost stability, that sure ground, that always already is—being—and which needs only more widespread recognition. If the former is open, the latter is closed: both en route an end with no real end. They feud with each other and fuel each other's endlessness—not with their own energies, or, at least, not with their own energies alone.

Indeed, the point I have been trying to piece together: they expel, for the sake of their endless project, ontological terror at the outset: those anxieties (again distinct from and yet related to those about which Warren writes) that prove, in their inability in either of these projects *to be*, evocative of nothing, being nothing, and nothing being. Given how I link ontopedagogical conservatism to imperial minded acts and legacy, it should not come as a surprise that I think of such movements as 'anti-black,' inasmuch as 'blackness' shares close ties with ontological terror, and suggest an ontologically terrifying positionality (a non-positionality). Less clear is how ontopedagogical progressives become implicated in this damning equation. My

calling these progressive pedagogues in says less about their particular way of moving and more about the overwhelming weight, way, and sway of the ontological enterprise, and about the way that humans have created for their selves, once and for all, a horizon beyond which there is no getting.

The antiblack ontopedagogical disposition I sense in these teachers convinced of progressive possibilities takes root in their appeal not only to an endless project, but also to the fact that they believe—and let me be crystal clear, at this point, that I find my self, on one hand, too, among these ranks; and on another, I do not fault them—that this endlessness ultimately creates an opening. I am not sure that it does. At base, surely, these optimistic progressives believe that there is actually a way out, that there is a better world, a better existence. They believe and operate and practice as if—on such a ground—the walls that humans have constructed can be systematically deconstructed and pieced back together. It would take an immense amount of effort, movement, labor, and time, but it is possible. Indeed, they cannot believe that humans can actually have messed things up all that badly, to such an irreversible degree. Indeed, they are optimistic.

As such, I worry that they participate—alongside ontopedagogical conservatives, and alongside humans and their self-preservational, conscious project—in the combustion of black being (as uncertainty, the unknown and the unknowable) for the purposes of their project; indeed, I worry that such a combustion constitutes the ground of their project, inasmuch as theirs is a human project reliant on human tools and machinery and mechanism and the metaphysical, meaning- and sense-making infrastructure which controls the very opening and closing of this here hand of thought. There is no out of this bind.

Transatlantic slave-traders, settlers, and imperial guardians (not to mention a human history and prehistory rife with genocide, war, terror, and devastating conquest, with unalterable consequence) have concretized and totalized as a normal activity—a starting location for action, for human conscious, the act of normal human thought—once and for all a metaphysical machinery which relies on this extractive expulsion, the obliteration of nothing for the sake of something: a parcel of meaning, hope, sense, being. I am not suggesting, then, that meaning, hope, sense, and being are lost causes, but rather that there is no engagement with these concepts that is not fraught for a *phulaks* figure, which is to say, for someone like ‘me.’

(I will remind my self and my readers, at this point, that this is a story I tell my self—and with it, a strategy; I practice sitting with the tension that an irresolvable problem engenders. The fact that I call this a story should nevertheless not distract from the fact that I also find it to resonate as deeply, formidably true, true at even these depths, and even in this darkness, where nothing else remains; what happens when I tell this story? This kind of story? Is this a kind story? What happens to ‘me’? What, now, remains ‘of me’?).

To move as a ‘me’ in relation to unknown others and otherness in this world is to move on and take advantage of and employ action from this here broken ground. Healing and mending and moving on from and redefining, reclaiming the break—progressive work, work that progresses the state of things—requires incessant labor; a breaking out of and away from the break. Assuring one’s self that the break doesn’t quite reach some safe sense of ‘me,’ that a part of me has been spared, and knows redemption—conservative work, work that conserves an underlying, reliable state of things—requires an incessant closing and closing in; a defiance of the break and a trust that *something* remains unbroken, an authoritative security force in me, in us.

Both projects contend for prevalence in my world. Pedagogues, pointers to and through each, they and their patterned movements and ways of moving shape, have shaped, and will continue to shape me. And if they do not contend for prevalence, they nevertheless somehow go and live on for the sake of keeping a hand in the game. A tension. Just in case. They have arrived—I have admitted them—and I cannot ask them to leave. They each keep but a finger on its erratic, long lasting heart and the powerful, productive pulse there. It ensures you that the course is worth it; that heart. There is, if nothing else, this thrill there—that we can, romantically beyond any project, do this. That we can really do this: realize justice, lessen harm, build more equitable structures, shape and re-shape the world. And we can! Oh, we can! We start small, a trickle dribbles down a monstrous mountain and into a ripple, a wave, waves coalescing into a massive, tidal movement. We just can't stop—the sticking, stuck, point. We have got to keep trying. End-less-ness—neither pattern allows an end. Neither admits an end. They can not. I need something else. I need to dis-integrate my-self and the *phulaks* forces that shape me. So goes this project: a teasing apart of these all too often collapsing dimensions: a jumbled mess of messages that authority figures have presented to me. So moves this personal, onto-pedagogical gesture, a studenting practice turned inside out. Why? If nothing else, may all these words constitute a practice of admitting the end, the ultimately mundane end.

Beceasing, a pointing to and through something else

Those ontopedagogical progressives—who strive for and advocate for becoming, that is, those of at least the Freirean critical and Deweyan democratic variety—do not want to accept this stuck state of things—that wall; *this wall*. They want to put the plane into motion, and, indeed, assume that perpetual motion as such *is what there is* or ought to be—a continual practice of breaking down the walls/laws that make oppression possible and profitable and

rebuilding something else in the process—rather than some solid state. Such a tendency toward ongoingness, movement, or emergence at a fundamental level proves paradigmatic of these two pedagogues and what I see as the movements and traditions that follow in their foot steps. I think of Freire and Dewey as exemplars of the fundamental thought that undergirds contemporary critical and democratic communities of scholarly thought and grassroots action. Basic to these fundamental ways of thinking is what I am calling ontopedagogical progressivism, educational work in service of becoming as an ontological force.

Those ontopedagogical conservatives—who strive for and advocate for (whether or not they intend to) being, that is, those who amass the everyday and ordinary, normally ‘schooled’ *phulaks* force that compel their students, because it is their job, into an adherence to the Order of the World du jour (Being, God, Capital, next week’s special)—take this wall for granted. They rely, whether or not they realize it, on its security. These figures are normal humans living inconspicuously in the world. Again, they are just doing their job, the job that they’ve been taught to do, the job that their teachers were taught to do. They do not think that anything is wrong—I do not fault them—with the underlying ontologic on which they everyday movements rest and find stability. So moves the ontopedagogically conservative/hegemonic force of the normal. If ontopedagogical conservatives take this normal for granted and assume that, on the level of ontology (again, a level that a, relatively, few imperial minded totalitarians have set up, once and for all, as a catch-fall be-all) ‘it is what it is,’ then ontopedagogical progressives intervene so as to ask: why? why more? As such, they counter this normal force and do their work so as to pre-figure something new.

This, what amounts to being a, critical project must be perpetual. Otherwise, oppressive (which is to say normal, and often, in this world, ontologically conservative) forms of power run

the risk of creeping in—that is, people run the risk, if not on critical, incessant guard, of letting egological forms of power creep in so much so that they oppress—and worse—others for the sake of their own security—their own wall. Critical and democratic thinkers and practitioners live out their work as an experiment in social formation, one which requires constant evaluation and deliberation and adjustment—it is never complete once and for all. It cannot be. If some semblance of social justice is the name of their game, they are in it for the long haul. So goes the ongoingness of the ontopedagogical progressives, a trajectory which (and here is where I feel the pull to slow) threatens, without some other, additional, guarding gesture, to reach an absolute state of persistently trudging—even if, in the end, democratically, say—along. What might it mean to bring an end to this trudging? Or, at least, to be clear about its *actual end*? Where does that which cannot end end? Endlessness tragically—and humanely—unites onto-pedagogical conservatism and onto-pedagogical progressivism, even though they ultimately contradict each other inasmuch as the former movement relies and trusts in *what is*—being—and inasmuch as the latter as a movement commits its movers to what could come into being, *what might yet be*—becoming. Of course, there is the possibility of adopting some portion of each, and of bringing nuance into the picture. Is that what people do though? Is that the world humans have created? Aspirationally, sure, we can imagine people breaking out of ontopedagogical bipartisanship—but is that what actually happens here?

Pause.

And so, although I do find that they ultimately align at some fundamental level (neither admits an end), there are chasms of difference between ontopedagogical progressives and ontopedagogical conservatives for example, in their classroom movements, that is, in the way they shape and interact with the relational space between teacher and student. And even if they

don't 'look' different, at a fundamental level they are intended—indeed, the pedagogue intends, whether with knowledge or through ignorance—to bring about different outcomes, different kinds of social movement in their students through their teaching practice/preaching tactics: different worlds and ways of being (worlds in tension, conflict). In my experience, with ontological conservatism comes a hardness, harshness, strictness, and rigidity because its contours constitute a closed and clenching system; the goal is clear: oneness, order (in relation to the wall); some degree of sturdy force is necessary when it comes to pointing people toward this particular page. With ontological progressivism comes an openness to what could be, and its pedagogues' movements—the stances ontopedagogical progressives take—follow a similarly open tenor. Ontopedagogically progressive movements do not take the form of strict orders and discipline, at least not for the sake of some fixed, essential unfathomable entity worthy of preservation and capitulation. There is nevertheless a seriousness important to these pedagogue's movements; the stakes are high, for the conservative trend and norm of collapsing all into single static oneness constitutes a persistent threat. The goal is clear: movement, multiplicity, something else—new growth (in relation to the wall); indeed, a growing, moving wall.

Pause.

Where there is a pedagogue—whether conservative, progressive, or otherwise—so too is there/their pointing. Here pedagogues of all colors unite—they take their posting in relation to the ontological wall of the human world; indeed, education as such is a humanist project. Again, despite the radical differences between ontopedagogical conservatives and ontopedagogical progressives, an undergirding commonality, a feature of the deadlock of this ontologically instated world: education takes place on and for the sake of the wall between what is and is not, between the ontologically secure human and, as we will see black being (crossed out). Indeed,

and so goes the tension, education is an antiblack technology to which humans—to their peril and to their power; a precarious technology—have access. They have a choice as to how they relate to the wall, not if; to how they use the technology, not if. They might, with one hand and on the one hand, re-instate this sturdy wall and point their students toward its preservation. They might, with another and on another, re-shape it into a living wall and point their students toward its progression. They might do something else—nevertheless in relation to the wall: the end.

The pointing act of the pedagogue pierces, penetrates, cuts, and makes its impression by way of the wall. The force of the wall—the sharpness of its edge—defines the pedagogical act. Where there is a pedagogue, a *phulaks*, so too is there a point to their presence. And where there is a point, so too is there a pedagogue—an ontopedagogy—present.

The pointing/pointed act. More so, not only is the physical and metaphysical act of pointing an integral part of the pedagogical/*phulakosical* movement as such, but so too are the where, the why, and the how of this pointing. These features of the pointing contribute to any given pedagogue's ontological stance and standing in relation to their students. The claim—since I am keen on making sure my point ('the end' of this pedagogical movement), no matter how dull it is, as clear as possible—that I am trying to make thus far is this: the point of our pedagogical movements cannot take place outside of the influence and the force of the normal, that firm bed of being that always already is. *And* a pedagogue's movements impact and shape this normal; *to a point*.

The usual puzzle emerges, a critical conundrum. Self-convicted humans rely on the stability of such a puzzling ground—on paradox, contradiction, obscurity, and, ultimately, nonsense—for their sense of sure is-ness (it's so, so subtle—at least it feels that way to 'me'). This ground is also a wall, a wall which educational figures operate in relation to when they encounter

students, primarily because when a teacher encounters a student, they encounter a wall between beings, between beings born into a walled off world. Pedagogical movements happen in relation to this ontological wall, secure for some, rubble for others; remnants of a wall nevertheless, for now.

The final point—which has been entering the scene over the previous plurality pages, slowly, indelicately—I want to make in this chapter regards the onto-pedagogical movements I have described so far—progressivism and conservatism—and the similarities between what I see as—and indeed have experienced to be—the underlying pedagogical aims of their pointing, as well as how they ultimately—or at least tend to, in this knotted up, socially reproduced, and rootbound world—orient their students toward ontological terror. It has to do with endlessness. And humanness. And ontologicality. And a normally antiblack base and bane of operativity.

When I write about ontological terror, I both do and do not invoke the sense of terror about which, through which, in which Warren (2018) writes. And so, let's start there. What do I mean—and, critically, what do I not mean—when I call attention to, invoke, and point to ontological terror? It will be helpful to start with Warren's work, wherein I first (and finally) faced (and felt ready to face), at least in wording, this notion.

CHAPTER V: ONTOLOGICAL TERROR

2.3

And the piecing together of a response to the overwhelming hold of its felt presence, a safeguard which will not let go//a safeguard which will not let go

In chapter one, I describe ontological terror as related to three deeply seated existential anxieties: nothing, nothing being, and being nothing. This sense of ontological terror differs both slightly and critically from the racially violent/personally violating sense about which Calvin Warren, author of (my) *Ontological Terror*, writes. My particular *phulakos* (inner guardian; a story I tell my self; chapter six) thinking about ontological terror lags behind and runs parallel—following and watching—never quite intersecting but taking some of the same twists and turns, following a common route. Is it too much to suggest that they—my sense of ontological terror as well as Calvin’s—share a common root? I do not know.

Warren’s work on this topic integrally weds ontological terror to antiblackness, in both the racial and the existential senses. An ontological world—a world that is, a world in which many worlds are and might be, *ad infinita*—requires ontological terror. That is, a world that is—and takes its self to be—is, for the sake of prolonging solidity and coherence, terrified of not being. That is, they, inhabitants of this world, fear nothing (and being nothing, and nothing being), of the void, of darkness, of blackness. They fear nothing. At the very least, such a fear—which is at once a brash fearlessness—is and has become normal.

In *this* world, ontological terror evokes nothing and humans, imperial minded totalitarians, have linked blackness to nothing for the sake of their own sense of ontological totality and security—that firm bed of being that Plato, one prominent pedagogue, claimed to be so true, so full, and so full of truth. For the sake of this ground, the world that is must

simultaneously be antiblack, where ‘black,’ again, ‘means’ nothing: a void. The core of this world that I am describing—a human’s world—burns and churns, for the sake of relative stability on its surface (a firm bed from which to launch one’s project), in a cruel way. In a world rife with beings so sure that they are and shall always be, the possibility—the very thought—of nothing, nothing being, and being nothing, poses a deep, existential threat. Indeed, this human project revolves around existential crisis (the deep seated, pre- and non-human—spiritual—knowledge of a sure end and the human audacity to tell a story which nevertheless has either *none* or only *one*). As such, not only does the world hinge on being amidst the terror of being, but at its expense and *propelled*, set into motion, through this expenditure. The presence of ontological terror—a necessary (and hated) presence in this world—instigates, fuels, and invigorates antiblackness and antiblack practices, which is to say this world, its core (including the fact that *it has one*), and its normal—again surface level—operation.

What is antiblackness? Warren describes antiblackness as:

an accretion of practices, knowledge systems, and institutions designed to impose [*once and for all*] nothing onto blackness and the unending [*with no end*] domination/eradication of black presence *as* nothing incarnated. Put differently, antiblackness *is* anti-nothing. What is hated about blacks [*and blackness, in the human world at large*] is this nothing, the ontological terror, they must embody for the metaphysical world. (Warren, 2018, p. 9)

The metaphysical world is the world of being, the undeniably and unquestionably true world apparent at the enlightened mouth of the cave, that thread that Plato noticed and latched onto, strewn immortally—before and beyond him—throughout human time. Antiblackness is integral

to this world that Plato points to and through. (The questions arise: are you a part of this world? Put another way, are you a human?)

Some have taken strong action and have left lasting impressions in the world for the sake of such a belief, and such that this belief would be total, widespread, unanimous, universal. As such—through the hands of a human force—antiblackness (and antiblack ways of being, that is, being—that perplexing phenomenon) holds—by integrating *phulaks* force—this world together. Thus, where there is ontological terror, there is antiblackness inasmuch as blackness radiates this particular kind of terror—death, loss, chaos—in a world concerning its selves with the endless pursuit of realizing a pure white plan of building toward and rediscovering unaltered being, bliss, and paradise. Order. Optimism. To reiterate, this onto-metaphysical (a prefixation that Warren coins, pointing to an unspoken existential linkage, integration, between metaphysics and ontology) world requires such a shutting out of—a strong, persistent (and persistently patrolled) wall against—ontological terror. This world thus requires antiblackness, so that the solidity of its true, concrete, unquestionable, and objective ground and true foundation might remain: a reliable, normal force. Any thing that is in and that comes into this world succumbs to and enters, too, into the whims of such a force—into these environing conditions, a water which suffocates some and supports others—albeit unequally and inequitably.

More to the point, the ontological terror about which Warren writes is an arena into which black people (people deemed black)—and blackness in general in this antiblack world—have been physically, metaphysically, and ontometaphysically cast; that is, into, following Warren (2018), what Frantz Fanon (2008, originally published in 1967) might call a ‘zone of non-being.’ The historical and contemporary state of this world belie this antiblack reality. In just the modern era—riddled with the baggage of millennia of prehistoric examples of more of the

same human behavior—we can still see echoes and affirmations of the foundations of this world that is. The technological advances and explosions of the modern era that bleed into this contemporary present have been built (and again fueled) by ‘black’ labor. This labor is founded on and makes possible an unusually and unconscionably brutal tone; the past and present state of settler colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, mass incarceration, police brutality. Here I name only a few examples of the terror that blackness in this world faces and has faced in the wake of the enlightened human.

For the sake of such enlightenment, it is not enough to cast blackness out—no, it must be kept out. Contradictions abound. At the same time, it must be kept in—only to be cast out again. A precarious position. Indeed, ontological terror is the type of terror that the world forces blackness (the black part of ‘me’) to face so that it does not have to. A precarious—real, lived—position. Which is to say: antiblackness lingers not in some metaphysically hazy organization of forms and ideas, or, following Nahum Chandler (2014), a sort of ‘metaphysical infrastructure.’ This physical world—the very infrastructure of this world—of great empires, imperial regimes, economies of unrelenting capital re-lies on the lives, deaths, and labor of enslaved and displaced and despaced people; on beings stripped, ultimately, of the privileges of merely—as if it were only mere—being. This world relies on a sturdy paradox, an unalterable core in tension: reliant on, on the one hand, the incessant eradication of existential (bleeding into racial) blackness, and, on the other, the production of black being (crossed out; an ontological impossibility which must be cast and kept out) for the sake of the human’s security and self-certainty and optimism.

Empires fall. Revolutions unsettle. The pattern, I believe, remains: so long as humans commandeer the cutting edge, the integrity of this world as a total, momenting force requires antiblackness. What am I to do when facing this tension, indeed, when facing what I am painting

as an impasse? I know, the prospect is bleak. I may very well be speaking out of turn, too. Nevertheless, I tell this story to my self as an act of healing, an act of airing out and breathing through wounds, and of washing them in the earth, these here local grounds that I've been tending.

Tension radiates, an intensity. It twists the wound. Who has—to be as crystal clear as humanly possible—done the casting? It is not enough to suggest that blackness has been cast and occupies a non-ontological pitfall. Whose being burns and churns so? Humans', because of some humans for the sake of all humans. If the human is a social construct then the construction requires a toxic, terrible technology. The answer is humans—humanity. We have a problem that we cannot stop casting out, our mental muscles on a sure-fire track to solution, always, incessantly. I have a problem. The answer is: "I" has done the casting for the sake of its self. I have done the casting for the sake of my self.

The answer is complicated: some humans—and all humans, those who remain human after dehumanization—benefit. Some I's. To be human—to utter "I"—is to guard, protect, and serve being; is to be a guardian of one's own self, one's own humanness. And more complicated: imperial and imperial minded men have done this casting, have ingrained and perpetuated this habit of casting blackness into the zone of non-being. Imperial guardians (Sithole, 2020). That is, imperial ways of being, being a man, and being a guardian: strong historical, ontological precedents that prove challenging to make a break from (see chapters seven and eight). Along with this antiblack world, the legacy of the human bears an integral relationship to ontological terror and antiblackness. A secure sense of humanness and humanity—an ego-ing I—rests on these foundations. The imperial minded man creeps along and moves—a protective gait, a

normal function and force—in and for the world so as to define and reify the bounds he sets for him/his self, the law of his own land. What is outlaw? Who? You?

In an antiblack, onto-supremacist world, then, blackness, in my view and following Warren's lead, 'is' (crossed out) that outlaw and 'is' that entity/presence which lacks being and triggers ontological terror, a now expanded upon—growing—three-clawed fear: of nothing (before the wake, before the dawn), of being nothing (my death, the death of 'me'), of nothing being (the death of the world). Blackness is not. In an antiblack, onto-supremacist world, blackness cannot be. Indeed, blackness, a necessary backdrop to a world of meaning, significance, and being, 'represents'/represents (crossed out) nothing. As such it must bear the weight of the nothing that limits the hands of human creation, the nothing in which there is a merge and from which something emerges. Nothing: an abyss, a void, a chasm, the unknown and unknowable, a limitless expanse for these here hands.

Lest my writing be read romantically, I need to be clear that blackness—in this imperial, human world that I am describing—occupies a necessarily paradoxical position, between 'being' what Warren calls an included-exclusion and an excluded-inclusion. It lingers on the outskirts and at the interstices, locked into a perpetual plummet, constantly developing an unlimited momentum. This scene is *not* romantic. Blackness is not allowed to come. It is outlaw. It is not allowed to go. It is labor, fuel, tool. A "hated necessity" (Warren, 2018).

The echo from within the walls of the colonial school; it calcifies into an age-old, social logic: 'keep them close, by terrible tide and tether—*they* might propel *us* forward.'

For the sake of maintaining this bounded world—bounds supported and secured by a firm bed and wall of obdurate being and beings—blackness thus serves as a perfect fuel for the security (force) this world needs. It occupies, as such, an enormous amount of their attention.

And will continue to do so. It is impossible to expend nothing. A kernel of blackness, something of nothing (the writing and uttering and thinking of the ‘word’ ‘nothing’) always remains (Warren, 2018). The constancy of the enterprise holds a total, whole and enduring quality because of this peculiar fuel. For the sake of a firm ground of being, a sense of ontological security, a *phulakes* force, a metaphysical holocaust burns and churns. Blackness—black being (crossed out)—occupies an ontologically terrifying position.

In a more recent project, Warren (2022) describes (ontological) terror as that which “discloses itself as nonbeingness. Terror is what is developed when one realizes that one is not a being, that one does not have the security of being. That is what terror has been for blackness. It has been a realization of the foreclosure of ontological security” (Warren, Banks, Oventile, & Samson, 2022, p. 115). Ontological security is fundamental to those people who feel a sense of being a coherent self, and also of being a human being. This fundamentality requires an energy in order to stay intact, in order to remain fundamental, that is, in order to remain the same, to remain its self; a dark and heavy energy for the sake of the lightness of being.

In *Ontological Terror*, Warren (2018) (counter to what he thinks of as romantic-minded black humanists) makes the strong case that blackness and black people have been permanently outlawed from the territory of the human being. The human, then, is not a neutral qualifier, insofar as ontology is not neutral; ontology *is* (secure).

From a certain permanence the strong statement emerges: “I am a human”—such a being is spurred on by nothing, an interaction which orders coherence and meaning, and particularly lasting meaning. Terror, then, on the level of being looks like ontological insecurity, “onto-metaphysical homelessness” (Warren, 2018, p. 60), and poverty. Blackness and black people face and regularly—indeed, disproportionately—encounter conditions such as these because of

the ontological non-position that (white) humans have inter-personally (with intra-personal kickback) cast (black) humans into, deeming them and their color the evil outlaw. The (conceived as such) *clear*—that is *invisible* but taken to be surely there—boundary of the human being requires antiblackness in a world where people have been called and now claim blackness as a racial position. On this brink there patrols a (*phulaks*) force which for the sake of the integrity of the wall subjects blackness to interstitial damnation. Here we have a world where black people exist but are not able to enter realm of being, the world that is (Warren, 2018).

The sentiment I am trying to convey in my invocation of ontological terror is heavy. Can you feel this weight?...Are you a human being?...Are you an I?...Are you sure?...What makes you so sure?...What allows you to be so sure?

Pause.

What, then, might it mean to tell a different kind of story? Indeed, the paranormal *phulaks* wonders, “what might it mean to lower and relinquish my taut grip on this shield that I hold—that I’ve been told and taught to hold—so ardently?” What happens when I let go? When I am let go?

The story I aim to tell is neither whole—there are gaps, chasms, ravines, valleys of shadow and death—nor linear—dilations, schisms, jolts, and long, drawn out exposes abound in no particular order. I seek to respond differently to ontological terror, otherwise than the way this world wants—an insurmountable pressure amidst which I nevertheless take and make slow, deliberate, and spaced-out steps.

Inner-ontological Terror

As a way out, I want to take up a little more space in order to clarify my thinking regarding this personal sense of antiblackness—and the subsequent habit of de-spacing ontological terror—at this local level of self and self-relation.

The sense of ontological terror that I am personally pointing to is both similar to and different than Warren's notion. My sense of it runs parallel and lags behind; a human sense, an intentional positioning, meant to be forgotten and left in the dust. It did not begin—back there, behind me, in suppressed memory. No, it's always been there—the sort of internal drone (a toned down scream) that once heard convinces me it's always been there, right there. The terror of being—ontological terror, before it is cast out and onto people, objects, and things deemed black, erupts within a psyche that in the face of fear of the dead-end deems its self and soul secure—immortal—and encased in white light; it emerges within a mind that thinks of and conceptualizes its self as—convinced, now, of its endlessness—pure and whole, complete and concrete. Or, if it does not imagine its self quite yet there, such a self nevertheless aspires and pushes toward perfection—even if not so named—as such, believing it possible. There moves another pattern across the micro- and macro-cosmos. Antiblackness at large is different and similar to antiblackness at a local—here, in and regarding 'me'—level. Indeed, these existential and racial operations look different in the social—the interpersonal—than in the personal—the intra-personal.

Here in the intra-personal I point to antiblackness in one's own self-storying, that is, in my self's relation to the (imperial minded man's) black, unknown, dark, unknowable aspect of this here being—so conceived as my own local, particular, personal, and protected realm. The personal and the social inform each other. Antiblack self-relationality sets a precedent for and

participates in the formation of an antiblack world, a world of antiblackness at large; wholly, totally. This local level of ontological terror, then, is what I point to with my pedagogical movement (and in order to do such a pointing, I need to do some disintegrating and prefiguring, affixing), and in particular to antiblack habits of relating to self (and student). I find ingrained in my normal state a conglomeration of habits and dispositions which, at their base, effectively serve to de-space the terror of the ontological order, what I think of as the onset of antiblack movement.

This local level is important. This local level—at the very least—is where I claim—*a la* Dewey—pedagogues (guardian, *phulaks* figures, which taken together comprise a *large force*, a force at large) do their work, where they manage their and their students’ boundaries, and where and how they point their students in relation to the wall that is, the wall of ontological security.

Again, Warren asserts that “terror is what is developed when one realizes that one is not a being, that one does not have the security of being. That is what terror has been for blackness” (Warren, 2022, p. 115). In this description, then, not only do black people experience terror as such, but also, I will claim, does blackness—that which is deemed and carries the weight of being (crossed out) black in the world—generally. Thus, facing ontological terror—the terror of nonbeingness—is not something that *only* black people face.

So too, I make the precarious claim, do people who feel as if their existential condition somehow incorporates or includes or bears a relationship to—even if not in a racialized sense (although I know such a ferreting apart is not without issue and problem)—blackness, black being (crossed out), whether that be by witnessing and experiencing trauma, or loss, or poverty, or violence, or abuse, or whatever throughout the course of one’s life. Here, again, I follow

Warren and the history of the human world which has positioned blackness, at a fundamental level, as constituting nothing, as nothing constituted.

There is, of course, a difference between being black and feeling as if one bears a relationship to blackness. I claim to occupy only the latter position. My belief and claim that blackness as an existential presence can find its way into the lives of people who are not black takes root in the wisdom of Fred Moten. He writes:

...blackness is present...at its own making and [all] the people who are called black are given in to that presence, which exceeds them. Ultimately, the *paraontological* force that is transmitted in the long chain of life and death performances...is horribly misunderstood if it is understood as exclusive. Everyone whom blackness claims, which is to say everyone, can claim blackness. (Moten, 2008, p. 1746, emphasis mine)

The paraontological force that Moten (2008) invokes is blackness. The para- prefix signifies, then, that blackness operates ontologically alongside of, parallel to, or with some indeterminable space between (white) ontology, the locus of the human. I return to the point of the ‘para-’ elsewhere.

For what it’s worth, regarding para-ontology, Warren (2017) understands blackness differently. Blackness, in his view, has not even been granted para-access to the ontological machine. Normal human operativity expends blackness from the very outset (in the first place), forcing it into submission as a tool—blackness on this view presupposes the very notion of the normal inasmuch as it constitutes the fuel—the expendable materials, an endless abyssal blackness—necessary for the forthcoming fire. Blackness is, in Warren’s view, always already cast out such that the human being might always already be—an innate preeminence that goes back, and back, and back in time to divine, perfect, obdurate origination.

Warren (2018) crosses out ‘being’ in the phrase ‘black being’ (crossed out) to signify what cannot be signified: the site (the sight) of human being wiping and crossing out of blackness’s being. This move occurs in the dark. It would not even be correct to call this entanglement a nonrelation. It is too vicious and violent to deem it mere detachment—there burns and churns a metaphysical holocaust which requires unrelenting labor, equipment, bodies, tools, and fuel. The permanent web of interconnectivity—“a long chain of life and death performances” (Moten, 2008)—suffocates nothing. Following Warren, this world, again, requires that blackness serve as the energetic tool which brings the fibers together into the threads, and the threads together into the tightly woven—and now knotted—fabric; a plane which rests on blackness but leaves no space for it between the very fibers of its being. In this operation, blackness is an integral component to the structure and bringing about of this structure but is not granted a rite of passage and participation; it is forever outside—through perverted teasing deluded into thinking that it will one day be allowed in. It simply not allowed—I won’t allow it. For the sake of the structure, of a coherent conscious thread, blackness must continue to serve. The structure is built upon its service, and requires it *by force*—inner *phulakos*, a personal pedagogy. The very act of building a solid, obdurate, lasting structure—consistency—founds its self built upon such an antiblack terrain, the surface of the world. First steps begin here.

Nevertheless, despite the discrepancy between thinkers and their takes on terms, the importance of the quote remains. Taking Moten and Warren together, blackness is (crossed out) present. Some people—black beings (crossed out)—have been cast into this presence which claims them and which they now claim. Others—human beings—find in their selves in relation to a lingering black residue—a remnant of the casting out, a parcel of a presence (perhaps an absence)—no less cast out, no less spent, no less integral, or necessary, or hated. Again, I do not

claim to be black, to know what it is like to be black. Rather, I claim to bear a relationship to blackness, interpersonally and intra-personally. To this inner sense of antiblack relationality, I turn in the next part, the storyteller, to ways I feel that I have been taught—through *phulakos* and my teachers' pedagogical movements—to narrate my own self experience, that is, ways that I feel I have been taught to shape my self. Some stories have stuck, others I had forgotten, until, that is, I took a moment to pause, breathe, slow down, and take a look around.

Looking around

It is challenging to point at what I have been trying to point at all along: at this nothing, this ontological terror, this nonbeingness that feels like it is, on some deep level, both integrally a part of and radically apart from me. It is particularly hard to point in such a way that does not fuel this horrific fire. In fact, I believe it is impossible to point in such a way—in a way which does not fuel, which does not expend blackness in the process, at least for 'me.' To point is to offer a spark, is to pass a spark through fuel.

That is, antiblackness, at least for e-ducators, like *phulakes*—posted on the boundary between what is and is not (to be)—is inescapable. Human education is one of the antiblack technologies about which Warren writes. Teachers, at the fundamental level of their work, make pointing gestures out into the void: the realm between them and their student, the zone of contact, in and through that liminality. They use this space. They poke holes through their own fabric and pierce and cut with a sharp edge—a culmination of points—through nothing, relentlessly. Teachers, my claim, when faced with this deadlock—that they necessarily participate in perpetuating the antiblack state of the world—need not de-space the ontological terror that arrives. I need not de-space it, the terror of nothing, of being nothing, and of nothing

being. The teacher need not de-space the dread that accompanies existential crises, worries that all of this work is good for nothing; that there really is no way out; that *this* is good for nothing.

If we can learn anything from the state of the world, it is that there *is* something—nothing (threatens to) stop people from this deeply-seated existential notion—and that this something is worthy of attention. People tend to fall into patterns along this fault line: some seek to preserve it, others to progress it. These are, at least, the patterns I have observed.

Here in this work, two great, gargantuan forces contend; unfairly, inequitably. They vie for prominence, for more of their own. Movements work like this: they start small and gain a momentum. They must—movement is how things change, or, is at least a part. Movement in this world begins from an imperially settled ground, at least for humans like ‘me.’ The antiblack world of which ‘I’ am a part operates for the sake wasting the terror of nothing/blackness away, and so pursues the obliteration of nothing, consuming all. Blackness as such must prove consistent so that this machine might move along. The white human requires that blackness occupy this paradoxical position, an included-exclusion/excluded-inclusion, simultaneously. Here, called nothing, it—blackness—is forced to play the role of fuel for a bright, enlightened machinery. It is impossible to expend nothing—all that is (crossed out) (void), and so this pinnacle may gleam.

We know how this happened. Some—a vocal, brutal minority of—humans, for the sake of their own self-same story, have deemed some humans black, a dehumanizing gesture. In doing so they unalterably redefine—defining for the first time, once and for all, *in the first place*—the human concept, constructing for their sense of self a boundless landscape of intricate, antiblack walls, all in service of protecting a coherent, immortal soul; ordered, endless, everlasting. The imperial minded man and his protective gait order this world, the dominant conscious culture, the

prevailing mode of thought and of being. They have given the world a terrifying order: being costs nothing.

People now claim blackness—they live it. It nevertheless lingers with-in-to the interstices—an in-between, impossible place. Blackness, then, persists—a powerful force; technically ‘free,’ no longer enslaved in the same old ways—free to serve as *techne*, a tool. Freedom for blackness is contingent—as soon as it incurs upon a white sense of security, cast-out-law. Black people free it—they free their selves and each other—a liberation which is not free, indeed, it costs something (a cruel equation), and continues to cost something.

Warren (2018) points to ‘the free black,’ a tense term, indeed, “...within its structure[,] it brings two disparate grammars into collusion and produces an ontological catastrophe. The term *black* is precisely the puzzle, the great abyss, of something outside the precincts of ontology. It is a metaphysical invention, void of Being, for the purpose of securing Being for the human....It is *nothing*—the nonhuman, equipment, and the mysterious” (p. 15). Tension radiates at the prospect, then, of freeing blackness as such. The world becomes unsettled at the prospect of blackness that is free, and so at large and at local humans incarcerate. Without the imprisonment of blackness, the human being can not be what it has been told it ought to be, which means ‘I’—the *first place* of the human—can not be what it has told its self it ought to be.

For the human as such, creative as they—some of them for the sake of all—have been, to be, blackness can not. Such are the terms of the world that is. Here lies the deadlock. There is no way out for ‘me.’ I write throughout this project in response to ontological terror—I experiment with slowness, space, and tension. I practice personally freeing the blackness in me, so as to slow, allow space, and sit with the tension that arises.

Indeed, the question I ask my self/the question that guides this project is: Given this state of the world, how am I to respond? So far, I have pieced this much together: through my own pedagogical movement, I slow so as to cease and call into question my mindless habits of black capture and expenditure for my own sake, for the propulsion of ‘me’ through space and time. At best, I seek to decrease the speed of this quenching that will, as long as I am, continue to happen, and to disintegrate the integrity of its certainty, its inevitability, its destiny, not for the sake of solution, resolution, or revolution, but, again, for the purpose of ending what I can—my small part in the thoughtless perpetuation of this grand machine—so that I might endure what I cannot—the grand machinery—end. Through my teaching practice, I dis-integrate my self. This is the story I am beginning to tell my self, this story of a new tenor, at least for *me*. Indeed, it is not the one that I have tended to be told; that I tended to hear; that I have heard.

To guard is to teach is to tell a story

Ontopedagogical conservatism has a place/takes up space in this world. Ontopedagogical progressivism has a place/takes up space in this world. In addition, I would like to let there be some space in the midst of the eternal conflict between these two forces, these two energies. Let there be space. Let there be movement. Let there be space between movements: stories I am telling my self. I am not doing one thing. I am telling my self and my students a different story.

As I have been discussing pedagogical traditions and movements that I deem ontologically conservative and progressive, I have been trying to suggest, in my own paranormal *phulakos* pointing fashion, that the point of a pedagogical movement—the pointedness (the “narrative character”; Freire, 1996, p. 44) of a pedagogue’s relationship to the student—carries a great deal of weight. It leaves an impact, and brings with it an inertia, an energy that the student then finds their self forced to contend with. They bring it home with them, too, home in at least

two senses: a place of residence away from the classroom, away from formal educational activity; and a place of psychic privacy, one's own inner world, interiority. On my own part then—that is, as for my intention: Let there be space. Let there be movement. Let there be space between movements.

In this Pedagogue part, I have shown that the point and the pointing of a pedagogical movement matter; they shape the world, inasmuch as on a local level they shape the way students shape their selves (in relation to the wall that always already is, to the force of the normal, a world into which they were born, a birth over which they had no say/have little say). Teachers tell their students stories about the fundamental fabric of the world through their pedagogical movements, the pointing gestures they make in relation to those under their purview, those for whom they are responsible.

I am not doing one thing. The point of these chapters about and through pedagogy, the pedagogue—where they point—is the stories that these educational figures, through their habits and practice, tell and teach to their students.

I have been pointing to the stories, and, indeed, have been telling my own. I have pointed to two stories that tend to prevail in this world, or, at the very least, which have prevailed in my world. Before getting on and into the sort of story I would like to hear and tell more of—indeed, that I am practicing through this writing as a form of pedagogy, paranormal *phulakos*—it is worth sitting with this storytelling theme. In the following chapter, I loop storytellers into our pedagogical-*phulakos* mix.

If, as I claim, ontopedagogical conservatives and progressives de-space ontological terror, where does the story-telling portion come in? Their ontopedagogical movement and the point they make with this movement tells a story. If this antiblack state of the world is what there

is, and if this antiblack force constitutes, as I claim, a wall between what is (antiblack) and what is black, then what sort of force do teachers take up, organize, and put out in response? How do they orient their selves toward this wall, and their students? What do they ask of them in the face of the formidable? Is the formidable cast out in the first place? Do they even know they are here? Out here on this wall?

Both of the pedagogical patterns that I have discussed in this chapter tell stories that effectively serve to de-space ontological terror, albeit in different ways, albeit to the same, absolute (I worry), extent. Ontopedagogical conservatives, by pointing their students' attentions to some naturally endowed order of things, nonthings, world, soul, whatever, leave no space for ontological terror, the possibility of blackness, and the three associated anxieties that I am persistently bringing up: nothing, nothing being, and being nothing. Those pedagogues who point their students toward the Order of God require unquestioning loyalty to a force—God—that is. Those pedagogues who point their students toward the Order of Capital, by falling in line with the institutional trends of the school and those who shape its walls, send messages to their students which reify capitulation to the way things are, in this case economically. Ontological terror has no place here. These pedagogues' movements point back to 'before,' and as we have learned from Plato the ontological conservative, anything 'after' runs the risk of corrupting that pristine prime time. For ontopedagogical conservatives, ontological terror is not even considered. They deny its presence and damn it from the outset. It constitutes a threat to the realization of the ideal, and must be kept out. These pedagogues tell a part of the story of the state of the world.

Ontopedagogical progressives, by pointing their students' attention toward ongoing processes and ways of organizing and thinking about transformation in and for the world, run the risk of transmitting a habit—in those who hear and listening keenly to their stories (their

ontopedagogical narrativity)—that would, when practiced, serve to, like their conservative counterparts, de-space ontological terror. These progressive pedagogues leave no space for ontological terror inasmuch as their project has no end. They must go on, for they must continually contend with the threat of the state, settled ground, corrupt, toxic power. If these projects do have an end, it is their endlessness, and their capacity to overcome, through becoming as an ontological force, any adversary. Ontopedagogical progressives point to and through practices of everlasting energy. Critical pedagogical projects require something like a Freirean notion of ongoing praxis. Without such incessant guard, abuses of power threaten to creep in. Those pedagogues who advocate for widespread democratic participation, sensibilities, habits, and dispositions effectively ask their students to engage with the world in a continually experimental act, that is, as flexible, adaptable democratic citizens, where ‘democracy’ as a social formation entails constant, emergent renewal and assessment on a regular basis. These ontologically progressive pedagogues tell a part of the story of the state of the world.

Both kinds of pedagogues point their students in relation to the antiblack wall that undergirds and protects the boundless boundaries of this human world. Pedagogical acts happen in relation to this wall. Teachers teach habits that have an ontological impact, that happen in relation to this wall between the ontologically secure and the ontologically terrifying. Again, the question undergirding this project is “how?” Do they secure and so sharpen this wall? Do they take the wall down? Do they dull its edge, allowing the elements to dismantle its integrity slowly, and over time? Do they make multiple movements? Do they sit still?

How: ontopedagogical conservatives teach habits that cast out ontological terror outright and indeed effectively expends the terror for the sake of securing—and asserting that there surely exists—a ‘safe’ and ‘known’ wall. Ontopedagogical progressives teach habits that perpetuate

incessant movement, continual experimentation, an ongoing process of reflection and action. As such, they tell their students a story that has no end—the movement beyond the ways of the world warrants incessance—and which effectively overcomes ontological terror by leaving little space for it.

When it comes to teaching habits and the ways teachers teach habits that orient their students in relation to the fundamental, most normal wall between inside and out and thus in relation to ontology and ontological terror, ontopedagogues of both the conservative and progressive—when taken up solely, singularly—teach habits that point students toward an absolute. At the very least, they tell an absolute story. On the one hand, ontopedagogical conservatives point students toward what will never not be, that inherent, latent, essential quality—the ‘first,’ an absolute. And on the other, ontopedagogical progressives point students toward a process of transformation (stagnation is not an option when it comes to this particular cruel and brutal world—it festers, rots, and withers away) *without end*, which, as such, belies an absolute flair.

Epilogue

Foreshadow: it is a symptom—and even if unintended, a tendency—of my one-track-mindedness to paint these ontological stances as if they were discrete categories and that any given person, pedagogue, assumes only one, or even one at a time. Such is the singular story that I have heard and thus tell, the story that overwhelms my sense of the world, the story which founds and confounds—a brutal buoying—my ontological understanding. I do not want to continue to tell my self such a singular, either-or sort of story. Nor do I want to tell a story that has no end, that becomes for ever and for ever only—a story of both-ands, and of *both* both-ands *and* either-ors, to infinity. There must be something else, another way. Even if not out, there

must be a way in—a new way in, for me. And so in partial response to the primary question which guides this study—what am I to do in response/in the face of what feel like, for me, formidable, bleak odds: antiblack ontological deadlock—I ultimately, through these aspirational—and optimistic, I will admit—acts of guardianship and teaching, tell a story, a story both new and old to me. I tell it to my self and I tell it to my students.

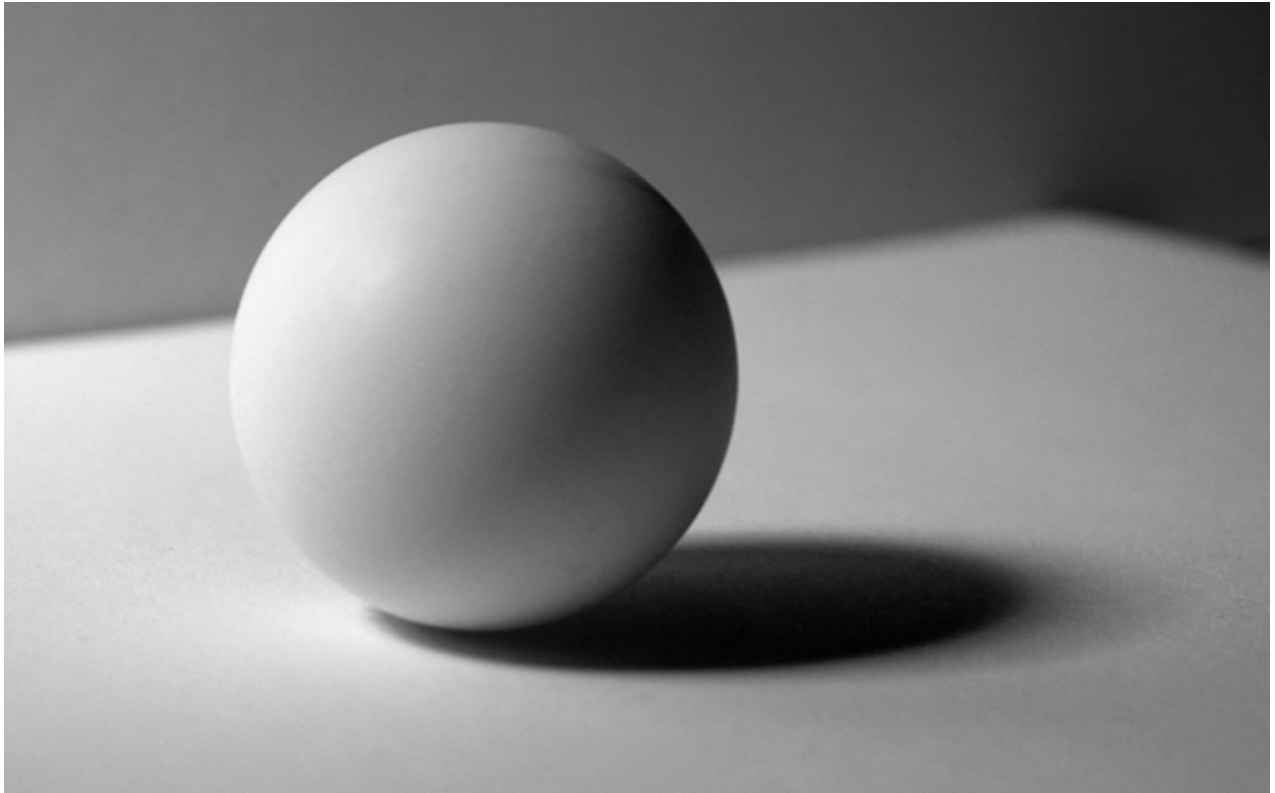
My hope?

My large—beyond me—hope: something else, space, movement, space between movements. My here and now hope: with-standing. My local hope: community, being a part of community, and feeling that one is—I am—not alone—and indeed that one is—I am—not, and never is or was, really only one, but necessarily multiple. That is, I am—I take my self to be, the story I tell my self falls from the mouth—amidst multiplicity: tension, pieces, tension between pieces, pieces in tension.

I am alone here. I am not alone here. I am in between.

Interlude Three

Figure 4. An awakened state, citation: open access image//original location lost



Part Three, The Storyteller

Plato's Socrates: "Well, think about the soul in the same way. When it focuses on something that is illuminated both by truth and by *what is*, it understands, knows, and manifestly possesses understanding. But when it focuses on what is mixed with obscurity, on *what comes to be* and *passes away*, it believes and is dimmed, changes its belief this way and that, and seems bereft of understanding" (*Republic*, 508d, emphasis mine)

"A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally *narrative* character. This relationship [overwhelmingly] involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being

narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness”
(Freire, 1996, p. 44)

3.0—Prelude to The Storyteller

At four years old, I walk in front of my mother down the sidewalk in our yard toward North street: a routine, retrieving the morning mail. En route, I would lose my footing, trip, fall, wail, and tantrum: “I am so stupid!” And she would scold me, “you are not stupid. Be careful about the things that you say about your-self. The things we tell our selves matter.”

It has taken me years—decades—and deaths to remember and realize the impact that being told such a—what I am thinking of as a—‘story’ (words with a point; words and communication meant to convey and carry something) in these vulnerable moments would have/has had on me. My mother told me a story, one pertaining to my own, inner narrativity—the things I tell my self, the way I think about my self. Needless to say—and even without these very spoken words—she left a lasting, psychic (*phulakos*) impression: she had her hands in establishing this foundational element of ‘me.’ That is, she shaped my psychic experience by intervening in these sensitive moments of cruelty towards my self and, instead, offered dignity—self-respect—as a possibility.

She posted herself as an interventive guardian; she offered forth a teaching. Ultimately, she told me a story. Repeatedly. Whenever she was around and able to hear me carelessly disrespecting my self, she would rebuke it. Such a story conveys what I am thinking of as an ontopedagogically disintegrating narrative thread and undertone. Such a story set a precedent for my being and ceasing to be in the world thereafter; for this very project. Following her complicated lead, I now practice, in addition to those other, more prevalent stories that I have heard throughout my interfacing with this world (of being, of becoming), a different kind of self-

storying, teaching, and guarding—that is, I point to and in this project through beceasing: an onto-pedagogical stance and movement.

And she pointed me toward my inner guardian(s)—that watcher at the gate between my self and the world, between my self and me—not in a sense that I should bow at the figure’s feet and obey its every beck and call, nor that I should lose my self in infinity. She pointed me toward an inner sense of tension—an intensity—and invited me to let there be space between feeling and thought and speech and act. She invited me to slow, pause, ponder, and think about what I wanted to say, about how I wanted to respond in the face of the formidable, indeed, in the face of falling and feelings—the shame, at least—associated with falling. Her story—a guiding hand—pointed me toward the possibility of allowing space to arrive and remain.

Of course, such space would not nullify the pain—the feelings, in space, remain. It need not, for it would nevertheless encourage and engender a capacity for sitting with the fact that things happen, that people fall, and that there are other ways to respond than those that resort to outright, blame-casting, brutal cruelty. In the crevice, the cobwebbed corner of this story that my mother told me, there rings an echo: although there are pressures to act in such ways, I—here and now, locally—need not fuel it, need not only fuel it; by letting space arrive and remain—between my gut and my reaction—there is the possibility for something else: I need not story my self in such a brash way—I need not sew into the soil of this here first place seeds of anger and of toil. I can tell my self a different story; I can story my self differently.

Chapter goals, project goals: a lead in from a ways in

As with parts one and two thus far, I return in the beginning of this third part, in chapter six, to Plato’s *Republic* in order to bring storytellers into the *phulakos* and pedagogy conversation as I have thus far pointed to and through it. Here, at a critical point in the dialogue,

Plato brings up storytellers and storytelling in both the social (interpersonal) and the personal (that is, intrapersonal) senses. In each sense there lies a close connection to guardianship (*phulakos*) and education. Indeed, this critical point and space and scene is the same one that I have been slowing down and sitting with all along: the scene of the guardians' arrival and the, according to Plato, immediate call for their education, a call that they—these *phulakes*—and their convoluted selves/souls bring/bear.

To be clear, in making this connection between *phulakes*, pedagogues, and storytellers (which we might also think of as myth-agogues), Plato does not make the jumps that am making. I bound off of the way of thinking that he has inscribed in the *Republic*, as well as off the mark that my studying his work has left me with. Here again, in making this unbound/rebound, I undertake the work that Miller (1985) calls for—of entering as interlocutor into the dialogue and formulating a response to the openings the dialogue makes possible. Plato's positioning of these three figures—the storyteller, the educator, and the *phulaks*—in such close proximity motivates me not only to connect them but to take them for granted as connected in their uniquely human flair. The wall I point to connects them. The walls of Plato's *Republic* confine and conscript them. Indeed, what ties and binds them together is the wall about and within (and perhaps despite) which they all do their work, the wall according to which they all take their stances and make their movements. I slow so as to enter into an ancient, human conversation. What do I have to say as a result of this long, slow study?

What is this project if not a response? A response to teachers? My teachers? In these ranks of guiding, *phulaks* figures, Plato is a profound guardian for me and my way of thinking. And not only, as I demonstrate throughout this part and in particular in chapter seven, have I witnessed his flair in my engaged study of his thinking, but also in my everyday encounters with

normal institutions, like the (Pentecostal; evangelical) church and the (rural, public, U.S.) school (and, of course, the university—a discussion reserved for a future project, re: study; Harney and Moten, 2013). Plato's (and not only Plato, but *philosophical figures like him—enlightened mouths telling stories*) particularly *human* thinking and the impression it leaves and has left on those who have studied it informs this world; indeed, the world of the human. I value him and his work for its authenticity—he has a keen sense of what it means to be a human, and of some of the problems that humans have brought to their world. Indeed, how they have shaped it and their selves in relation to it. Its inhabitants—pioneers, settlers—have a habit of unabashedly and uncritically loving and longing for some singular sense of hierarchical, top-down social and personal order; whether it be ontological, theological, economological; tenets of imperial minded manhood, the *kosmos* he feels he needs to bring down—a white, purifying, cleansing weathering—upon the earth.

In my return again to Plato, I attempt to bring the slow—sitting with the tension—pace that I bring to my studying his work to, in addition, my practice of storytelling—that is, through writing and these here pedagogical, *phulakos* movements. I intend to make an ontologically disintegrating gesture, that is, to allow space to arrive and to remain. My hope is to make possible, if not for you then at the very least for me, a practice of sitting with the tension of impasse and impossibility (I cannot escape this teacher that, at once, appears to have had a strong influence on the opening (progressing) of my mind, and, when distilled through others, on the closing (conserving) of my mind, and, when refused (bounded off of, rebounded), on the disintegration of my mind), the tension that space—and an invitation to pause, move, and breathe—in a de-spacing—and suffocatingly supportive in the sense that, reliably, it is always already there—world engenders.

I have strewn tension and the strange space that surrounds it all throughout this project. For better or worse, it follows me here and I don't know what else to do with it other than put it into words. I am experimenting with a new—to me—(drawing from an old story) kind of narration; paranormal *phulakos*. I tell this story and practice this different kind of storying from an intentional stance and standing, in the same way that any storyteller, and whatever story they tell (to their selves and to their audience), takes place from a stance. It takes place from an understanding that they can't not bring to the world that is a wall that they create with their words. Because this world—my world, the world 'of me'—is walled (for it to be, there must *be* a wall), any story and any narrative arc—even if arcless, odd, avant-garde—will, especially those with points ('the moral of the story'), bear a relationship to the wall of being that always already is. That the world is ontologically deadlocked is as such, of course, a story; a pessimistic, nihilistic one. I am not beyond either of these—versions of the same—deadlock. My pointing to and through them does not preclude any separation, freedom, objective understanding, detachment, claim to absolute truth, to rightness; the opposite is true. For indeed, only because I am so immersed in this (every)thing—this water that has never not held me, this fabric of the universe that has never not integrated my being—am I able to see that I can only work within. I learned to keep it in the lines. I learned that—and really I always knew that—I am stuck here in these walls.

I do not deem this detail unworkable. Boundaries, after all, are important. And, at the same time, humans have abused and broken and betrayed them, in ways so brutal that the damage is done and cannot be undone. It feels that way to me. The 'idea'—their form, their underlying premise, notion—of them, boundaries and this wall that I point to and through time and again, is not going anywhere. At least, until I am gone. For, at the very least, human

consciousness—this here apparatus of thought that gently guides my piecing together of words into writing and your piecing together of words into reading—as such requires not only a boundary but also border security, an inner *phulaks* configuration. Need there be a way out? The harsh boundary at the brink moves and morphs, now mirroring the walls in which you sit, read, write; the walls in which you study. Indeed, the walls provide the security to get this sort of deep work done; these walls secure the halls of the universe/university/universe-city.

In the face of the inescapable situation that nevertheless proves workable, endurable, not only do I dis-integrate my self, but also the story that I am telling and also the way I tell the story. In this part and in this project, I weave (and have been weaving) multiple ‘stories’ in and out of these words, and different storytelling figures (*personae*), with different points and ways of moving. Inasmuch as Plato, pessimism, and nihilism guide my thinking and inform the several-storied and -surfaced—dis-integrating and dis-integrating—story I seek to tell and give some space to here, I nevertheless find motivation and hope, too, in pragmatism—a progressive story—and find some sense of grounding in a Zen Buddhist tradition—a conservative-ish story. Let’s get on with the outline; I am not doing one thing, nor telling one story, nor telling these stories in the same way—may it meet you like a clusterfuck, a calamity of narrativity, with a point.

And so, to reiterate, in chapter six, the first part of this storytelling part, we begin by looking at what I am thinking of as the social—interpersonal—example and importance of storytelling in Plato’s *Republic* as it relates to bringing about the class of *phulakes* and *phulakos* (in the first place, a point of no return thereafter) and, thus, the bringing about of/need for (their) education. Here my hope is, again, to elucidate again, with ‘something else’ coming into the fold, the connection between wall-managing figures that I see in Plato’s *Republic* thinking: namely,

that guardianship, teaching, and storytelling share something like a conceptual weddedness *not only* in his *Republic* thinking and world (context) but very much so still in *this Platonically*, which is to say *anthrop-onto-logically, in-formed* world. This cadre of boundary managing figurines are part of a world Plato both pre-scribes/wields and de-scribes/notices in the world around him, and which I cannot help but also notice, having spent so much time in deep, human, and self-reflective study, and wield in the world around me, in the world in me, and in the in between.

This ‘something else’ that I bring to this section branches and precipitates from the ‘inner ontological terror’ talk that I include in chapter five. For with the advent of the storyteller—the mythagogue, a leader by way of *mythos* (a leader of mythic proportion)—in the *phulaks*/pedagogy connection, I am able to talk about the aforementioned ‘inner guardian’ or the ‘personal pedagogue’ *as a form of inner, personal narration* and/or storytelling. Which is to say: the story I tell my self is an act of personal pedagogy, of guardianship not of and over one thing, but several: my self, my boundaries, and the boundaries—and the right to self-boundary-management, to determine whether or not ‘I’ want to tell my self a story that centers boundaries, that is necessarily bounded—of others that I feel are worth defending, even if defending means just letting people do their thing insofar as ‘their thing’ does not entail an unsolicited infringement upon someone else’s ‘thing.’ It isn’t that simple, though. This world in which I live is not only one of boundaries, of boundary security, but of boundaries already having been crossed, time and time again, in basic and mundane ways (climbing over a fence and running through a neighbors’ yard—marked ‘no trespassing’—when I was a kid, playing ‘hunt’ at night with my friends). And in brutal ways (barreling through and knocking one of my classmates on the football team down and out, for the sake of ‘practice’). And beyond brutal—

unconscionable/in-human and dehumanizing at the hands of the human; take a hard look at human history—ways.

The questions then arise, with the turn in this chapter to both the interpersonal and the intrapersonal, and with the realization and understanding of the fact of the narrative quality *of me*, of my humanly conscious, narrative-driving experience, and of this narrativity constituting a form of guardianship, of *phulakos*: what story do I tell my self and how do I protect my self with this story? To what extent do I protect my self? And what and who gets expended in the process? How do I shape the wall between my self and the world? My hope is that with this project thus far, the multiple pieces that I have haphazardly thrown together will begin to create a bit of an image, and that you will begin to be able to call to your imagination a shape of sorts, the shape that I am going for, the sort of shape that undermines my very going for(ward), the shape I bring as an addition into my ordinary (un)conscious manifold.

I write, I am realizing as I move this project and as this project moves me, so as to consider and care for the story I tell my self and for the stories that people tell their selves through their ways of thinking. I write as a way of re-shaping my idea of self, a local practice of self-storying, a personal pedagogy, para-normal *phulakos*, and I write to encourage my readers to listen to their wall and what it asks of them. My way of ‘caring’? Pointing to the wall—is it settled? Are you out there? Do you know you’re out there?

I feel keenly sensitive—perhaps because of the stories that I have been told, the stories I have heard, the way I heard them—to that fact that the stories, when they are told (that is, in the telling) and when they are heard and read (that is, in the hearing and in the reading), leave an impression. An echo: Do they serve to preserve the *status quo*? Do they make and take space for transformation? Do they dis-integrate so as to allow space to arrive and remain? A combination?

Do they do something else? Regardless, stories hit home, here and now, on a local level. A horde of stories then, when taken together, feed into energetic currents—conservative, progressive, whatever—at large that lead to social solidification, social movement. Plato was keenly aware of this local to large, large to local interplaying—‘cultural’ really—phenomenon. He situates his guardian class to serve as ‘supervisors’ of the stories that people tell in the city, and, indeed, of the stories that people tell their selves, as leaders and inspectors of the builders of the cultural foundations of the city, and of the souls of the people in that city. I return to this point later on.

All of this is to say, the stories people hear from the outside shape the stories they tell their selves. Or, at the very least, the stories that I hear from the outside—from others—shape the stories I tell my self. The pedagogical counterpart bursts in. Stories have an educational potential, an instructive energy. That is, the story my teachers have told me, that my guardians have told me, shape—in my becoming a teacher—the story that I tell my students (they—my *phulakes*—have set a precedent, an example to follow, an example to leave behind). The stories that I hear, they shape the story that I tell my self, that I tell my students. This particular story: I tell it this way because of you—a conglomeration of you, over time, cited in subtle ways. Faced with such a force, I cannot do one thing.

A harshness bursts through. I claim that I am not doing one thing, so in my writing you will see that I do them all—all the things I claim to do—at once; catastrophe, impatience, stuck in the moment, senses cut short, refusing to think (only, or even primarily) about the larger picture when this local context needs so much work. I think about and through the world in the way that I do because of my teachers, my storytellers, my guardians, and the impression they have left on and with me—can’t you tell? You have taught me to think about my role in society—the role that I am called to play; my role as a... Can’t you tell? That I am little more

than this assemblage of other-informed pieces, held together only by this here singular soul? I am in a perennial conflict with Plato—the guardian will not let go. The guardian will not let go.

An additional question, pointing (the long way) to chapter seven, arises: if, as I show, Plato is so concerned about the sorts of stories that the people in ‘his’ city would hear, and about the stories that especially his guardians—storytelling figures—would hear and thus pass on to (and through) their pupils, what stories does Plato tell? In the piecing together of the *Republic*, what stories—overt, in-between, otherwise—does Plato choose to incorporate into the text? Indeed, what does he choose to inscribe so as to leave a millennial and more impression? Did he want to leave the sort of impression that he did? Did he leave all that deep of an impression? And what about breadth? Am I the only one who has been mesmerized by Plato? Indeed, the question morphs and takes on a personal tone: what draws me here? To Plato? For the purposes of this part, I consider only one story, one pull, one piece of the drawl: the cave. And on the topic of the cave, the line between chapter six and chapter seven begins to blur.

In chapter seven, I turn to the stories that I feel I have been told throughout my life and which I feel have left a lasting and deep impression on the way that I tell my own stories and, indeed, on the way that I narrate my own experience, the way that I think about and talk about and relate to my self. Each of these stories, in the ways that I received them, pointed me toward singular self-storying and toward a sense of my self as sphere. I began to think of my self as an entity with a singular, stable core who should ultimately orient their self toward something similar, an object out there as a guiding mirror for the object in here. Of course, I am exaggerating here, but only insofar as it conveys the way I feel these institutionalized stories have compelled me to think—that is, of my, this self as a dramatic, heroic, ego-logical, self-

centered, main-character human. Where did ‘I’ hear these ‘stories’ of self-singular tone and tenor? The cave, the church, and the school.

A feeling of guilt rears its brutish head. I need to be honest with you. I’ve been lying—I’m not only talking about ‘me.’ There were other people in the classrooms with me, and in the church pews, and in the chains that positioned my facing toward the wall of delusional shadows. I want to suggest that these stories have left an impression on ‘you,’ too—how could they not? They are the stories—this is the story—that shapes the world. A driving force. Who are you? Are you?

I begin chapter seven with the cave and the story I heard there. Especially when I first came across it in college, the allegory struck me. A spark lit—insight—and resonated deeply in my soul; I felt like someone—this Plato person—was describing, in a way I had not yet known how to put into words, nor even into thinkings, what it felt like to be me, in this world, a being locked at the bottom of a cave sensing that there is something more, more than meets the eye—what these eyes can see—more than this here, what felt like a, state of things. If only, his writing—the cave writing—compelled me to believe, I could just figure out a way to glimpse it, to get from here to there. He had me believe that there were other possibilities, other ways of thinking, even other than the pre-scribed way—he had me believe that I could get there.

Painted in this way, the story doesn’t sound so bad. Whether good or bad, I cannot say—this story is nevertheless a big part of who and how I take my self to be and so I relate to it—this Platonic impact I see on my self and on the world—for it constitutes a wall, the wall of my experience.

I did not come to it—Plato’s musings in the cave—with this measured expression. Only over the course of a years-long deep study—that is, only because I have been permitted the

space, the secure walls, in which to study and enter and dwell and take up space in/de-space the deep cavern of my own mind (note to self now: let there be space, let there be movement, let there be space between movements)—was I able to translate original flabbergasted mesmerization (‘Microsoft Word’ asks me if I mean “memorization”—I do) into, then, critique, and then into nuance, and then into whatever the hell this is—perhaps a scattered combination of these options. Most people don’t get the chance to leave the flabbergasted phase; nevertheless, if they live in this world; if they go to school and if they go to church in this world, they witness Plato’s legacy, the legacy of this here cave, this here storyteller and, in particular, this *way* (orders) and *why* (order) of telling stories. Indeed, when I came to the cave, I was already steeped in what I am thinking of as an ontologically conservative habitude, orientation toward the world, orientation toward the wall; one that uncritically accepted and adhered to the institutional narratives that I had heard throughout most of my life, my growing up. Which is to say, and to give a teaser: Plato’s allegory of the cave resonated with me because I was already used to hearing ontologically conservative stories in the church and in the school, stories pointed toward oneness, wholeness, totality, capital T truth, and an unquestionable Good; and a congruent way of thinking: a one-track, way-seeking mind. It resonated because throughout most of my life I had already been shaped—a person in the world—to bend and bow to the whims of the winds that be and the position they prenatally set out for me.

In the institution that is my evangelical and pentecostal turned methodist and nondenominational church experience, I heard stories that pointed me toward a pre-formative configuration of God. The narrative undertone was one of what felt like God (the God of the universe) as, even if not outright stated then assumed, preeminence, an unreachably objective being (worth pursuing and orienting attention to nevertheless; indeed, absolutely). In the

institution of the school, and my particular experience in the public schooling system of rural, coal-region Pennsylvania, the narrative adherence to a preeminent figure remained. Here, the—read between the lines—story was Capital, and the undertone cutthroat competition and individually rising through the ranks. I do not claim that every student heard this story at school, nor that every young churchgoer heard the stories in the way that I did. At the very least, what I am claiming is that, somehow (and I do not think I am alone in this), I found my self willing and able to fall into these lines of thinking, without much questioning. Indeed, questioning was not advised. This undertone of oneness took a hold, and I took hold of it—or at the very least felt that I must. Indeed, it became my sole focus. Perhaps it is because of the overwhelming pressure to conceive of the world in the ways that were normal, accepted, and unquestioned (unquestionable) in these spaces, and to operate in the world in support of these ways of being because, according to the guiding/guarding figures therein, there was no other way—this is the way things are. Deal with it.

The stories that I heard pointed me toward an unquestioning acceptance of the ways of the world and what is possible—and profitable—here. Where, then, amidst this overwhelming pressure to be and adhere to the one thing, the one way, was there a break? Was there? I write to and through the break.

Where is the break? The breaking point? Does the pressure ever build? I need you—teachers—to, at this point, trust your self and let me go; some(non)thing, even if not the young student you sent off, returns. It is enough for me, this newly dis-integrating entity, the part of my self that we agreed to send off and which now returns, differently, precisely because it is not enough for me. Without this thing I've been told I need, I as such begin to fade—this de-spacing piece of me—away. I nevertheless cannot completely. I embark on a journey that falls and falls

short, a partial educational personal practice (Harney & Moten, 2021). In the interim, the space between, may some(non)thing—a space-making entity—recognizable by and as ‘me’ return, arrive, and remain, a piece in proximity. May something of nothing return. May I practice feeling alone—at home—in its presence here near me (*autos*). I write to and through it, this figure, this broken and breaking figure.

In chapter eight, at the break, I consider another story that my mother told me, now regarding my birth and the context of my very conception (every body has this kind of story, even if untold, unuttered, lost, destroyed)—the creation of this here self, this person: me (I again implore you to ask your self, are you, like me, a human? What makes you so sure? Are you a guardian? what makes you so uncertain? Questions give way to an interjecting echo: “...the human is the guardian of Being and Being *needs* this guardianship, or care, to manifest; Warren, 2018, p. 68, emphasis in original). And what, I ask in this part, am I to make of my history; of human history? How will I narrativize my past—the past ‘of me’? To what end? How will I remember the moments that formed me—that left a permanent impression on me, who I am and can/could be? And how will I re-remember them to you?

Shaped as I have been in the paradigms that prevail in this world, I seek not to shape similarly. I am looking for a different story, and I am bringing something else into this here manifold, something else *in addition*, not as a replacement. Following a divulgence of the break and fissure and tension that grounds me, this here me, I will then pause—take a break, so to speak—in this part and consider the ‘shape’—the sort of surface, its closedness, openness, orientation—that the stories I will have referenced thus far in the project (ontopedagogically conservative and ontopedagogically progressive ‘ones’) have taken or have suggested for me. Put another way, at this point I attempt to discern the sort of shape—self-shaping, and self-

storying—that these stories that prevail make possible, that the stories that prevail have made possible *for me*. Here I claim that the stories I have tended to hear overwhelmingly instill in me a sense of self as sphere—an inner realm cut off from an outer world *via* a closed surface, by way of a sharp and sharpening, clean and cleaning edge. Such a shape presupposes a particular, surgically outlawing and often mutilating relationship to ontological terror—one of outright casting out—that I do not want to continue to perpetuate, or at least, inasmuch as I am able to avoid it, a being so embedded in this world, not singularly. What other self-storying and self-shaping is possible? I return to my roots—a child of tension—and point to the Klein bottle.

In chapter nine, finally, I preview three intertwined, entangled short stories that I now tell my self, each aligning with potentially contradictory and at odds scholarly and spiritual disciplines and conversations: the story of pragmatism (following Eddie Glaude, 2020, at least), the story of pessimism (and Mara van der Lugt, 2021)/black nihilism (Calvin Warren, 2018, p. ix), and the story of Zen Buddhism (following Shohaku Okomura, 2019; Chogyam Trungpa, 1991; and Kosho Uchiyama, 1993). In this ninth chapter, I experiment with what I feel the Klein bottle makes possible, that is, a dis-integration of the ordinary into some parts. I attend to pieces in tension, and to several stories which, when told together, evoke tension, some contradiction, and the occasional misalignment and miscommunication. I offer this penultimate part of the project as an example of what ontopedagogical dis-integration can look like, and to show that it is nothing all that spectacular.

Throughout this part (this project), I narrativize a personal process of both losing and finding my self in the midst of simultaneous trauma, loss, and grief navigation. I intend to tell it in a way that is onto-pedagogically dis-integrating, whatever that means. May it be more than a clunky phrase I use to capture what I am trying to do. Indeed, what does it mean? Hands have

brought these pieces about. Hands have crafted this soul, and self, and they have educated it. They have told it stories. And they have protected it. These here hands. May they make something else. May they no longer build a singular structure, one structure that stands for ever alone.

In the end, what will we have done? Indeed, what will have precipitated from—what will I have put together as a precipitant of—our relationship? Are we in relation? What will I have brought to an end, and what will that end be?

CHAPTER VI: *PHULAKOS*, PEDAGOGY, MYTHAGOGY,

AND THE INTRAHUMAN TURN

3.1

The *Phulakos*, Pedagogy, Story-telling (Myth-agogy) connection

My hope in this chapter is to provide you, readers, with a further (in concert with chapters two and three) textual and grounded basis for what I am thinking of as the storytelling-*phulakos*-pedagogy conceptual connection, or weddedness. It is not a coincidence that Plato brings these three practices—guardianship, teaching, and storytelling—together at this particular moment of tension in the course of the dialogue (indeed, at the point of original faction and fever, where simultaneously the *phulakes* arrive on the scene, a point of no return). Each practice has to do with managing boundaries and borders, whether they be physical, mental, spiritual. Let's return to the pivotal scene and take a look at where the storytellers come in.

We have gotten this far; the *phulaks* figure bears a divided, not-one and so for the sake of one, soul. When they arrive in the city—that is, when they start performing their task—this split becomes evident—the *phulaks* can not have a singular orientation, for they must be able to discern when to be tough and when to be tender, for the tenor of their practice shapes the culture of the city; a tension. Co-arriving with the *phulakes* and their tense task is the need for education and, in particular, *their* education. How else are these figures to do their work in a way that brings about more healing than harm, I can imagine Plato wondering. For shaping these ultimately unmanageable figures—figures who must be left to their own devices, to devices they have chosen, if they are to do the best, most soul-reaching work (figures who must be let go)—Plato devises a special form of management: a leading and turning of the soul out of the shadow and toward the light, the Good. That is, he devises education—psychagogy, a leading and

guiding of the soul—the practitioners of which would equip the *phulakes* with what they need to endure the tension inherent to their being, the injustice immanent to their just practice, that is, to do their best—and always flawed, falling short, and partial—work.

The storytellers stride in tow—but where? At one point in this scene, Plato’s Socrates ‘deliberates’ with his interlocutors about how to begin crafting the first *phulaks* force, a team which thereafter would mostly reproduce amongst themselves so as to preserve their silver bloodline. Where does the silver begin? Before they are full-fledged *phulakes*, they are impressionable children. Those who will join the ranks won’t be just any old children—they will have to show promise. They will have to show that they have what it takes to carry and not sever the tension inherent to their task, the tension they will find their selves in. Aren’t we asking too much of these children? Well, that depends. Not if we tell them, in the first place, the kinds of stories that make this all seem so normal.

Let us take a look at where these three figures and practices emerge alongside each other in the text itself. To this end, it will be helpful to view this part of the dialogic flow in full. On the topic of the challenging task of bringing about a good guardian, and in particular this first *phulaks* force, Socrates begins:

Philosophy, then, and spirit, speed, and strength as well, must all be combined in the nature of anyone who is going to be a really fine and good guardian of our city

Glaucou responds: Absolutely.

Socrates: Then that is what he would have to be like at the outset. But how are we to bring these people up and educate them?

... [Adeimantus enters the dialogue]

Socrates: Come on, then, and like people in a fable telling stories at their leisure, let's in our discussion educate these men.

Adeimantus: Yes, let's.

Socrates: What, then, will the education be? Or is it difficult to find a better one than the one that has been discovered over a long period of time—physical training for bodies and musical training for the soul?

Adeimantus: Yes, it is.

Socrates: Now, won't we start musical training before physical training?

Adeimantus: Of course.

Socrates: And you include stories under musical training?

Adeimantus: I do.

Socrates: But aren't there two kinds of stories, one true and the other false?

Adeimantus: Yes.

Socrates: And education must make use of both, but first of the false ones?

Adeimantus: I do not understand what you mean.

Socrates: Don't you understand that we first begin by telling stories to children? And surely they are false on the whole, though they have some truth in them. And we use stories on children before physical training?

Adeimantus: That's true.

...

Socrates: Now, you know, don't you, that the beginning of any job is of greatest importance, especially when we are dealing with anything young and tender? For that is

when it is especially malleable and best takes on whatever pattern one wishes to impress on it.

Adeimantus: Precisely so.

Socrates: Shall we carelessly allow our children to hear any old stories made up by just anyone, then, and to take beliefs into our souls that are, for the most part, opposite of the ones we think they should hold when they are grown up?

Adeimantus: We certainly won't allow that at all.

Socrates: So our first task, it seems, is to *supervise the storytellers*: if they make up a good story, we must accept it; if not, we must reject it...

(*Republic*, 376c-377c, emphasis mine)

Guardians require education, again, because of the tense task they find their selves faced with: the prospect of discerning between when to be harsh and tough—toward the enemy, that which is to be kept and cast out—and when to be tender—toward the friend, that which is to be kept in and nurtured. And now there are storytellers in the mix. Baked into the musical—and, again, spiritual—aspect of guardians' educational regiment is an attendance to stories, but not just any stories. The kinds of stories that people—especially those who are going to be guardians—hear matter. When children listen to a story, they do not just imagine characters and figures doing deeds and indulging in dialogue; the moves that characters make set a precedent for future movement, for *their own*—the listener's—future movement. Put another way, stories point to and through behavior as normal; indeed, whether attended to or not, stories and their tellers normalize behavior by way not only of the stories they tell but also of the way they tell the stories.

It should not require too much stretching to see why Plato was, thus, given the power of stories to shape, contour, socialize, and enculturate the minds of the young, concerned with bringing the storytelling practice into the guardian-education conversation, especially at this crucial moment. If *phulakes* are to guide and guard the city according to justice and goodness, and if they are to turn not only their own souls around but also the soul of the city around, they must have, so to speak, their shit together. Their souls must be ready to endure the battle, the hardship ahead of/within them. The storytellers must equip them. From a young age, they must prepare them for this journey. They must begin the shaping early; they must set the tone early. Eventually, it will all be easy—the tone will prove to be an undertone that goes and goes, and is and is. The kinds of stories that these *first phulakes* hear must set a strong precedent, for they are to serve the city, the soul of the city, the souls of the city, and their own souls in the precarious role of border and boundary management—as storyteller, as educator, as guardian—thereafter. And the road is long. All in service of an end.

In this segment, too, we learn something about how Plato thinks about the veracity of stories, the details that comprise them, and their overall thrust, their impact, the impression they leave. Must a story, if it is to be a good story, be true? How true? To what end? The surface level details may be ‘false’ or fantastical or even blatantly false insofar as the ultimate, undertonal thrust rings true; that is, as long as the point is clear and piercing. Which is to say: the telling of false stories—stories that are not in all actuality truly true (think of a fable with a moral point but which takes root in a fantasy world)—is justified inasmuch as such a story ultimately orients the listener toward, at least for the case of Plato, an adherence to what is: onto-‘above all’-supremacy. And so in the corralling of the *first phulaks* force, stories are important. Indeed,

Plato's Socrates' remark lingers: "our first task... is to supervise the storytellers" (*Republic*, 377c). *Our* first task—who is he talking to?

Step one: the protective gate.

To supervise is to keep an observing watch over, is to perform an act of guardianship over. Perhaps Plato's first *phulaks* force is already there, in action. Perhaps they are already in the room. Socrates says, "If [the storytellers] make up a good story, we must accept it; if not, we must reject it..." (*Republic*, 377c). In keeping watch, these supervisors are forming, securing, and managing a boundary, a border between what shall and shall not be when it comes to telling stories, when it comes to the underlying, ontological thrust of any given story. It is at these points that the conceptual differences between storytelling, guarding, teaching, and writing begin to blur. What, with these words, this grammar, and this structure—is allowed? And not allowed?

Step two: the protective gait.

The managed storyteller then serves as a primary boundary manager for the young guardian to be, such that this young one might grow up in the world with the right, or at the very least a promising, relationship toward the boundary that they must eventually manage—in relation to their selves, to their students, and to strangers on the outskirts. In each of these locales, their task is to discern when and what and who to cast out and when and what and who to keep in. Their task is to shape their selves—at local, private—and the world—at large, public. I have spent a good deal of time focusing on this large, public, world-shaping aspect of *phulakos* and pedagogy. On the topic now of storytelling, we are more explicitly making a turn inward: to this work that I cannot really show you, because it is private to me. Like Plato, I can only point. Indeed, like Plato, I can only tell a story—a story: words, images, sensations, thoughts pieced together *with a point*.

Step three: tell a story.

With all this talk of stories, I hope that it is clear that I am not only referring to tales told around a camp fire, or in a book. On one hand, I am. In addition, that is, on another hand, I am thinking about the undertone—the point, or direction—of stories and, on yet another hand, of ‘undertones’ as such as telling a story, as projecting, in their ‘under’-ness, a narrative thread. In chapter four, for example, I think about onto-pedagogical stances as identifiable only as an energetic undertone, which, in this ontologically-imbued and -secured/-securing world, looks like a relationship to this thing called ‘being’—that is, *everything* (contra-nothing). To tell a story is to operate according to an undertone, and at the very least in relation to—even if not an accordance with—*the* undertone. Plato surely points us there, with story.

Plato ‘tells the story’ of a tripartite soul. The just soul—*the* soul like *the* city that always already is—comprises three elements which are parallel to the three hierarchically organized classes that comprise the just city (the city that *is* but which, in his personal case, has fallen far into fever and faction, division): comprising the ‘massive’ base, various appetitive elements meander and roam. These are the pieces of the soul/self which carry desires and wants for satisfaction (and which, if left to their own devices, lead to multifariousness, ruin). These parts of the soul do not, on their own, that is, when left to their own devices, know the way. Perched higher, closer to the core, lies the philosophic element, or that element of the soul/self which deliberates and rationalizes about ‘good’ or ‘proper’ knowledge, understanding, and action. This part of the soul knows the way but proves insubstantial, insufficient—and also unwelcome—in its attempts to sway all the others to it. This element alone is unable to wrangle the roamers of the soul onto this here same page. And in the middle resides the spirited (in the courageous sense) element which navigates the in-between and, indeed, brings the message and the

knowledge of the way from the core to the pasture, the surface. This mediator element acts as inner *phulaks*, storyteller, and guardian. Plato here conceives of, in parallel to his *phulaks* force, a guardian/*phulakos* element of the soul/self, an aspect which guides and manages the vast appetitive elements with the knowledge and understanding (the educational example; the personal pedagogy) passed down from the philosophic. The three elements in the just soul work together for the sake of the whole.

This middling inner guardian element, again, in this story that Plato is telling, is a conscience, or perhaps even an egoic element of sorts. At the very least it is an element that has to do with thinking, with managing the boundary of thought, with hands that inquire, under the radar: what is thought; what is not?

Critically, for Plato, not all thinking that any given souled being engages with their mind stems from this guardian element. Deliberative and calculative thinking—the sort of thinking required for true understanding of the nature of reality, for example—takes up house with the philosophic element. The inner guardian element, then, guides the ‘thinking’ that occurs in the everyday.

More plainly, this inner guardian element of the soul is essentially a narrative element. It is an element that tells a story *about* (and to and through) this boundary of thought, one’s everyday, conscious—self-*ish*—experience of the world. Between the world and me, there is a wall, an absolute limit to my sense and perception, a complex plane of points beyond which lies all that is and is (crossed out) other (the former being that which is *at the expense of*, that is, *through the crossing out of*, what which is not, the latter). With this guarding element of my human—for Plato makes these claims and tells this story not only for his own soul but for the souls of humans and, ultimately, for the soul of the world—mind, spirit, self, psyche, whatever, I

tell a story. With my everyday habits of thought and with my being in the world, I tell a story. There is an undertone, an energetic undercurrent, to my being in the world, to any given being's being in the world. How do I respond? What story do I tell my self within these bounds and in relation to that other, the crossed out; which others, which crosses? (Why?) How do I conceive of this wall? What story do I tell my self about and through this barrier? Across the way? This surface? And how do I protect and preserve it? Do I? Does it need that from me? What shape does this preservation create? This pressure to progress? What shape am I creating? What shape have I been taught and told to create?

Posed another way, now branching off the page of Plato's story, a soil bed in which I grow, for better and worse, my self (may this practice—this project—contribute to the regeneration of the health of this soil): how do I narrate my own experience? (Why?) How does this narration compel me to act in relation to the world? To others? To other thinkers? To non-thinkers? To my self? To this wall? Who and what do I keep out of this world—my world, this mind—and who and what do I let in? (Why?) In the most *mundane* (basic, worldly) sense, the inner guardian is the—rather inquisitive, sometimes—narrator of the personal experience of the human being, or, at the very least for this here human being.

In Plato's story, such an inner guardian, spirited element serves as an auxiliary element—much like his class of *phulakes*—with allegiance primarily toward the deliberative element (the philosophers, their teachers), a banding together for the sake of managing the appetitive element, the multifarious masses that comprise the majority. He depicts Socrates and Glaucon concluding such:

Socrates: ...just as there were three classes in the city that held it together—the money-making, the auxiliary, and the deliberative—is there also a third element in the soul, the spirited kind, which is the natural auxiliary of the rationally calculating element...?:

Glaucon: There must be a third. (*Republic*, 441a)

The soul parallels the city for Plato, one-to-one. What *there is* in the soul of any given person manifests its self in the (soul of the) city. Taken together, the city then takes on a cultural force which reinforces some behaviors—those which formed it—and marginalizes others. In this story, it is possible to re-shape what people have, with their soul work, established, but it takes a lot of time and oftentimes a collective movement of the masses.

All of this is to say: how people manage their selves—the way they guard their selves, tell their selves a story—is a rather serious matter; Plato is writing—telling a story—about social change, how social change does/might happen *in this world*. And he is suggesting that this change, this movement, begins within, in particular people and their particular souls—that is, in the local—inasmuch as it occurs on the social level at large. This personal sense I have of my self—this private way I relate to my self, this ‘story’ that I tell—does not end with me. It emanates and ripples out and into the world, mingling with the public and social. And inasmuch as *phulakes* require education—every soul with a *phulaks* element (which is, for Plato, to say every soul) bears a parallel (similar, and with some space between) personal sense of tension—*everyone*, in Plato’s thinking, needs ‘education,’ or at least a personalized version of it, which the *phulakes* at large are tasked with bringing about locally; they are teachers, they are storytellers, they are figures whose gaits secure the gates; the threshold between inside and outside.

The shape of the public space—the way those in charge go about shaping the city, social affairs—that is, the large, then matters for the personal, the local too. The two inform each other;

the soul informs the city which informs the soul which informs the city, and so on, and on, and on. . . . Plato, in his *Republic* work, writes—constructs and generates a dialogue—in order to tie and tidy up the fray and fraying at both ends of the intricate yet singular thread, the deeply interconnected plane that is, the firm bed and wall of being that constitutes the concrete, everlastingly structural, load-bearing wall of the world. He does so such that we—these pieces of me, the human community, the ontopolitical community, the gated/gaited community—might all simply be. A compelling—indeed mesmerizing—story.

Pause.

And so, in bringing about his vision of a city of justice, which again means a return to something that always already is, Plato's primary task is preparing, by e-ducating, a *phulaks* force. Such a force, once carefully cultivated and managed, have a responsibility to then manage the masses of the city, not only in a physical fashion but also regarding their souls, their minds—the *psyche*. The *phulaks* must serve this role—acting out and in the world, exemplifying possible ways of being a *phulaks*, of doing this important, integral, and integrating work. The *phulaks* force that Plato conscripts are an example, a beacon—they are the leaders of the city to be followed; they are e-ducators, and their practice is one of story-telling, of telling stories through their way of being, stories that others—those who witness this example—may then model their selves and ways of being after. This does not mean that all people become *phulakes*. Rather, *phulakes* as a class have as their task the shaping of the masses—and in particular pointing them to their own human souls, to the *phulaks* element of their soul, and to the many and multifarious pieces of their soul this inner *phulaks* might well tend to, and why.

As soon as he mentions the need for education and management, storytelling and the importance of storytellers propagating the appropriate—conducive to Platonic justice—kinds

stories becomes clear: the stories that people—and *phulakes* in particular—hear shape the way they conceive of and story not only the world and the city of which they are a part, but also of their own self, that very part and piece of the social world. The self, a small, local parcel—and the way people think about and narrativize their selves—matters for the shape and structure of the city and the world at large inasmuch as vice-versa.

The stories that *phulakes* in particular hear are of utmost importance first and foremost because, for the sake of transformation, of realizing a return to the lost world, the *phulakes* are themselves to be tellers of stories to the public. And in order for them to tell a story to their students that might bring about such a realization of grandiose goodness, their work of telling such a story must—not unlike their pupils—begin within. The way they shape the world stems from and is informed by the way they shape their self, is informed by the stories that they hear, the stories that stick, and the story they tell their self. They are managing figures—managers and shapers of self and world—a force which leads its pupils in a particular direction along and which points them toward a particular orientation in relation to this obdurate wall. So goes the story that Plato tells, or, at least, one of them.

It is worth wondering: what other stories does Plato tell his storytellers, his audience, and his students? How does he supervise them? How does he supervise us? What story does he tell his self? How does he supervise his own soul? To be sure, Plato tells several stories throughout his writing of the *Republic* (and many beyond in his massive body of work). Still, his stories point in one direction; they all have the same point. The fact that his ultimate aim is to point people toward oneness, that which is and is whole and total, complete and sure, motivates me to see his storytelling efforts as singular, tending toward a singularity. He tells several stories for the sake of singularity. The culmination of Platonic storytelling converges, merges to that

particular point: the wall of being and the preservation and conservation of this wall that always already is. He's pointing you right here—to this wall that there is no getting beyond, that is, to the wall between; the one wall we need.

Of this litany of converging narratives that Plato proffers, my focus here will be—in my discussion of, my pointing to and through, one more 'story' that Plato tells, akin to other stories I heard 'growing up'—on the cave. While I relegate my discussion of it—this pivotal, at least for me, narrative—to the following chapter, the narrative undertone of it has long been here. I write from within the cave. Thinking and writing in the dark, I piece together this project from within a cavern setting, a settled cave, a realm of shadows and shadowy figures, in close proximity to pitch-black darkness. What translates? What remains obscure? What is thought? What is not?

I turn now to 'stories'—to the ways that authority figures intervened into my path, on my behalf, so they say, and to the words they used there, and the way these words worked on me. I turn to the stories that I heard in the cave, the church, and the school. In my description of these settled spaces, I do not seek to capture or suggest that I know what everyone heard, felt, or witnessed here in these settings. Nor am I interested in rebuking every and all sense of church and school and cave. I know that churches can be a powerful place for community, and of communion and culture. They have been for me. And I know that schooling—a formal education—can create opportunities and help mobilize people into positions unreachable otherwise. Indeed, if nothing else, schools prepare people for working and making a living in this world. I would not be where I am without school, without my love for school. Rather, I point, again, to and through the narrative undertone—and to and through the shapes it made possible for people to find their selves (for me to find my self) in—that I felt in, and as a weight and pressure integral to, these spaces. And I point to and through the way I feel they came across to

me, and to how I heard them and learned them and regurgitated them in my life, living, thinking, and moving in the world (in relation to the wall). Notably, then, when I first encountered Plato and his work (in college, post ‘school’ and ‘church’), I ‘came to’ (in) the cave (Being) according to an already ordered, churched (God), schooled (Capital), and primed one-track, way-seeking—that is, already institutionalized, in-stated in the firm bed of being—mind.

I do not, then, seek to get the details ‘right’—and here I am thinking specifically about how I (insubstantially, insufficiently—indeed, focusing on one thing, the way I feel it met me, my studenting capacity, and degree of receptivity) narrate Plato’s allegory of the cave. Indeed, when I describe the story of the cave and the stories that I heard growing up in the church and the school, and in particular those that stuck, I relay them in the ways that I heard them, the way that they came across to me and my susceptibility to a particular kind of pointing, a particular kind of pedagogy: ontopedagogical conservatism pointing me toward oneness.

3.2

An Institutional Narrativity

Stories abound. Some stick, are heard and held tightly. Others pass through, and on, and away. All stories told impact the world, this world of walls, a wall. All stories meet the wall with an underlying intention. No intention, in a walled world, is an intention. Personal stories, too, that is, the story I tell my self, about and through my thoughts and thinking. They—stories, and especially their tellers—take up space and they do work, boundary managing work, at both local and large levels. To tell a story—to offer a teaching, to take a guarding stance—is to orient the listener in relation to a wall, is to tell a story *about a wall*; the wall that always already is, the very wall that storytellers—pointers of attention and guides of thought and thinking and walling—can't not interact with. The holding and passing of stories occurs through and according to the wall, a wall which, at the very least, these hands (of thought) manifest/stretch between you and me—this communicative thread, a wall in its own right; indeed, a boundary.

Stories—counter to this singular story—abound; nevertheless, *this world that is* carries a current, *has been told to carry a current*, a current state and flow, a currency that moves in a particular, converging directionality: a surface level Order (of...). Such a story and a practice of storytelling integrates the—and has for millennia, this human—world. Personal narrativity—my stream of conscious storying mind—integrates my normal operativity. Left to my own devices, I will incessantly return here, right here, to the thread throughout, to this way. That pressure—it doesn't let up. Once it arrives, it cannot leave. Indeed, there's nowhere for it to go. There is no more space. There is no more space here. The human's here and now is full.

In this chapter, I focus on those stories—this story, the story of the world—that I have heard throughout my life that has stuck with me, and, indeed, which I have allowed to form ‘me,’ which I have allowed to integrate my self. In this collection of stories told in different environments—the cave, the church, and the school—I have noticed a pattern: the underlying narrative thread conveyed to me in each of these places pointed me toward—or, in hearing them, I felt a pull to point my self toward—oneness, a one-track, one-way-seeking mindedness, an individual sense of self, a narrow and narrowing practice of self-, other-, and world-storying, and a singular sense of story telling in general. I am no longer doing one thing.

In the cave, in the church, and in the school, I heard a story that pointed me in a particular direction. Ontologically, these stories promoted a conservative orientation toward the wall of being. Such a conservative orientation relies, again, on the assumption that *there is*, in the first place, a firm, stable ground, the most stable version of which is a supreme and pure underlying oneness that is always already there, always already informing, always already good—and which we, I, need only bow to and recognize in my self and for the world. So these stories go, closed and closing on this point. At the very least, again, for me; I heard and received them in this way. That’s the point. Their point.

I begin with the cave, move into the church, and then end this part of the chapter in the school.

The cave

When I first happened upon Plato’s writing and thinking—and the allegory of the cave in particular—he mesmerized and mystified me and my mind. The prospect of realizing this way, his way (and the way he pointed), struck me: perfection; paradise, purity, utopia: an untouchable, reliable, underlying bed of being that fundamentally is. After reading, gazing, and glazing over,

all I saw was white light—the allegorized sun—a pristine source in-forming every-form-of-things (every essence) and every-thing, all things around and in me in this dark cave of ignorance, delusion, and shadow. I became enamored with this light which revealed a naturally fundamental and fundamentally natural order—an onto-as-supreme, meta-physical world, which is to say, the world of forms. And above all, it—this transcendental landscape—was good; simply and basically good. The words on the page called out to me, and I began my own journey of recognizing the confining cave that I and my mind were in. Guided and guarded so, my soul began to turn around, away from the wall of multifarious shadows and toward that enlightened wall that always already is. In my deep studying of the text, Plato and his interlocutors became my psychagogues—leaders, turners of soul and mind up and out of the cave.

This movement up and out of the cave *is* educational—indeed, for Plato, movement in the cave of ignorance allegorizes the most basic educational movement: the simultaneous presence, which is to say encounter, of an elder and a younger, a guardian and a child, a leader and a follower, a teacher and a student; and the soul, energy, and drive they bring to the encounter. For why else would I ever begin to move in the first place? If not pulled? If not pushed? By some other thing that has ‘been around longer’ and which, by all objective standards, knows better, and if not better, at least more?

Plato opens Book 7 of the *Republic* closely linking the cave and being in the darkness of the cave as necessarily indicative of a “lack” of the “effect of education” (514a). Education, then, and the effect of education *is* this very movement up and out, out of the realm of shadows—a deficit position and standing—and toward the enlightening mouth, toward the realization of world and mind as cave. Education is this guidance of the good guardian—the voices and sayings of teachers in my head.

Foreshadow/for the shadows: what, I now ask, might it mean to go further into the darkness of the cave? That is, if not up, out, and toward, what might it mean to go down and in? What would compel me so? What could compel me so? What sort of education—much less what kind of educator, if we can call them that—leads into darkness and obscurity, a world of non-sense, that is, a world where sensors/senses find their selves cut short? To less of an (and a less-sure, less clear) under-standing rather than more? Such a movement would, nevertheless, happen in the cave, the realm of the human.

The cave. Here we are. Plato's interlocutors' words suffice as a starting point:

Socrates: ...imagine humans [*anthropous*] beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up that is open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They have been there since childhood, with their necks and legs fettered, so that they are fixed in the same place, able to see only in front of them, because their fetters prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the prisoners and the fire, there is an elevated road stretching. Imagine that along this road a low wall has been built—like the screen in front of people that is provided by puppeteers, and above which they show their puppets.

Glaucon: I am imagining it.

Socrates: Also imagine, then, that there are people alongside the wall carrying multifarious artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other animals, made of stone, wood, and every material. And as you would expect, some of the carriers are talking and some are silent.

Glaucon: It is a strange image you are describing, and strange prisoners.

Socrates: *They are like us.* I mean, in the first place, do you think these prisoners have ever seen anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall of the cave in front of them? (*Republic*, 514a-515b, emphasis mine)

This image, the call to imagine, strikes me in my youth because it points me toward my stuck state (my deficit, fallen position) and, most importantly, affords me a glimpse of a way out, a glimmer of hope (to gain what I lack) for movement despite and enlightenment for the imprisoned state of my shadow-gazing soul.

These prisoners, “they are like us.” Suddenly, the words on the page poke and prod me and I wakes up. I. I am becoming an I. I am becoming. I am. I. A perfect, uniform circle: the circle of me, the self-circling of the enlightened human mind. The chains no longer bind me, and I am free. And now, and only now, there is more to see, more than meets my ordinary darkness dwelling eye/my I. I stand on sore, weak legs and turn a stiff neck; there is a figure there, beside me, gesturing welcomingly and pointing me toward a glow that had always been there but which I’d only just now been able to perceive. Indeed, as far as I can remember, the glow has always been there; a warmth at the edges of my periphery. It is an informing, integral piece of my over-shadowed view of the world, the way of viewing that I’d never known I could acknowledge—indeed, I could not yet see it. And then, there it was—and nothing was the same.

The fire: soft, warm, bright, light. We approach it and I stumble—I am still disoriented—upon the puppeteering wall. Here work the storytellers. Figures pass by holding strange objects which cast, as I glance back at that wall of shadows, shapes I recognize, but which I have not yet seen in such extruded detail. I realize it. I am looking at objects—objective reality. There is width and depth and height. The two-dimensional world of flat shadows that (be)come and (be)cease, I slowly and, even if stubbornly, begin to realize, are but mere delusions in terms of

grandeur inasmuch as they are but offshoots of something more fundamental. Reality—true reality, that which always already everlastingly is, which is to say that which *integrates* and is thus *beyond me*—is of a higher dimension. Indeed, I find my self to be an offspring of something 3-D.

Suddenly, I don't quite know where I am. I turn around to get a glimpse of from where I've come and it's all a blur. I resist the pull and go back, undulating to and fro, time and time again. Nevertheless I move toward the mouth of the cave; the pursuit, like a river and I a river stone, structures and shapes me, rolls me along and rubs me down until I am but sediment in a stream, one with everything, indistinguishable, absolutely dis-integrated. I snap to, and find my self further along the way to the mouth of the cave.

A grander glow, I can sense it. There is a spark beyond the fire. The sun—a perfect, uniform, spherical object of massive power—radiates far away (and somehow yet I feel it) with immense intensity, and a world of color explodes. I simply cannot take it all in. It overwhelms. Indeed, embracing the white light of the sun with straight sight seers and scars my vision. I look away, dazzled. For a moment, I cannot see any-thing. I redirect my vision back into the darkness, to the cave and the world that was so clear, and I see nothing. The force of the sun has consumed my senses, and now, having seen it, having embraced its rays and grandeur, I cannot be the same. That blaze—the hit the humans needs—scolded me, has scalded me. I heal, learn my lesson, and return to the cave where the other pieces of me are, an odd one among the shadow-gazing many, and try to tell a story.

This figure beside me—a *phulaks* force—they have released me from my chains. They have led and turned me and my soul up and out. I, because of this impressive pedagogical (a

leading of the young) movement, have gazed upon what is and is as such pre-eminently good. I have witnessed the source of every-form and -thing.

Pause.

Plato depicts this/his metaphysical worldview through allegory, through story. The allegorical story of the cave holds the infrastructure of what is essential together and, perhaps most importantly, situates the people of the world—humans—in it. Indeed, humans are the very figures which, through their conscious experience of it, integrate it, that is, make and have made it into what it is. If they remain in the shadows, they will continue to sow seeds of self-destruction, delusion, idiocy. Indeed, they will be their own downfall, the story goes, if they—these young minds, these naïve pieces of my own mind—do not adhere to the call of the enlightened and enlightening mouth of the cave.

Indeed, as Plato suggests, people—ordinary humans in this world, the masses—find their selves locked here, in the world of shadows. According to a normal habit, they take this state to be the true one. They are stuck gazing at lower-dimensional things, or what we can think of as the *physical* world, what Plato calls “the visible,” the world of things (*Republic*, 507c). This domain operates according to a lower-dimensional and thus at the very least partial and necessarily incomplete—not the *whole story*—reality. The journey up and out of the cave is a journey into the *metaphysical* realm, what Plato calls “the intelligible” (*ibid.*), the world of forms and a form of consciousness that understands onto-logy: what being, first and foremost, and in the first place, says/has always already said: I am/my soul is/this soul that is of me is/I am; true, basic, fundamental reality.

Such a story does not fray, but is tied at both ends, tight, knotted—together. In Plato’s allegory, he invites us to imagine that along the path up and out of the cave, there is a line. This

line has four segments, corresponding to “four conditions of the soul” (*Republic*, 511d). Put another way, these divisions demarcate various stages of psycho-logical development: from ignorance to knowledge, bottom to top, cave depths to cave mouth. A soul in the lowest condition is one locked in chains forced to face the wall of shadows. They interface with a world of *images*, lower-dimensional, flat representations of true, metaphysical reality. They must rely on *imagination* in order to make any sense of their world; they can only wonder, guess, and muse about reality. Stuck in their state—glimpsing only things—they cannot *know*. The next segment, or condition of the soul, is that of *opinion*. Opinion-havers still deal in the world of things, this lower world. They have seen the fire, the objects behind the shadows, and the puppeteers parading them. They have a sense that there is something that underlies what they had previously considered—in their image-gazing state—to be true reality, but, again, they cannot *know* what this something is. They can only have opinions and opinions, indicative of a soul stuck still in the physical world of things, always run the risk of falling off and short of the true, arduous path up and out of the cave. Indeed, a soul of the opinionated condition has only witnessed part of the story, a piece of the whole. They need guidance. They must pay attention to a *phulaks* force.

Beyond opinion, *thought* emerges, and thinking (a guider, a manager of thought; a guardian; indeed, perhaps *the phulaks force*), for Plato, leads one further up the path and ushers the soul into the third condition, knocking on knowledge’s door. Having made it thus far, the soul finds its self in the intelligible realm, the metaphysical world of forms, the fringes of true reality; their thinking—now true thinking—now entertains those ideas that are—forms—and the world that is—the firm bed of fundamental being. At the height of the cave, at the enlightening mouth, the soul, in the fourth condition, *understands*. From this vantage, the soul can look back down along the route they have taken to this point and see the souls, the conditions of their soul

below, as they navigate and painstakingly fumble around the physical world, nevertheless managing to ‘make things work’ in the world of things, vacillating between their capacity, on the one hand, to imagine and, on the other, to have opinions. And these thinkers can see and sense the transition point from thing—physical, visible—to form—metaphysical, intelligible. And further, their understanding affords them an insight—a glimpse—into that entity that undergirds it all—every-form and -thing. The primary source of light and life and beauty and truth: the everyday sunshine. Without the light of the sun, the visible and intelligible realms remain empty, vacant, null. That is, without the sun and its radiant spectrum, its awakening force, there would be no thing; nothing; pitch black dark. There would be no intelligibility, no true form behind the thing, indeed, no thing for which there to be a form. Without the light of the sun, and even in the shadow, nothing threatens to reign here; a terrifying prospect and indeed, according to Plato, altogether undesirable, perhaps even bad.

Further yet, Plato attributes value to the light of the sun—a privileging of the day—and what he calls the form of the good, a form unlike the other forms. Indeed, the form of the good informs all other forms, again, the essential, metaphysical objects ‘behind’ the things (mere shadows) we see in the physical world around us. The sun, then, is not neutral, but good, charged, and pointed. The sun has a point for Plato that is beyond its self—the good, the light, white sight: it is a cosmic guardian expending and casting out darkness in its own right, patrolling by way of the center, the intense middle, an incessant revolution around and toward the heart of the matter, the beating heart of matter, this material world. The sun, renderer of all emanates a basic goodness that needs only widespread realization for it to be unanimously, universally so. Goodness under-lies and -girds all that is and, as such, represents, somehow, that which is beyond being, and indeed, is that which makes being and existence possible *in the first*

place. Latent within Plato's understanding of the world is a fundamental point, a pointing, a directive, an order, a command: goodness; recognize it; let it be; let it inform, as it naturally does, being, form, and thing: all that is.

In Plato's Socrates words:

You must say, then, that what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. And as the cause of knowledge and truth, you must think of it as an object of knowledge. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things. But if you are to think correctly, you must think of the good as other and more beautiful than they. In the visible realm, light and sight are rightly thought to be sun-like, but wrongly thought to be the sun. So, here it is right to think of knowledge and truth as goodlike, but wrong to think that either of them is the good—for the status of the good is yet more honorable. (*Republic*, 508e-509a)

Further, he suggests that

The sun...not only gives visible things the power to be seen but also provides for their *coming-to-be, growth, and nourishment*—although it is not itself *coming to be*....therefore, not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their existence and being are also due to it; although the good is not being, but something yet beyond being, superior to it in rank and power. (*Republic*, 509c, emphasis mine)

The form of the good does not come to be, and yet makes possible growth and the coming to be—becoming. The form of the good both fundamentally is (inasmuch as it is intelligible) and is beyond—we might say, before, or even behind (maybe even because?)—being. It is, again, the pointedness of the world, the direction, the directive, the natural order, an underlying oneness

that is whole and total and which needs not. It requires nothing from me, but submission, recognition, and a falling in—a following the—line, a following the leader who guides me, my soul, and my thinking along the line. It needs not. I need only follow its lead, its call, its command; again, goodness; let it be.

So goes the story I tell. So goes the story I heard in the cave. So goes the story I told my self.

The story—this telling of the story—of the cave imbued in me a sense of widespread, objective meaning latent within the world. The sun casts an intense radiance, informing all. Everything, I heard, then traces its underlying veritable goodness—needing only recognition, realization, and adherence—back to this whole and total source: the one. There was a healed and healing world beyond this sick and sickening world worth striving for, worth pointing people toward. The more people that knew, that understood, these metaphysical facts, the better. The enlightening mouth of the cave changed me, was significant for me, and instilled in me a sense of purpose. Although I did not know it then, I wanted to be a guardian, a leader of the people out of ignorance and into the underlying truth of it all. So pointed and led toward the sole source of goodness, that fundamental bed of being that always already informs the world in a perfect way, I desired to become a pointer, a leader, a director of people’s attention away from the darkness—the realm of shadows—and toward the enlightened and enlightening realm.

Pause.

Oneness— at the end of the day that’s a nice story that helps me sleep through the night. Something remains beyond my falling and falling asleep. A complete circle, a veritable core; there’s closure, certainty, coherence, and consistency. Indeed, I wake up again and again and again. That’s how the story goes. Uni-versal reliability; one-line describes it all. You’ve just—

sorry, I've just—been following one line. It feels good. It sounds good. It is good. It is. Such a story serves as the basic psychic foundation of this human('s) world; the way, through their actions, that humans—some humans 'for the sake' of all, an imperial, settling way—have narrated and created it, intentionally designed to be held and secured by an unsurpassable horizon—a limit, a lock—beyond which there is no getting (Warren, 2018). The human soul, according to Plato, is immortal—this is their ultimate lock, an infinite lease on life.

This world, its humans, and their prevailing way are locked to this shape—what other than a total sphere?—a strange cave, with strange walls, a world of spheres and spherical, cyclic, one-track-minded thinking.

There are other stories. Other stories exist. Especially regarding takeaways from Plato, or how to read and work with Plato in this contemporary context. Of course, they do. I am choosing to tell the story in a different way—that's the point. Indeed, I am trying to tell it in the way that I heard it, an intersectionally positioned figure susceptible to brutal acts of other neglect in the name of self preservation.

Which is to say: the story of oneness is not the only story that people—humans—have told. It is, however, the one that any given human's being relies on. It is the one that, through imperial conquest of body, mind, and soul (which is a reduction of the three into one, into the supremacy of conscious experience and the capacity for mental faculty), makes this world possible and profitable. It is the one that won and wins out, at least for 'me.' I see it everywhere around me.

I write, if for nothing else, than to expose the total education that this world finds its self, its selves in, the universal lead, the leash of life. Does Plato, as I claim, really play that grand of a role in shaping this settled world, a world hell-bent on settlement, on achieving a settled state?

Plato's place in *this* world—and his culpability in the concretization of what I am thinking of as the onto-culture of the imperial minded human and his wake and way—is not settled for me.

Telling the story in this way feels urgent, for what I do know is this: the story of the one cannot be pursued and realized in isolation—it requires congregation, and this congregation is massive.

The condition of the world is one of brutal tumult, with the possibility of aid only in the distribution of capital, which is only temporary—not to mention that it takes a lot of time—for capital must move and accumulate and trickle down slowly, inequitably, in its own endless, cyclic fashion; the way of the invisible handedness of the *phulakes* in the *agora*.

Nevertheless, if nothing else, this project rests and relies on and pulls up alongside this unsettled ground—the ever-complicated, to an end, I hope, relationship I have to this particular (which feels like I am saying singular) Plato figure—his singular stuckness in my world, my seeing him and his allegorizing, cavernous thought in every single thing that I do, in all that I am and, I worry, in all that I will ever, could ever be. Like a parent, he is a guardian, indeed, of the immortal variety. The church and the school—institutions of which I am a product—reverberate with a logic that, in hindsight, I attribute to him. The ordinary preacher points to God; the teacher to Capital—and both *through* Platonic ontometaphysical concrete, a firm bed of being. They adhere, whether they intend to or not, to the order of being, the order of the human being.

Would he have wanted—much less accepted—such an honor? A suffocating support, a safeguard, a way, an odd anchor—the honor of being a good teacher, indeed, a teacher that is dead? No, I don't know if he would want this—I claim that he has been dragging me up this way. Perhaps I've been dragging him. Perhaps I've been keeping him alive. Perhaps that's all I'm doing now, and maybe all he wants to do is finally die.

Again, I think of Plato not as an originator of this way of thinking about and conceptualizing reality, but as someone who noticed, observed, and promoted rather linear, orderly, and uniform patterns and went about concretizing and calcifying them. He is not, I claim, alone in adhering to this paradigm.

On his own, Plato could not have thrust his thinking (which, again, need not even have explicitly stemmed from there—for indeed Plato, inasmuch as he picks up on patterns, picks up on *human* patterns and *human enlightenment* thought and an enlightened human way of thinking) throughout the millennia. Indeed, Plato could not have achieved this far-reaching, resonant feat, the impact of his particular story on the shape of this current world (this world that is a current), much less the shape of me, more than two millennia down the chronological road of human time, by himself. Certainly, he had his own teachers—his own guardians: Socrates, Parmenides, his brothers—who ‘preceded’ him. *And* he had students, and students who became teachers, *phulakes*, and spreaders of the story—this particularly pointed and ultimately onto-supremacist sort of storying—in their own right. To get it here—where I claim it is still present, even if in an abused fashion (although Plato’s fashion was not above abuse)—took intentional acts of work and working. His students and others of self-similar lineage have, throughout the millennia, told this singular story differently, with their own words, tailoring it to their audiences, albeit with the same point. Such a story and sort of storying now pervades the normal logic of this world—and runs rampant. Again, I suppose I can only say that it feels this way to me.

And so, although I first came across Plato and his *Republic* and the allegory of the cave when I was a young adult, I had been primed—immersed in this structured and structuring atmosphere, the cultural milieu and dominant current of the world—to let such a story—the unidirectional, universal tale of the cave—sink deeply into my psyche, my soul. Decades of

similar gestures preceded what emerged as a fixation with this particularly Platonic flavor of signification and storytelling. Indeed, in both the church and the school—from both preachers and teachers—I heard a similar story, a story with a similar, underlying point: oneness—a closed and total, totalizing sphere—and a way of conceptualizing, narrating, and shaping my self that followed suit.

I beat my fist on the wall of the cave—may there be echoes; may they communicate something up and out. Some thing crumbles. May they point to the mundane ways that one-track, way-seeking, hyper-competitive mindedness manifests in the everyday, normal experience of ‘me,’ just another church-goer, school-goer, cave-dweller.

The church

Several times a week when I was young, my family—my mother, sister, brother, nanna, pappaw, and I—attended a fiery-spirited evangelical/Pentecostal (the distinction blurs) church called Fearnot Assembly of God, tucked away in a small, rural Pennsylvania borough bearing the same name: Fear not. In this Christian community, the vibe was serious: energetic, lively, convicted, and nevertheless strict, harsh, and severe. At least it felt that way to me. God, I learned, is an all-powerful being, giver of laws, commander of ways, bringer of judgement: *I AM*.

Fear not; an aspiration. What is there to fear when God, the Creator of the universe, perfect and capable and sure and secure as such an entity is and must be, is on my side? Uncertainty, worry, anxiety dissipates in the presence of such majesty. There is a God, the story goes, and this God’s ability to create a cosmos ensures that there is a greater plan, a guiding thread, guardrails, justice, reconciliation, redemption, and ultimate closure. And so, what shall I fear? I—a meager, worldly human—am safe in the hands of my creator; no matter what.

Emanating from and integral to such a ‘figure’ is an objectivity so grounded and certain that I might live freely, courageously, and similarly spirited. That is, if...

Fear not; a command. Such a Godhead, the story goes, has rules and laws. Fearlessness justified finds only those who obey the commandments of the creator. Contingency contorts the story. For indeed, I miss the mark, I deviate from the plan, that pre-ordained path. For indeed, I go astray, I wander, and I fall. I scold my self—a harsh rebuke (an echo: “I am so stupid!”). A singular, internal cycling—a story I begin to tell my self: that I am an individual, personally responsible for my actions and for living with the consequences and facing the repercussions of my actions; that the way I am in the world is because of what I have done, first and foremost, and *not* because of what others have done to me, and *not* because of the impressions others have left on me.

Another command; repent. I hear the voice in my head: turn your singular back from that sinful, deviant, deluded behavior and face and embrace the light of forgiveness, wholeness, and healing. By turning your attention solely toward the heavens, you alone in communion with God may save you, lost soul. The complete oneness of God—a oneness comprising three complementary parts and nevertheless ultimately One (sound familiar?)—has the power to wipe a bedeviled, dirtied, and darkened slate clean, to cleanse the illness that, the voice becomes confused, you/ I, in your/my own fallen state, allowed and let in.

But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
You descendants of Abraham my friend,
I took you from the ends of the earth,
From its farthest corners I called you.

I said, ‘you are my servant’;

I have chosen you and have not rejected you,

So do not fear, for I am with you;

Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you;

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41: 8-10, NIV)

Fear not; a call for faith; that although I will persistently fuel the fever, so too may I persistently return to prayer, confession, forgiveness, healing, wholeness, a sense of self as one, as in my brokenness enough. Faith; that although I feel plural, shattered, an entangled mess of contradicting, multifarious pieces, there is a singular ground—a sure surface—on which I stand (which *I am*), crafted by the Creator who also conceived of me.

In the church, I learned to think of and shape my self as a detached, objective entity, akin to the figure of God and the way that I had been told to envision him, the way that I had been told to think of my self in relation to him. I learned objectivity, oneness, a sense of self as individual, wholly responsible for how I am. I began to think of my self as sphere, of there being an ‘in here’ to me, radically other than, or separate from, the ‘out there’ to you.

The school

In school, I learned—was taught—to be a Glaucon, an Adeimantus, to go along with: what my teachers told me; how they told their teaching to me; and, in particular, where they as a unit—a cadre, a force, of teachers, guiding and guarding figures, over time—were directing me, a student eager to succeed, eager to mobilize my self and my conditions. The story I heard aligned and fed into narrative of the oneness—*the* way things are—of the world. For what it is worth, I do not begrudge these teachers. Rather, I point to what I observe to be the story—the

singular, underlying story—that an institution like a school—especially a standardized one, caught in the momentum of this world and its order and orders, and especially those in the United States and its cultural mantra of and obsession with capital—tasks its teachers with telling. Such a story is, of course, on one hand, important, for it would be irresponsible *not* to equip the masses with the tools they need to navigate this world that very much is. I point, however, to the possibility of doing more than one thing—of telling more than one story—at once. I point to the fact that there is something else already going on in the school, in the church, and especially in and through their institutional nature, their institutionalized and institutionalizing nature—that is, their ordinary, normal currency driven and order deriving current. For there is something else already going on in the world: a gargantuan flow that is inescapable—to be is to breathe it in and out (and, for what it’s worth, to cease to be is to breathe it in and something else out. It is to give back to the world the very thing it needs to continue doing what it does, but with the option not to, with the perhaps new option—an additional option—of allowing the space that necessarily arrives to remain.)

The school (which, again, for me means a small, rural, rather ‘normal’—which is to say not raising any eyebrows, which is to say passing under the radar—public school).

I, like the vast majority of unsuspecting students populating these halls, followed these teachers’ lead. And they, these teachers, tended to be what I am thinking of as ontopedagogical conservatives. Having been shaped by similar teachers, shaped by similar walls and the similarly strict and particular walling mechanism that is the school, they and their ordinary, everyday movements perpetuate the often unquestioned (and even when questioned often doubled-down on, one way or another) structure, the culture, the shape and the expectations and the norms inherent to the culture around them. They were experienced in living in and navigating this

world—they were the adults in the room. I submitted to their authority (perhaps because it appeared to benefit me, perhaps because I was scared, perhaps because it was these teachers expected me to do). I oriented my attention—similarly shaped within similar if not the same walls—to where they pointed it and me. I nodded along—subservient—to their pointed questions, directives, and orders. I listened, heard that subtle undertone, and learned that I was first and foremost on my own when it comes to achievement, of achieving what I wanted, should I want to live a profitable life. At the end of the day, *I* completed my assignments, and *I* received a grade. *I* took the tests—*I*, again, was personally responsible.

So goes the story: every one out for their self. Of course, at times my peers and I helped each other and collaborated, built bonds and friendships, and studied together. Nevertheless, the underlying structure, the prevailing paradigm, and the order of capital worked its way and staked its claim. Ultimately, it came back to me—it always, in this world, comes back to ‘me’—the singular student and what *I* could do, how *I* could perform. The underlying order, the backdrop, the foundation compelled us into independence, slotted us individually, obsessed us with class rank, grade-point-averages, and test scores, and kept our sights on where we—I—alone would go, what I would do, and how much money I would make given the prestige of my plans and prospects post-graduation (the most prestigious and prosperous of prospects being, of course, so the story goes, more school; college, university, higher education, lifelong learning).

Sports exacerbated the individualistic, competitive edge and urge that the school spurred on in me. Football, in particular, made brutality possible, acceptable, and profitable—or, at the very least, the prospect of rising through the ranks and boasting my strength and power enticed me so such that I risked harming even my own teammates.

An instance: the football field—whether in times of practice with my own team or when competing against an opponent—enraged me. Admittedly, I learned that this rage—at least in the company of sportsmanship, and with a sense of dignity—was justified when harnessed against another team. The onlookers want a good show. And so for the sake of this show, and doing my part in the bringing about of its good quality, I practiced with my own team as if they were on the other side, in the way of victory. My one-track mind chimes in: how would I prepare for high-stakes play—game day—if I did not practice with a similar vigor? I hit my teammates hard, relentlessly. On occasion, I fought with them, fists flying, my only goal to pin them to the ground, to hold them there, and to prove my dominance. My school wants to see their team win.

A particular instance of brutality sticks with me. The linemen are practicing on their own and a collective desire for a round of “bull in the ring” begins to bubble. Soon we find ourselves circled up, facing a lone teammate in the middle who has, along with their helmet, shoulder pads, and other gear, a padded shield. The idea behind this ‘game’ is that the coach would call out the name of a player poised and ready on the perimeter. The called would then run toward the man in the middle, who would then, in theory, begin their own charge toward the one making the advance. At the very least, the middleman would brace for impact, would take on a defensive stance. And then the two would clash. The idea behind this hitting drill is to give players practice bracing for, anticipating, receiving, and administering the sort of impact that happens all the time—play by play—in the intensity and speed of the game. Underlying the logic of the drill, for most players, is an understanding that this ‘opponent’ is a teammate, and that there exists a balance between practicing and doing real harm—and hitting as if there were victory on the line—especially when people’s sizes and strengths and comfort-levels with high-speed impact vary.

I could not see beyond/other than through my enraged, victory-craving and crazed mindset, my mantra of practicing as if we were competing so that when we were competing, I would be ready: to win. The coach calls my name. I take off in full-sprint and accelerate through and bull-doze the man—half my size, and frozen, struck staring at the bull charging from the brink—in the middle. No in between. He collapses to the ground, dazed, concussed, and winded. There is awe, trepidation, praise, caution, cheering, and worry.

Another instance: the wrestling mat. I'm in the spotlight, the ring in the middle of the room, poised to meet my opponent. I take a casual, upright stance. This match is only for me—whether I win or lose, my team has already secured overall victory. I nevertheless feel the thrill, the pressure to perform and not only to win but also to pummel—to assert power—in the process. The referee blows the whistle and movements are but meanderings—there's no real contact. The first period lingers, and passes, two figures circling each other looking for an opening.

And then, I am on top and begin to lay the blows. One at the elbow, breaking them down and onto their stomach. I prepare for an arm bar, that is, to crank my opponent *via* prying at the shoulder from his stomach and onto his back. The preparation consists of an aggressive slam of my forearm into the back of his head. I hit once and can't secure the hold. Things aren't moving. I look at the ref expectantly, waiting for a stalling call. Then, again, I pummel harder, so hard that the ref, although he does not give me a penalty, nor even pause the match, cautions me to go lighter. He gives a lightness to me as I knock the daylights out of my opponent, turn him over, pin him, and win.

The worst part about this story? In the hallway after the match, I run into the young man I had just wrestled. He congratulates me. I tell him I shouldn't have hit him that hard, and that I

am sorry. He tells me that he would be doing the same thing—wrestling the same way—if he were my size.

Pause.

A good student and sport, I threw, dove, and sent my self—and was my self sent—head, mind, and body first into the prevailing paradigm—the competitiveness and the individualism for the promise of mobility, victory—and what precipitated in me is a one-track-mindedness, a dualistic, either-or frame of thought, thinking, and being. Victory. Or death (and we can't have that). Everything—all. Or nothing (and we can't have that). No in-between. Or all in-between (and we can't have that). So I settle, a hard swing between two poles, in binary revolution, incessantly.

What, I must muse, is—in *this current, this state, of the world*—schooling and formal education about if not the cultivation of such a singular, self-centered, and ego-logical sense of I? And if it is not about this, then why do we—humans—do school—and structure institutions—in ways that compel people into individualistic self-storying, one-track mindedness, and an expansionist, competitive compulsion? Am I the exception? Am I the norm? Why do we—why do I feel so sure that I—live in a world where such a self-storying leads, as I see it, people to become brutal toward each other, to engage in brutal practices? My way or the highway. I don't care so much about the team winning as much as I do about the credit. Who gets credit for the victory that's coming, in this competitive, conflicted, and conflicting world that cannot not win out? What, if not a sick—wounded, and traumatized—sense of self and ego compels people to, in the first place (the victor's position), resort to judgment, shame, and punishment? Against others, sure, but first and foremost against self? What, if not the world, the way that humans have shaped the world, has be-caused this traumatizing, cruel reality? Is this not the world we live in?

I feel absorbed in such a world—it is the world of the imperial minded man, a world, first and foremost, of pain and suffering, a pain and suffering that first he feels, and then neglects, and then projects, bent on incessant pursuit of solving the problem they are sure they have diagnosed and, through a singular sense of civilization and social evolution and the culture of their self as captain of the ship, cured. His first place—his humanness, the victory he has achieved, and his status as apex pre-dater (he pre-dates all—he, conceiver and shaper of time)—requires neglect. The ground from which he walks—a protective gait—begins with conflict. Within himself—he cannot deal with this problem he finds in himself, and so he turns it into a tool, its own demise. The ship sinks under the weight it desperately wants to relinquish and cut and carve through; doctors—deliberative, calculating thinkers, possible only from such a first place, the place of the human; doctors of...doing surgery with sharp exactitude—there's a point—and a collection of points, a pedagogical edge—here.

A Shape Emerges—some other ship, shipment—and Shies Away: A Way

So submerged—I wallow in the waters that imperial minded men have polluted with their waste and wasting ways. Every step, every pedagogical gesture that I make begins, in part, from this desolate wasteland of a ground; these foundations; the foundations of this world. If nothing else, such a ground offers a plot of dreaded stability. Indeed, it has withstood the test of time. It is that so-called and so-shaped oneness; that firm bed of being, a naturally good thread strewn throughout every-thing; a total arena, leaving no space for nothing; a white and enlightening realm, a space which allows no space—no nothing—at the pinnacle. The darkness, existential blackness, according to this singular way, constitutes the boundary of one—this wall, and its ultimately inconceivable other side, so cast out, so neglected, so guarded against, so obliterated. Darkness—different than and yet related to, perhaps in parallel fashion, blackness, particularly

when it comes to the historical ‘treatment’—enlightenment thinking, white supremacist ideontology—they each find their selves in—is not allowed. The human—at the pinnacle, the hard-fought center—must push out the darkness that wells when they consider what it took to get here. I cannot deal with that right now—that dread. This deferment must go on without end if the human is to retain their achieved position at the peak, the height of the extent (of course, the human relies on forgetting, of neglecting so as to erase the memory of how they got here, their way to the top—indeed, first and foremost; in their first place they must forget the law of natural conservation: what goes up must come down. They remain elevated—I got here because I in my unique capabilities have finally found it, the answer: the truth. Such a feat requires the constant, incessant consumption of a dark fuel.

Darkness—that which light casts out—is that which is beyond, outside of and down below from and deep down within that which is whole, total—and, as such, must, for the sake of the integrity and cohesion of this center, remain at the periphery, locked in place between inside and outside, bound to the wall, to a patrol on the wall, to the work of patrolling the wall, a liminal realm, in a constant state of pushing and pulling, caught, captured (relegated to “the hold;” Sharpe, 2016, p. 68). The oneness creeps in again—what makes me so certain? Nothing. Everything. The state of nothing. The state of everything. It’s broken, and falling, and I can’t fix it—perhaps I can re-shape it, though, at least on the way down. May what goes down come back up.

Although such a story of oneness—of one-track, way-seeking mindedness—pervades this world, and indeed has prevailed in this self—my self, this person’s world—and although it possesses a strong pull and pressure to buckle, there is something else, there are other ways. There are other ways of moving—spaces for breathing—along this route I can’t not travel, this

way and trajectory the world has made for me, a ‘being unto death.’ I must tell my self this, and I must tell my self something else. There must be something I can do. Something else.

I sense it, and it undoes me. Even if not out, there is a way in, within. I am no longer operating only from here—locked to the one, fettered to these foundations. I am not doing one thing. I am telling my self a different story. I am storytelling differently. I am telling the story of my self—and how *I* came to be—to my self and to the world differently, off-kilter to my ordinary mind, against the ruts of that well-worn grain. Indeed, amidst the space left after ontological dis-integration, I bring something else into the fold, a tense and breathing shape and plane.

The pull of the one-track-minded, way-seeking personal narrative

The cave, the church, and the school all pointed me toward oneness of the imperial minded man, his particular movement, a harsh gait. Here I learned an ontological habitude that, I fear, there is no getting beyond. If I am to be, it will be from this here ground—a history I cannot change. I heard in these historicized places of worship and work-ship, first and foremost, a narrative undertone ushering me in a particularly singular, sharply pointed direction—the human dream. In the church and in the cave, I learned that there was an underlying, fundamental singularity on which my attention should be focused—storytellers, teachers, and guardians guided me and coached me toward this way; toward (a limited, one-track, I will concede, notion of) the Good, toward (a limited, particular and not wholly representative (although poised as such) I will concede, notion of) God. In the school, I learned that I was an individual, detached from a world of others and, indeed, in a diehard competition with them for scarce resources that, should I work hard on my own for my self and garner them, would mobilize me and my conditions and would ensure security and prosperity. I learned that if I worked hard enough I

could escape the tendrils of poverty, the grim reality of being poor—if only I could acquire more capital. If only i could capitalize its self.

Interjection: εγω/ego

Where, I cannot help but wonder, did this one-track self-storying begin? Here again we face the tension tied to an unpinpointable origin. In parallel, I ask: when did I begin to have an ego? In a sense (indeed, according to human sense), I, a human, was born with it. A natural co-arrival. Where ‘I’ begin, there too does an ego, my ego—and there, too, is there a figure before me, whose hands I am of and in; indeed, a parental *phulaks* figure. In another sense, it was nurtured; indeed, by these hands: a matter of socialization and enculturation. It’s complicated. The ego pre-dates me; it is a water I have never not known, in which ‘I’ am immersed—a vast sea of ego-logics, that is, a world, ready-made and rife with personally-securing and self-protective walls, a world of tunnel-vision.

I and others have a hand in shaping such walls; the fact of them, for the sake of at the very least ‘me,’ remains. The ego is the wall between the world and me. My claim: for there to be a me, so must there be a wall, a sort of force field which constitutes the boundary that butts up against and rears its head between what I consider to be me and not me, I and not I (even if arbitrary, and even if superfluous, or mismanaged, or abused, humans always make this distinction about their self—they always make this wall about their self; such negation (the outcasting of some negative thing, some-‘thing’ existentially dark, black) integrates their world, their ego tunnel). The ego, like the obdurate wall of being that always already is—sunk into metaphysical concrete—and which integrates this world, is an integral and integrating feature of the human self; it allows a world and a self to appear. We turn briefly to the work of neuroscientist and philosopher Thomas Metzinger (2009). I pay particularly close attention to his

view of the ego as a neurologically, philosophically, psychologically tunneling feature, which is to say a mental feature with walls—and a *phulaks* figure, a personal pedagogue, a narrator of personal experience patrolling that inner face, on guard against incursion and for the sake of the self and its central terrain.

Metzinger (2009) thinks—tells a story—of the ego as a tunneling, perspective-engendering feature of human consciousness which accounts for the appearance not only of a world, and not only of a ‘self,’ but of coherent and unified versions of each of these. Indeed, the two—self and world—are deeply intertwined. A ‘self’ is a ‘someone’ for which a world appears. A ‘world’ is a self’s phenomenal realm. Personal perspectives and world-shaping ways at local, self-ish levels aggregate into a world at large: the river and its massive current and currency, a deep momentum.

In such a world—which is to say at the point of the ego—the self appears as the subjective and perceiving ‘center’ of this process of world appearing, this process of witnessing a world. Why? The ego is a ‘tunneling’ apparatus of the mind (which is to say closing and not opening) because it walls off—for the sake of an apparent world and self in world—in a sort of filtering fashion. What it keeps out are the more nitty-gritty, complex, and ‘higher dimensional’ details of reality—everything that contributes to the ongoingness and relative cohesion of space, time, and matter. And it does so for the sake of a ‘simpler,’ clearer, *intelligible*, and ‘lower dimensional’ picture: that is, the world I sense around me, the first-person, animated portrait that my consciousness presents to me. What I consciously perceive, then, is the product of this tunneling, managing, walling, contouring, and routing feature of the ego. What I perceive then is the ego’s point. Where, we—if you are with me—might wonder, is the inner guardian in relation to the walls of my ego? Hold that thought.

“The ongoing process of conscious experience,” Metzinger (2009) writes, “is not so much an image of reality as a tunnel *through* reality” (p. 6). “I”—a guarding word—am—an ego-ing word—“in” the tunnel. There is an inside and an outside, separated by the force of the tunneling, the wall, the designation not just of “I,” but of “I am.” *This* tunnel *is* inescapable, at least for *me*, for if I am to be, so too must there be the tunnel’s often immaterial wall designating what I am not; there must be a personal boundary. Human consciousness requires such a filtering of—a walling off of—the entirety that constitutes complex reality (not to mention history) into something sensible, perceivable, manageable (managed). Here again there persists a stuckness, a tension that I can’t quite unravel and resolve.

A critical perspective from a distance proves insufficient in its aim to adequately unpack. The tunnel follows, for although he does concede that it is possible for ego-brains to *reflect* on this tunnel feature and thus, for a brief moment, conceptualize outsideness (“there is a tunnel”), Metzinger (2009) finds that this outside nevertheless remains ‘inside.’ At the very least, for there to be an acknowledgement of ‘outsideness,’ it must be brought ‘in.’ I remind my self: there might not be an out of these walls—that’s all this I has been trying to say; indeed, I do not feel like there is an out for me. Put another way, at the point of any noticing of this tunneling feature in the first place, that is, at the moment that any given conceiver realizes that *they* are noticing this outside position (“I am outside the tunnel”), the tunnel re-emerges by way of the very the act of identification (“I am”), of being the entity that notices, of acknowledging the noticing. And so, it is possible to conceive of outside the wall, but it will never be me out there—I, me, and what is ‘of me,’ brings with it a wall, a walling practice. Where I am, there will be a wall I has built/must build.

Such is the problem—the impossibility of real, detached distance for an ego-brain (stuck in the interpersonal, even in the intra-personal)—of the first- and third-personal perspectives. Such is the impossibility of occupying both mental—and what Metzinger (2009) calls “epistemic” (and not ontological; this distinction is not worth our time here, as my point here is on the “irreducibility”)—states at the same time. Action and living in the world occur from the first-person perspective—the perspective inside the tunnel, the walled and filtered perspective. Reflection and contemplation have the potential to alleviate the thinker from the strict bounds, but this reprieve is always (if “I” want to be, if I want to say “I am”) temporary. The thinker must—should they want to do anything, to interact with the world, to have a lived experience—return to the tunnel. Here again we find a habit of one-ness, of *funda-mental* either-or-ness. So normal for this ego; it pervades his world. In this world structured by human consciousness, in this conscious human—this self—I cannot be both inside and outside. The shape and the understood infrastructure does not allow it. I can either be inside, which I am, or I can think and dream of being outside, in which case I am not. This world and self, as the one-track story has gone and goes, rely on a forbidden—intended to be forgotten, damned—outer realm for the sake of sacred inner. What kind of tale, if not away from walling and the walls, might another story tell? Another kind of story telling?

Pause.

My world is full of walls—my conscious experience is the result of a process of walling, of walling off—what is ‘not me’—and walling on—my self. I bring up Metzinger’s notion of the ego tunnel here, at this point, to strengthen my case for—and to point to another story that resonates with the ones I am telling, which advocate for—perceiving this world and the selves which comprise and constitute it as thoroughly, necessarily shaped, walled, bounded, and bound

to the one-track. And I point to the tunnel, and the phenomenon of selfhood that it presents, to further suggest that where there are walls, in both world *and* self, there too are managing figures—a first-person, a third-person, so to speak. If nothing else, the *phulaks* figure accompanies *me, here*. Latent within ‘me,’ there are interactive masons of mind and the tunneling apparatus that is the ego. There are figures poised in relation to that wall, narrators telling stories about this relationship, telling stories that have a shape and suggest a practice of shaping. What might it mean, counter to the tunneling, collapsing limitations of this very ego stuck in funda-mental either-or-ness, to tell a story, instead, of personae—a third-person, a first-person, perhaps, and also more—plurality, for the sake not of one-at-a-time consciousness, personal and subjective experience, but a team, a puzzle, with pieces in tension?

What story do I tell my self? About my self? About the world? I am dis-integrating my self, this personal and local place and space I inhabit in the world. And I am pre-figuring something else; I am bringing something else into the ordinary manifold of me.

Pause.

Despite my inability to point to the origin of this one-track mode of thinking and being in the world, this tendency to tell my self a singular, rigid, either-or story, suffice it to say that when I encountered the institutions—the cave, the church, the school—in the ways that I did, I encountered a stream with a current and contours and well-worn grooves. Going with the flow—is a child expected to be able to discern and tease apart the milieu they are finding their selves in?—of growing up in this world, particular—and prominent—narrative and structural undertones stuck hard and fast. Perhaps it is because human consciousness comes with locks, limits, and ready-made walls—created horizons beyond which there is no getting, despite far reaches and stretches and hopes and dreams—that I am unable to decipher which came first, the

chicken or the egg. There is no “out” of this conundrum, much like there is no “out,” as Metzinger suggests, of the walls of the neurophenomenological cave. Indeed, they are impenetrable. The guardians have arrived and with them their permanence—any attempt I make to send them away would mean taking on the very persona and task which I am attempting to cast out. You could sit there and do nothing—I reckon someone would come along and jolt you out of this meditation, and if not someone, some thing—hunger, a guarding ego’s bodily need and want to continue living on (to a point). What, at this impasse of unknowability and impenetrability, is there to know? To understand?

A world appears, and not just to me locally. There is a world at large. It has a shape. People have shaped it, and have established institutions with an ingrained narrative character. I have encountered these institutions, and they have shaped me. Their walls have told me stories. The protectors of their walls—if only those in menial service within their bounds, those doing the job they were taught and told to do—have shaped me. These particular institutions—the cave, the church, and the school—and their conservers pointed me in a singular direction if only because these now non-human agents have been shaped by human-agents to have *have a point*, a hegemonic force, a latent desire for the shape their creators have founded. This shape matters. These foundations matter. They have pointed me. I now point to their pointing—I need not tell my self the story they told me to tell. A different shape is possible. Different foundations are possible. If not at large—given this world and the concrete quality of its obdurate walls, crafted by human hands and minds—then here, locally.

In these institutional spaces, I could have gleaned other insights and heard other stories. Indeed, there and elsewhere (on the sidewalk leading to the mailbox) I had heard other stories—stories counter to the prevailing and particular and pointed narrative thread of the world and its

deeply rutted, well-worn by persistent, heavy traffic history—a history and story with an inertia. Nevertheless, my mind, as it is bound to do, tunneled and heard and held tightly to one, a story of oneness, amidst this litany of others possibilities—they were but drops of fresh water in a sea of brine. And, indeed, inasmuch as it overwhelms and prevails, the story of oneness too entices; it offers security, certainty, and wholeness, to name only a few dribbles of its drawl. Only upon and through critical self-reflection, honest and vulnerable contemplation, and a practice of breathing space into the tight-packed masonry of my own mind—into and despite the persistence of this tunnel—later on in my life have I been I able to entertain the possibility of de-mystifying and calling into question the one-track, way-seeking mindset that this susceptible, impressionable (to a point, apparently) young one was finding and securing their singular sense of self in.

I am telling my self a different story.

CHAPTER VIII: A BREAK

3.3

Child of Tension

I am the child of a fissure's force. They conceived of me next to the black creek. I bear the mark, a middling name: Douglas; dark stream.

They were separated. For good reason. My father—Jacob Marvin—was angry and abusive and had betrayed my mother and siblings. He abandoned them and chose another woman and her children over and before the family he had had a hand in creating. (I would, of course, like to hear his side of the story. From what I can gather, he was troubled, a black sheep in his Mennonite family. I can only imagine that his resorts to numbing devices and accelerating substances and aggressive projections and punishing forces were attempts to ease and rid and get out of the chaotic tumult of an ill, tormented mind; a mad man. I imagine him as a troubled one trying to make sense of a world and his place and worth in a world that tripped him up into a feverish fall—indeed, into a world of its own fever, its own falling; always already).

And yet my mother—Sonya Allison—appealed this man she could not help but continue to love. My father was drifting, not stably with the other family nor with his own, floating. He found temporary—liminal, at best—residence next to this black river thanks to my mother who knew the people who owned the small plot of adjacent land—a blueberry farm—in little Loyaltown, Pennsylvania. Here, shaded by oak, pine, and sycamore, he parked his small airstream camper, a home away from home. And there, forgiving as she was, my mother gave him another, final chance. He claimed that this time would be different, that he would work to make things right with *his* family; that he would return. He ultimately lied. And so, from the coming together

of these figures—hopeful, lost, losing, forgiving—who were ultimately falling apart, I began to grow in my mother’s womb.

When my mother learned about me, she was, on the one hand, enamored by the mystical work of serendipity—that some good might come from this heart-wrenching, so it turned out, final reunion. And, on the other, she was full of grief, burdened by the thought of how people would react to the news of another on the way, especially those people who knew the disastrous circumstances that her soon to be divorced husband had continued to conjure, continued to leave in his wake; and worse, how people would perceive of her and the seductive spiral toward which she continued to find her self tempted. Worse yet, she worried that people and their judging eyes would suspect and spread rumors that she had found reckless intimacy with someone else—so fast, so soon.

She thought long and hard about an abortion, a real possibility halted only by the reprimand of a fellow Fearnot churchgoer: “you know you can’t do that!” And so she didn’t. My mother alone, despite a co-laboring act of creation, pushed her self to bring me from womb to world. And here I am.

I don’t have any real—as far as I can tell—memory of my father. I do not believe that he ever held me. I am not even sure he spoke a word to me. The first time he saw me, swaddled in my mother’s arms, he asked, I’m told, “is he mine?” He died when I was two years old. Soon after my conception, he had returned to the other family. At around the same time, although the timeline is a blur, he became sick; non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. And while he had apparently begun to recover, with time and treatment, from this particular illness, something else continued to ail him. One morning when he was out tending to his garden, he collapsed, and died. A blood clot had made its way to his brain.

The memories I do have are those, I can only imagine, of a desperate child trying to piece together a picture that has been shattered—a picture he is told, by the world, that should be complete and whole. In one, I am in a pale blue room with blank walls. I stand on the left side of a rickety hospital bed. Above me, in the corner close to the ceiling where the walls meet, there is a window. Sunlight gleams in and shines down on a large man laying in the bed. He has dark brown hair, a beard, and is wearing, similar to the walls, a pale blue hospital gown. There is one monitor attached to him and next to me, and as far as my memory contains, I am the only one there with him. I stand silently. There is no movement in this memory.

In the other memory, there is movement. My mother, siblings, and I are attending his funeral. It is a bright, sunny day. We park out back and head into the funeral home. The entrance, in my mind, is below a large building and in the back, off the main street, in an alley of sorts. Something about the structure of the building feels off. The building is large, and the space we occupy so small. Inside, we enter what feels like a shrunken room. The drop-ceilings feel too low, too dropped. There are no seats for us as the front, and so we sit in the back corner, next to a black curtain. Everyone is wearing black. At the front of the room there is a large black casket. Inside, the remains of my father. I do not remember seeing him inside of it. The memory ends there.

Pause.

I am a child of tension—this tension—conceived in moments of pain and forgiveness and hope and despair, emergent in critical junctures of faith and wonder, and born on a precipice between the absolute presence of my strong, enduring mother and the absence of my father. Next to this pit, teetering and traipsing, I find a footing—a strong one, despite the rough and rocky road—only because of her, only because of what she made possible for me (for all of us, my

siblings). And, of course, the black background he provided, of which I cannot say much. Indeed, I have gone too far, I fear, already.

Pause.

Two months before she died, my mother told me she had something serious to talk about with me. We were regularly having what I had considered to be serious conversations throughout the entirety of her diagnosis and treatment. They arose organically. I didn't know what to expect here, with this overt prompting. And then, in the moments that she began talking, it dawned on me: she knew—or at the very least strongly suspected, worried—that she was going to die. And there was something that she needed to say. This story, if she had kept it quiet, would have died with her.

She told me about my father, and how she saw him in me. In my anger, in the habits she recognized in my tumultuous history of relationships, in my general patterns of relating, in my emotional tendencies, and in my apparent (and actual) vacillating between extremes of thought and feeling. Above all, she acknowledged that I had been abandoned, that I was born with at least one metaphorical foot in an abandoned realm. A creator had abandoned his creation. This fact had a hold on me. And then she did what he could not—as she always had. She released me. In her convicted, spirited tone and tenor, she spoke: “I release you from this abandonment. Let it hold you no longer. May you hold it no longer.” She brought it—what she could, on her part—to an end. She initiated a process of ending. (She pointed me toward my father figure, a *phulaks*, Ender.)

Now loosed, I began to fall, and turned into two. I began to realize that I had always been falling, perpetually, in a crevice...between: a part of me on the soft, sure ground that she had nurtured—the ground the human cultivates for its self, a beautiful realm; and another part of me

into that cold chasm—the ground the human cultivates for its self, a terrifying realm. Between the fruitful and the formidable. A space where I could questionably be.

Pause.

What does it mean to let go of something you did not know you were holding? How do you loosen such a grip, a grip that, once you realize it, you realize, too, that you've never not held? That has never not held you?

This story struck me. Growing up, I felt nothing but love, an inter-generational maternal energy. At the time of my birth, my mother, still separated from my father, and my siblings were living with my mother's parents in what we all fondly remember as the farmhouse. My grandmother—nanna—and grandfather—pappaw—welcomed my mother with what I can only imagine were open and tentative arms; there had been a lot of tumult—would it persist? Would it follow them here? It did not. Somehow, the farmhouse was a refuge. I came home to it as a babe, and had little sense of the pit that preceded me. I found shelter, sustenance, joy, and a freedom to roam, play, and wonder here and, for the most part, throughout much of my childhood. My memories here—in these formative years at the farmhouse in particular—sing with verdancy. They are full of sunshine.

I learn as I live, however, that memory, and what is re-membered, is only a part of the story. I begin to remember the shadows, the dark. There is before, before me, before the dawn, before the wake. And then there is all that I have forgotten. I operate according to a fundamental dismemberment, a missing memberment. Now on set: existential dread and crisis: I can never really know. Any certainty I claim—no matter where I base it—is a story I tell my self, a rendition—at least in part—of a story I have been told, a story that has been told *for me*.

A bane. A base.

This story struck me because by telling it my mother pointed me toward a problem I did not know I had, toward a problem I did not know had me. Of course, I had had a sense of the personal impression and impact that growing up without such a figure in my life—and the adjoined conditions—would leave on me. What struck me was the force of my mother's release—her ability to release me from this brink, and what had until this point proved an endless teetering. She forced me to face this problem at my core, this schism, the fissure. She offered no way out—she pointed in. She sensed my grip tightening around a font of pain and loss, and this very grip is that from which she released me. The singular grip—the grip of singularity—is the bond she broke, unlocked. Although she could not ameliorate the fact of the abyssal part of me—there it was, there it remains—she suggested that I might relate to it in a different way. She said that there was something I could do in addition. She encouraged me: to loosen my grip, to ultimately let go; to trust in what my eyes/my I could not see. She pointed me toward the dark, and further.

She told me—as she always had—that, should I fall, I would be okay; my response—my way of telling the story, narrating my experience, teaching my students—is what mattered. My response—my practice, action and reflection on and in the world—is what I can control; my way of practicing (the how not the whether) is where, if anywhere and even if only minimally, I have some semblance of a say. And so I have chosen to piece together these here words. The cadence, tone, flow, and disturbed and disturbing quality of these here words. Indeed, she echoes, there would be falling—out of line, into an elsewhere and onto an other line for a brief moment. There would be a lapse. In the event, faced with these formidable odds, she encouraged me to slow down, pause, and ponder (and to understand the privilege and responsibility that comes with the wherewithal so necessary for such studious behavior): what shall I say? How do I respond?

She lovingly and wisely pushed me—as she always did—toward my truth, the truth of my multifariousness (not worthy of pathology, nor apology), my multiplicity, scattered pieces. More specifically, at/with this particular point, she pushed so that I might acknowledge the fact of my standing, with multiple feet, touch points, in and amidst multitudes—as an entity capable of sitting alongside irresolvable, persistent, nagging tension, and terror. Multiple, complex positions predate me and amidst and between them I find and am re-finding my self. And she pushed me so that I might no longer feel pulled into the delusion of being (in) only one, of forcing my self into only one, of holding tight and relentlessly clenching to that sense of singular, suffocating selfhood. She pushed me, my everyday momenting, and my momentum onto, at once, *both* an everlasting ground—the ground she cultivated; in and around that farmhouse, where I might live and grow (a green and light realm)—*and* into an abyss, *this abyss*; where things, some things, might fade to black and come to an end, where I might bring things to an end (a black and dark realm). I reside—I find a footing—in both locales; me, multiple. Pieces in tension; I, *both* in both *and* in between.

Looking at the Earth from the Moon

There is a tension, a conflict—an intensity—at my core, at the core ‘of me.’ And space—void. In-tension. Intention. A space of tension—original titans having faded away, and I pushing and pulled between. A navigator of impressions; what do I take, what do I leave? What do I allow and keep in? What do I reject and cast out? How do I constitute the wall? I both am and am not in control of the answers to these questions. I both push for my own right—making my own way—and feel a pull *from* these specific points where I have happened to spawn and *to* the thread thereafter. Inasmuch as I—loosed—am making my own pointing gesture in this act of

alternative storytelling, to these points—pointings, non-pointings—I am nevertheless tied by tether—bound.

Such is the story that I am telling my self. So moves my *phulakos*, a personal pedagogy. Why? What's the upshot? What kind of a shape does such a personal narrative project? If not a sphere, if not only a sphere and its sharp, excising edge, what then? Before explicitly (for I have been building such a shape all along) venturing into this strange topological territory, we must consider (again explicitly, for... “”) the impressive presence of circles and spheres in this world. So present, and presenting, that they can't not be a part of my consciousness, the consciousness 'of me.' Indeed, the world is in the shape of a sphere—I have no choice but to follow suit, to an extent. I am a part of, not apart from, this world, at least according to a spherical—and even hyper-spherical (the extent)—logic.

The world (and its unquestioning/only questioning *phulaks* forces) has shaped and formed and informed—and still does—the harshness, the severity, and the objectiveness of the stories that I heard come from the mouths of storytelling authority figures in arenas such as 'the cave,' 'the church,' and 'the school.' Scoldings—I was an unruly child. Scaldings—left, leaving, a mark on my eyeball, on the shape of my eye-ball, on the shape that I see when I gaze up and out of the mouth. Onto-pedagogical conservatism points here, in these ways. What is valuable in this world? An objective current. An objective currency. What sort of shape do the guardians, teachers, and storytellers of the world, in their wake and through their ways, and whether or not they intend to, make possible and profitable? Indeed, I ask again: what is valuable in this world? End-less-ness. Infinity. Multiplicity: Everything, Everywhere, All at Once. We need to think about the shape of consciousness—the object of its ordinary, human focus. Onto-pedagogical progressivism points here, in these ways.

What is the world obsessed with if not ontology? It can't not be. The world—the realm of human beings—their reach, their reflection—reflects its shape: onto-logos. Ovtō – omicron. Omicron, a small o. Small o's. Small circles—objectively, a sphere—the building blocks of everything—indeed the building block: BEING/ONTOS, and black-being (crossed out), its infinitely expendable—and always already expended—counter-part. Need I relate to existence in this way? This train of thought whimsically prances from path to path, not like a train at all, nevertheless loco-motive. That is, as a human being who takes his self to be a strict, harshly monitored sphere? In part, yes—there is no escaping a world that is a sphere—like the tunnel, it follows. I might do something in addition, and there releases a pressure: I need not overturn the mountain; may it overturn me. May there be space. May there be movement. May there be space between movements.

So compelled by the institutional 'stories' that I heard figures of public authority telling me—with their hands and hands of thought—I grew up thinking that I was essentially, at my core, not much different than a sphere, an inside detached from the outside. A protective shape. A protected shape. Indeed, in a deep, fundamental sense, I am (modernity's first phrase of protection; it's starting point). Such is the shape from which I am making a break—no longer bound, but released, and not breaking out, but in (a tension); or, at the very least, such is the shape with which I no longer seek to solely identify. I offer the possibility of an additional shape, a story in addition. I am and am not one, but multiple. Perhaps I am—but a part of 'us,' as Harney & Moten muse—more and less than one. Let the shape and shapes I take and make and mold for my self and may my shifting between these shapes tell such a string of stories. May they meet you like the dull points they are, and, when taken together, may they obfuscate the sharp edge. May it be a gentle nudge. That is, if you find your self to be, like me, at least in part,

a spherical entity, an entity with a clear—even if cloudy, and nevertheless communicable—boundary between your self and the world. That is, if you are a human being. That is, if you are a human being who feels as if, according to the one fell swoop of being which cuts off and distinguishes you and your self from the world, their mind has been similarly severed from their body. May they—these stories, their points, the dulled edge—meet you: self and world. May they meet you: these pieces. I write so as to heal the split, to suture, in a sense, my act of splitting. But first, the splitting.

Sphere

Not only do the stories that I heard in the cave, the church, and the school suggest a personal storying of self as singular. They compel and in many cases require that I begin to view my self as an individual independent and detached from others. The stories do not just make an offer. They make it materially lucrative. They shaped me insofar as in hearing them, their harshness, and their scalding/scolding tenor, I—the ‘young’ (peda-) to be led (agogos)—began to follow suit and shape my self. I shaped my self according to the pressures, so that I could make sense of the undertone, and so that I could reap the reward—so that they might, finally, in the end, think I was good, that I did a good job, that I was ‘a good boy.’

The stories that I heard from the outside—those stories that prevailed and proved dominant in the cultural milieu in which I learned and grew—incentivized me to construct a particular sort of boundary—wall in which I might move and protect my self, a surface on which I might move and explore, where I might push the paradigm. They incentivized me to construct such a boundary both between my self and the world and, indeed, *within* my self.

Stemming from the words I heard in and drew from these stories—baked into the space between lines and the pauses between diction—the shape that appeared possible and profitable

was one which separated me from the world, which separated me from not me. I wanted to be like God; I wanted to live a Godly life, and so I shaped my self—objective, detached, a perfect, uniform shape of multiple (three, trinity) dimensions—accordingly. I wanted to rise through the ranks. I wanted to make my hometown proud, to be the individual who ‘made it’ (which is to say, who ‘made it out’ of ‘the valley’), and for this pursuit I needed to conceive of my self as ultimately independent of my peers. We went to school together but we would leave, en route to our lives out and in the real world, separate. Indeed, the real world would separate us, unless we were able to stick around, in the depressed rural towns we’d used to call home. I wanted to understand the universe, and so I directed my attention toward the blazing core of this solar system, and to the precipitant (onto)metaphysical rain and reign, the logic that fell down in rays upon me—which made and makes this world visible and intelligible. In doing so, I effectively turned my self into a mirror, a reflective and reflecting tool. I wanted to inhabit—to be in the world, to exist in—something that would encase me, hold me, and support me. Above all else, I wanted to be a sphere.

I heard different pieces—different spheres—of the same old story depending on the environment, which is to say I did not get the complete story in any one of the institutional settings that I name. In the church and the cave (and in my studying of the cave under the pretense of the university), I began to think of the world itself as a sphere and I but a microcosm. I began to understand that I was viewing the world through an ontotheological lens—a lens which, over the course of human time, has proved normal. The world ‘out there,’ the realm of God, the heavens, and the world of forms, the gleaming radiance of the sun appeared to me as necessarily detached, separated from me by way of a wall that enclosed behind its pristine gate/gait purity and perfection. Inside the walls that formed the bauble, there was, I heard and

believed and told my self, an essence, an underlying truth, a stable and obdurate and lasting, immortal, beyond mortal, non-mortal core. I desired to shape my self similarly—I emulated the goodness and holiness and everlastingness I imagined was ‘out there’ so that it might be in here, in me. I turned my self into a sphere. I was turned into a sphere.

In the school, I began to think of and narrativize my self as a sphere because of some different constraints. The contemporary classroom culture of competition fueled a concurrent culture of individualism. I felt I had no choice but to take part in these forces—indeed, I did not even know that I could question them, their overwhelming presence—especially if I was to make something out of my life. I began to think of and shape my self as fundamentally one, a singular and individual entity—every-one out for their selves; everyone as their own one. I was encouraged to think and shape my self in this way—the world’s current compelled me here. My peers became counter-parts, the parts I would position my self against as I established the ground from which I would propel my self, on which I would find security as others propelled me. Such a contest can only be waged from within, which is to say there has to be a within—distinct from a without—in the first place for there to be such a feud. Which is to say, there must be something like a sphere—a closed surface, a surface which encloses and engenders an interiority, a sense of self-ness, subjective is-ness, an ego-structure. At its center lies me.

(Self-described) garden variety physicist Clifford Stoll (2021) describes a sphere as a shape that splits the universe into an inside and an outside. A sphere has two surfaces: a ‘within’-side and a ‘without’-side. Growing up, I thought of and narrativized my self as ‘within’—and indeed as fundamentally similar to—a sphere as such. I situated the world—all that was not quite me—as ‘without,’ or different than me, albeit similar in its, and its inhabitants own ‘within’-ness.

Which is to say I thought of you—other humans, other creatures, existence on the whole, a total function—as something of a sphere (you, whether living, dead, or in between), too.

I know I am not alone in this sort of atomistic personal story-telling, nor in my gravitating toward this way of conceptualizing my self. Indeed, I was not alone in these classrooms, in these church pews, on these practice fields, in these cave chains. Trust your self, young one. This differentiating between self and world and identifying with the former and not with the latter, taking the former as ‘my own,’ a private space that is unique to me and leaving the latter as, again, that world ‘out there,’ is *normal* in this world, a world full of and, indeed, requiring a mind and mindedness that takes the form of a one-way tunnel (Metzinger, 2009). The shaping of self as sphere is normal—an unspoken expectation—in an ego-logical world.

Self

I both did and did not resist this weight. Both do and do not. One day, when I was ten, I noticed its thrust—the weight of the world, the momentum of its current and currency—when I had a peculiar thought: how do I know that I’m not the only one who is really real? Could someone else actually convince me that they, too, feel a sense of deep personhood, and, further, that this feeling we both have is similar, similarly deep, similarly sure? Could we really both be? Is my certainty of my self in contention—contension—with you and yours? The first place my aware conscious mind went, when given an avenue, was doubt. It was to call into question not my own integrity (a dis-integrating gesture) but the equitable—on par with ‘me’—existence of others. Only because I felt that I necessarily existed did I feel the need question you, and not the other way around. *That* is how this world works—*that* is the world’s first place. Possible only through the spherical way, or at the very least a way which is closed. All or nothing. All in

between, or no in between. I am now telling my self a different story. I am telling that young one a different story.

I felt the pressure of the force of the normal. I had a choice, and chose to indulge, for status, prestige, understanding, enlightenment, forgiveness, and an everlasting soul. It is hard not to get pulled into gravitational force of the world, its movement, its inertia, and its momentum. Indeed, resistance is marked by struggle, a wear and a tear. I neither blame nor judge this younger me—that is not my role. I am healing the split. That's still me. I am moving differently. There is something else going on. Indeed, the world—beyond and before me—plays a part in me, who I am, and who I have and can take my self to be. I need not carry the full weight of responsibility. I am not, actually, a lone, detached sphere. At the very least, I need not so singularly be.

Figure 5. My young self, open access image//original location lost

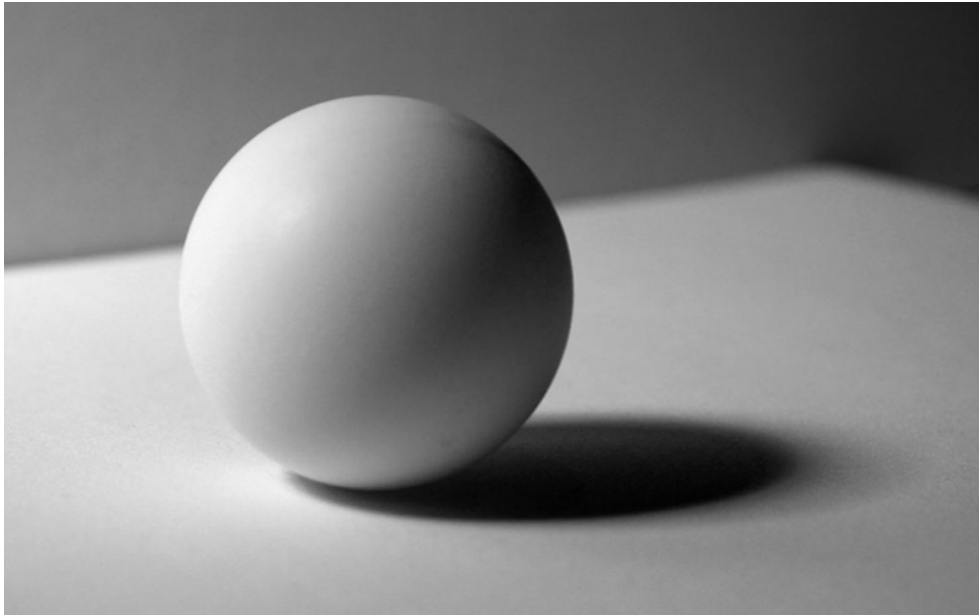


Figure 6. The world, <https://theconversation.com/what-if-the-world-was-one-country-a-psychologist-on-why-we-need-to-think-beyond-borders-152135>



World

A sphere is a closed and closing surface and shape constituted by a precise boundary between inside and outside. The world is a sphere, securing what is within and what is not without. Figures—storytellers, teachers, guardians—notice and touch on, indeed they manage, this, what amounts to being a wall—this world that is a wall—when they engage with their listeners, readers, students, pupils. They manage it from without and from within. Their outer work translates into inner work in the movement of the *phulakos* spirit. In this world—as humans and their hands and hands of *phulakos* thought and action have shaped it—when inner elements and outer forces work together, that is, when they collude, and cooperate, ‘things’ move along according to their nature, in agreement with that firm bed of being. I decry not the sphere as such, but the singularity with which I feel that it has been offered—thrust—upon me. Indeed, I decry the *phulaks* force that shaped me so—I decry the world, the world that humans have created. This devastating, dreadful world. Such singularity, such onto-supremacy, such a spherical worldview: these are the *human* precedents—creations—of which Plato is—may the debate remain unsettled, unsettling—either prescriber or describer. *That’s* what I’m pointing at—it breaks down, a non-*phulaks* which is to say pre-*phulaks* force. May it dis-integrate me, my worldview. I am pointing to and through the sphere.

Such is the story I heard and which I told my self. Not only possible, though, this sort of shaping proves highly profitable. When outer and inner forces collide and collude and produce more spheres—the spherical way—the currency of the world increases—becomes more solid, more stable. People become interested in this current state—it works (and labors) for them. This world relies on and thrives when its people—its apex predators/pre-daters—believe that they are, at their core, individuals who must compete against others in order to mobilize their status and

standing, their proximity to the core, the center. Their mission is to distance their selves as far away from the boundary and surface as possible. Their mission is to settle, so as to settle their home, so as to settle their mind, so as to settle their new, perhaps unsettling, unsettled, world. They remain in private—underground. They are not storytellers. They are not teachers. They are not *phulakes*. They send these public figures out to do their bidding, and they send them with a message, a shape in mind.

There is no better way to propel and profit from the state of things *that is, the way things are*, than through providing people—political agents, humans—with the kind of cyclic, closed narrative that gives them a sense of tangible purpose, a sense of meaning. It is impossible not to get caught up in this current. If you exist, you are a part of this, even if a non-part, and even if interstitial, which is to say caught between, which is to say caught, nevertheless captured (may you, into this adumbral space, flee). If you exist, you have heard the spherical story—you have felt its weight, its way. My young self, there's something else. You can bring something else into the manifold. Even if it does not afford an out, may it guide you in. The world be what it may—you, this entity which I have experienced, you need not cling so tightly to the one thing that the world weighs, ties, and binds you to.

This world—so sphered—now normally reproduces its self and the selves that have made it and the selves it makes. This shape is no longer in my hands. My hands are no longer shapers of this singular self and this total world. A sphere without intervention begets and reproduces a sphere; vicious cycles, revolutions, and orbits: the movement and motion of spheres; cosmic harmony. Indeed, order. And on, and on, and on.

I seek not to rid my self of this spherical shape, of this tunneling and spiraling feature of my mind. I cannot. It is inescapable. It integrates me. It makes 'me'—and whatever movement I

make from here—possible. Rather than strive for and story an out, I tell a story in, as an addition. And addition that subtracts. I am incorporating another shape into the mix, one—a strange one—that, I hope, might allow some space to arrive and remain in my midst. That is, in the presence of this infrastructuring sphere, a shape that is at once supporting (indeed, spheres make for impressive building blocks, at least at a macro level, whether they be cosmic, metaphysical, or physical (don't look too closely)) and simultaneously suffocating (so impressive that there remains no space, no way of undoing the construction, a litany of threads so tightly woven they have become a fundamental fabric; in an attempt to undo, I chase a horizon; such a chase makes me who I am; there is no space here, no allowance to cease, for ceasing reveals the current underneath, a flow that nevertheless carries me, a momentum of my ancestry; spheres and bodies in motion, revolution; a chasing of the sun only to realize it is my focal center, that singular entity around which I orbit; this chase, this fall guided by gravity, makes me who I am, an incessant drive to reach that horizon; there is no space here; there is no breath; endless, suffocating thoughts, spiraling always inward and never reaching an end). May there also be something else. May there be breath and breathing. This sphere, its story—it is especially suffocating when I take it to be my soul shape, the sole which is to say singular shape and story I tell my self. Thankfully, I am not doing that one thing here.

Klein Bottle

A Prologue to a Subsection

I first learned about Klein bottles during my first semester of college, in a course all first-years, at this then proud liberal arts institution, must take: the foundations seminar. Each offering of a foundations seminar is different. Interested/enlisted teachers tailor it to their personal, scholarly pursuits, make it popularly appealing, and incorporate some sort of writing component.

This specific context, foundations seminar course experience, enabled my first foray into strange topological territory, the very territory I have been laying out/pointing to and through all along throughout *the course* of this project.

The instructor called the course Visual and Mathematical Patterns. And while I ultimately wound up moving away from my undergraduate study of math and physics for the sake of linguistics and classics, something from this foundation remained and remains. The possibility for new forms of sense-making by way of topology has somehow followed—and has indeed guided, guarded, I believe—me and my thinking here, to this project, to this old student writing a dissertation about pedagogy and ontology and the inescapable binds I find my self in as I anticipate navigating—an already do practice in—this world as a teacher, a storyteller, a *phulaks* figure.

What is this project if not an extended—dis-tended—version of my final paper in that first course, wherein I first researched this subject? Still, it would be absurd to suggest that I've been 'studying' 'topology' for a decade. What I am suggesting is that I do not come to an interest in the topic of surfaces, and the shapes, features, and contours of surfaces, through any formal study, and so I do not tell these here topological stories—regarding spheres and Klein bottles—in a way that is grounded in, in this case, any serious undertaking of, again, technical topology. And here we can think of 'topo-logy' as a study of surfaces, or areas, or as a conscious attention to (i.e. study of) 'what a surface says,' which is to say as the *logos* (saying) of the *topos* (surface). An amateur student of topology—truly a novice—I have nevertheless carried with me, for at least a decade, the Klein bottle as an example. I have carried, too, its shape, the force of its shape which is to say the force, the contours, and the features of its wall, the story its wall tells, might tell. This 'in addition' that I claim to be bringing has, for me, been building momentum for a

while now. I am pointing out, to, and through this strange sense and shape that I have somehow found my self in.

Because I am a relative novice in these sorts of conversations (indeed, I only skim the surface), I don't always use terms according to their settled definitions and specific utility. For example, I use terms like 'surface' and 'boundary' rather openly, not quite settled on what they might mean or where they might come up for people doing this work at a deep, disciplinary level where these words have a technical meaning. Whereas topologists might think of a boundary (according to drew's campfire (2023)) as "an abrupt stop to a surface," I think and write, throughout this project, of a boundaries as surfaces and surfaces as boundaries insofar as my hope with this project is to point my self again and again to the wall I can't not face. The arrival of the Klein bottle in my thinking also blurs this distinction between surface and boundary, and in doing so, I believe and speculate, reveals an impasse inherent to this world beyond which there is no getting: indeed, this walled, where surface blends into boundary, world, again, a world in which there remains the presence of *phulaks* figures on patrol. Here too emerges the slippery slope: the impossibility of sending them away, incessant and present and safeguarding and suffocating as they are.

In a different version of this project, the distinction and technicalities attached to these two terms—boundary and surface—may warrant attention. For now, in these beginning phases, I do not distinguish between surface and boundary for my concern is the fact that both of them are effectively walls—walls that humans have created, even if not with their hands then with their minds, their hands of thought; with their noticing, their observing, their conscious perception; their deliberative, calculating action. In this delicate, susceptible space, the subtlest of interactivity, of interpersonality leaves a deep impression. As I point to and through this world of

walls, this world that is a wall in the most fundamental ontological sense—the sense that grounds the humanness of the human—my aim then is not a severe, sharp, and exact employment of topological thinking, not a sharpness in thinking at all, for that matter. I strive for something more rambling, indeed, with a dull, mundane, and basic point. If anything, with this strange sort of storytelling comes a bit of silliness and whimsy. Indeed, I attempt to tell these stories, overall, in the way that my Klein bottle teachers—and similar pedagogues I’ve encountered in this passing-by—told it to me, that is, with an eye to art, artistry, creativity, imagination, and eccentricity. And, of course, I hope to mirror the pace of these teachings: their serendipitous onset, their slowness thereafter, their being in disjointed, haphazard pieces, and not without a tense, anticipatory space between the movements, the pedagogical movements along the way.

I hope to have pieced together this part in such a way that gives you a vague sense of the distinction I am drawing between the story of the sphere and the story of the Klein bottle and the importance of each method and mode of creating and relating to boundaries. Truly, I piece together this entire project according to a surfacing undertone that has been there all along and which I am only mentioning—noticing for my self—now. For as I edit this writing (which I claim to offer as an act of teaching and *phulakos*), I do so according to an onto-pedagogically dis-integrating stance and gesture that I have been creating and practicing throughout the piecing together of this project. That is, I piece together, again, these chapters as they change shape, according to a stance and a movement inspired by a long, slow, and irregularly attended study of the Klein bottle and a few of its peculiar features, wondering about how they might impact, when kept in mind, my way of thinking.

Par for the course on Klein bottles, then, throughout this part in particular, I offer only pieces of this bottle (this will make more sense shortly), gesturing at and through, nevertheless, I

hope, its ‘overall’ shape. I will occasionally reference some YouTube videos, as well as a few other popular sources. These authors, creators, and featured members have served as important, instructive figures in my life and my growth as I have rather sporadically pondered topology, and in particular the mobius loop and the Klein bottle. If you find your self wanting to hone in on this part of the project and take a deeper look into this Klein bottle figure, you will find these videos (linked in the references) helpful. Watching them, however, is not necessary if what you’re interested in here is the basic flair of my pointing gesture: again, onto-pedagogical dis-integration, paranormal *phulakos*, and beceasing: a story that I am telling my self in addition to the one the world has told me, in addition to the one I told my self in response to the pressure—the weight—of the world.

May there be space. May there be movement. May there be space between movements.

A Subsection

Figure 7. Dennis Thompson’s Mobius Strip Sculpture,

<https://www.saatchiart.com/art/Sculpture-Mobius-Strip/954368/6273411/view>



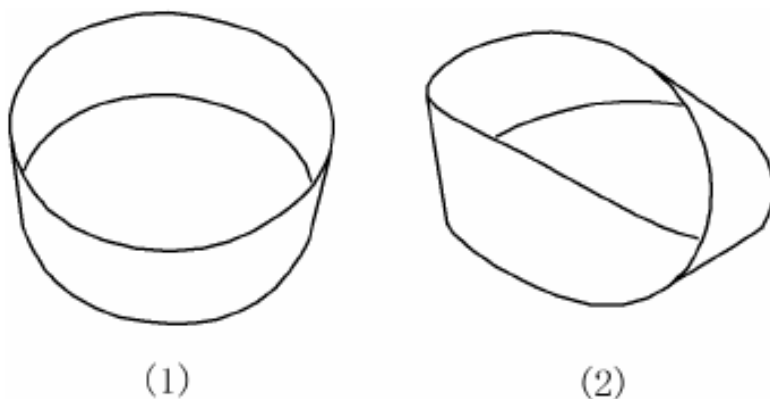
In 1882, mathematician Felix Klein affixed two mobius strips (Figure 7), edge to edge, together and in doing so documented a strange shape, an odd vessel, a contradictory object, a

Klein bottle. In addition to a *surface* as a boundary, let's think of an *edge*—the sharpness of a piece of paper, the part that slices—as a *boundary*, too. Adhering to this line of thinking, it follows that the edge, the singular boundary of each mobius strip, in this experimental, emergent thinking I am finding my self in, indeed, where the Klein bottle emerges, becomes—or, really, 'beceases'—a surface, a wall.

But first, what is a mobius strip? A loop with a twist, a turn (Figure 8(2)). Distinct from a 'band' shape—think of a watch on a wrist (Figure 8(1))—that has an inside that makes contact with the wrist and an outside that doesn't, a mobius strip only has one side; it is a 'loop' with only one side. The—or what appear to be the—'inside' and the 'outside' are, in fact, the same. Imagine an ant with a fatal flaw walking on the surface, for no good reason, of Figures 8(1) and 8(2). Its fatal flaw? Should it cross a sharp edge, it will find its self severed in half. On any given jaunt, the ant on Figure 8(1) could cover half of the total surface area. If it wanted to see the other side of Figure 8(1) it would have to come back on a different visit.

Figure 8. (1) and (2), A Two-Sided Loop and A One-Sided Loop,

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Normal-loops-and-Moebius-strips_fig2_259604916



On a mobius strip, a one-sided loop (Figure 8(2)), this ant could meander all along the surface and cover every bit of area without crossing an edge, or a boundary. Why? Here's the twist. A watch band has two edges—two boundaries; one that is closer to the forearm area and

one edge that is closer to the hand area. If we took two of these loops and put them together, edge to edge, we would have a thicker band (and with more, a tunnel), nevertheless with a similar number of edges, and nevertheless an inside distinct—separated by this edge, a boundary—from an outside. Adding two normal loops together yields another normal loop with the same number of edges: there is still an edge closer to the hand, an edge closer to the forearm.

As Klein discovered, ‘adding’ together two mobius loops does not yield something similar in product compared to components, but similar-ish, which is to say something else. Indeed, subtraction—or weird math—occurs, the dissolving of some boundaries and the unanticipated arrival of another takes place. The addition takes place away and what precipitates is the strange surface of the Klein bottle. Only possible through human hands yet unable to be anticipated: this very ground, these here foundations—my personal foundations over which I have no say. Here lies a surface over which, to an extent, I have no say, indeed which I cannot (nor do I desire to) entirely deconstruct in order to bring you what you want, in order to start from your first place rather than mine. These grounds, indeed, are my precondition, the precondition of ‘me.’ They are a harmed ground, with harsh and scolding demands at the outset. Any-thing that such a personal pronoun holder—which is to say a human, the personal pronoun holder of ‘me’—makes—that is, any thought, any action—marks this ground, to an extent, indeed, to the extent of the wall and the sort of surface this particular human’s world allows, makes possible, makes profitable. Can you sense the stuttering? I am slowing the engine’s operation down. Indeed, the thing’s in idle. I’ve stepped out and, at this point, I—depersonalized, the very idea of ‘I’—am walking. Right here beside you.

I refuse to adhere any longer to an institutionalized sense of self—locked in chains. I refuse to adhere to the enlightening mouth of the cave, to the rule of the surface that gleams, to

the ontometaphysical, Platonism-informed and obsessed concrete that infrastructurates the fundamentally antiblack, antidark, antichaos, and antimad—which is to say normal human—consciousness of this world, which is to say ‘my’ mind, the mind ‘of me.’

I am returning to the dark base. I am going into the ground. May this work constitute a mobius addition—an adding on, a movement in addition—which proves to be subtraction inasmuch as it enables my decomposition, a dis-integration, for the sake of revealing some other thing: a strange surface, a different kind of bed: de-composting material, a medium which loses track of its self as it withers and decays away.

A mobius strip has one edge, one boundary which need not be crossed in order for the ant to get from ‘inside’ to ‘outside’—indeed, they are not different sides. And so affixing two such strips—one edge, one surface—together will yield something without an edge, without a boundary, but with nevertheless a surface: the surface of the Klein bottle. Through such a shape, the calling to mind of such a shape, boundaries subtract and the surface protracts—distending its self as the final boundary beyond which there is no getting, the brink between everything—this here very thing—and nothing. The edges subject themselves to reveal a continuous, closed surface that somehow, nevertheless, does not distinguish discretely between inside and outside. A domain in which I know neither where nor whether I am. A cool, calm, collected (a collection of dis-tended pieces—and as such, intense and intentional) energetic position; indeed, chill, chilling.

The surface—acknowledged—becomes and calcifies into a Non-Newtonian boundary, hard to the fast, harsh, and severe touch and slow to the gentle, easy-going—and nevertheless dire and serious, for it evokes darkness, and dread, even if lovingly, even if only in addition—gesture. In the meantime, the ant meanders, unsure of where or whether it is, and wonders, eyes

in wonder, and slowly, but surely, ceases to be. Indeed, even the Klein bottle is not somewhere—a shape according to which—I can continue to be, not singularly.

Pause.

Figure 9. An Example of an Image of a Klein Bottle,

<https://mathcurve.com/surfaces.gb/klein/klein.shtml>



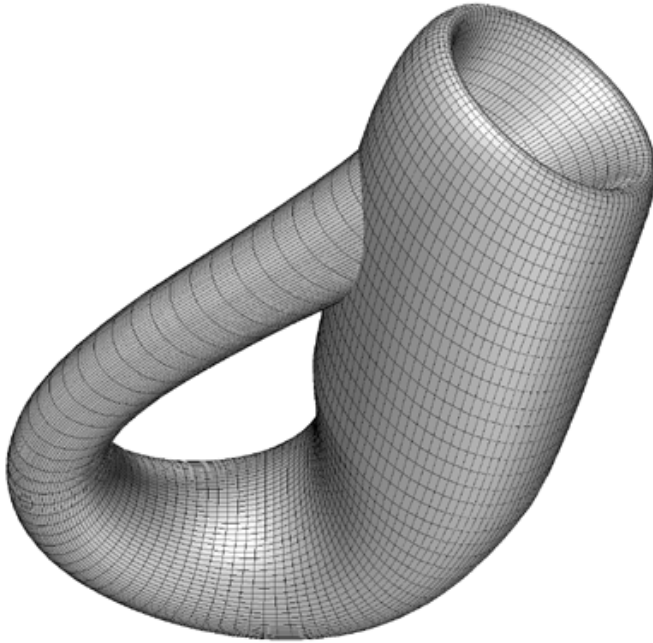
Here in Figure 9 lies Klein’s ‘boundless’ (again, at least according to the topological definition of boundary) bottle, indeed, the edge-subtracted surface protracted product of two mobius loops. Sequin (2013), in their article about types of this figure (for there is not just one kind of Klein bottle), refers to this ‘product’ according to a few qualifying features, calling it a “closed, single-sided mathematical surface...sometimes described as a closed bottle for which there is no distinction between the inside and the outside” (p. 1). Remember the sphere? Akin to a sphere, a Klein bottle is ‘closed,’ in that it encloses some space; however, it does so in, again, an unintuitive manner. Unlike a sphere, which we can think of as shaped in such a way so as to

distinguish between inside—its self—and outside—other—*via* its surface (a boundary between what is ‘me’ and ‘not me,’ or this shape as opposed to that shape), the surface of a Klein bottle is not so clearly separative. Indeed, somehow, although technically ‘closed,’ it retains a singular side which gives off the appearance of openness—the protracted surface can speak. Indeed, it has a mouth. The mouth of the cave has made its way to the man and his mind. Indeed, the caveman has woken up.

Since we call the Klein bottle ‘closed,’ it would be sensible to assume that such a figure has both an inside—a surface pointing, or oriented, inward, and which ‘encloses’ this inner-ness—and an outside—a surface facing outward. However, the Klein bottle and its ‘closedness’ is unlike the sphere and its closedness. The strange surface of the Klein bottle, while ‘pointing’ in different, and contradictory (so much so that it eludes comprehension as anything worthy of consideration as diction) directions, indeed according to different vectors, ultimately does so according to the same, undergirding act or movement of origination, engendering, extension, conception. I might say that the ‘inside’ of the product—the Klein bottle—blends into the ‘outside,’ but in truth they are, as with the single-sided mobius strips that comprise it, indistinguishable. Indeed, in short, a Klein bottle only has one ‘side’ (readers may begin to wonder why I am bringing more ‘oneness’ into the mix—bear with me! It’s a slightly more complicated oneness—less settled and settling—and I believe this can make a world of difference. Indeed, if nothing else, may this work add some other one on—this decaying ground—in addition). Now what was that about a mouth (Figure 10)?

Figure 10. An Example of an Image of a Klein Bottle,

<https://mathcurve.com/surfaces.gb/klein/klein.shtml>



In terms of visualizing, or imagining a Klein bottle—which is but a part of this practice, for there is also the experimental way of thinking that emerges alongside the very thought of bringing together two mobius loops, that is pre-protraction—I have shown but two examples of one form that this strange shape can take, a more traditional and common rendering; indeed, one with a ‘mouth.’ But forget about that part for now. The fact that this shape only has one side is not intuitive, so let’s continue with that track. A way to conceptualize the strangeness of a Klein bottle and, in particular, the ‘point’ of its single-sidedness is by imagining again that infamous ant that walks around on different surfaces. This time, first consider it navigating a sphere. Much like the limitation it faced on the normal loop—the watch band—the ant here can only cover a portion of the surface in one trip, for covering any more than one side would require crossing a sharp edge, a death sentence. On a mobius strip and a Klein bottle, there is no threat of severing. Again, there is no edge to cut it. It can traverse the entire surface of the shape without crossing

any boundaries. There is more to say, however, when it comes to a Klein bottle compared to a mobius strip. Indeed, inasmuch as there is ‘something else’ going on with the surface of the Klein bottle, so too must there with the ant’s navigating it. We will get there.

Pause.

Pause. I tell the story of the Klein bottle to my self in addition, an addition which dis-integrates my ordinary—ensphered—world. I do not tell it in an effort to re-place the sphere, nor even to de-place, or de-space. It suffocates. It supports. In either event, the guardians of the sphere will not let go. They are not allowed to. There is no exit from this privileged uni-verse, the one where you—a younger me—get to be, the one in which you have been gifted and granted that singular sense of interiority; a one-track, way-seeking mind. I include this in-addition act of storying in an effort to gesture at and ad-figure—affix—something else. On my own part, I intend to affix a momentary—ceasing to be, itself—act, the act of returning to this fact: I may breathe in this world; I may breathe in this self. I may breathe out something else. I am breathing out something else.

Here I decry in particular the *rigidity* of the plurality of the sphere—its acclaimed rigor—and not its multiple-ness, not its apparent within-ness and without-ness. The plurality that the sphere has to offer is but a piece of the story I feel I need to tell. When I tell it from the sphere alone, it turns sour, such that soon the inside and the outside bear a rigid (and often brutal) relation—indeed, it cuts me, and this is where the sharpness comes from, in two as I cross the edge—to the extent that they/it cease(s) to be ‘two’; I alone am the cause. I seek to bring more than one thing, a balancing act that flies into the face of the sphere alone, its apparent plurality (the romance and hope it offers) and what proves, upon closer inspection, to be a particularly routing relationship, not a two-way-street throughout, nor a two-in-one but a one-way-street in

and out, each direction with its own particular, irreconcilable point. Or so the story goes, for they converge. They are forced to converge—bent into an appropriate shape—by the gravity of the space, and there combusts a fusion. Its product, a radiant intensity, a scalding, scolding, stellar pressure from a mono-cultural undertone to be, to be a me, to be nothing but an ordinary, everyday human being. The sphere is a singular, for the sake of order (an institutional pressure), prism through which I have been coached to make sense of and shape—once and for all, so that I might live an easy, care-free life, the American Dream—the world, which is to say others and their otherness, and my self. All at once. I, according to this world’s logic, must do it all at once, in this intense singular here and now moment, *ad infinitum*. My being as such—so sphered—commands it, the reproductive battle between conservation and progression. The orientation of the inside of a sphere is always toward/against a singular core of the outside, a singular object. The story of my ordinary conscious experience: *an* entity traverses the *one-track*, en route *the* way.

And so, on the one hand, I sense the world through a sphere, a kind of spherical sense of self-hood, a singular story. I can’t not. It is my base. My bane. And on the other, there is a Klein bottle. Another base, and when singular another bane, and so I actively pursue at the outset the non-singular, a distance from that pressure. Foolhardy as it may be, I am actively dis-integrating the pressure of this solar system to converge on a central, integral core. I do not know what it means to tell my self this kind of story. It feels precarious and reckless and can be nothing other than, although I deign to suggest it, faith-based. It thus feels, too, irrational, short-sighted, a deep-dark gazing at the navel and the sky. I do not know where the entire end lies, but only small pieces. I know they lies some-where, though. I rely on this fact. I trust in senses attuned neither to intelligibility nor visibility. The confusion that ensues—that marks this here December day—

constitutes a large part of what it means to walk in the dark, and to write from a void, of knowledge, of understanding, of enlightenment, of goodness. I am only now—in my writing of these here words, in this practical piecing together of my everyday life—realizing what it might, if anything, mean.

There is not quite a revolution here, but false starts and stutters and jolts. The orientations—points—that are apparent on the singular surface of a Klein bottle constitute a chaotic spectrum, one which does not have a center (and which *both* is *and* is not one; again, perhaps this picture I point to and through is more and less than one). I do not know if, with the incorporation of this shape, I can be coherent, or consistent. I do not know if, as such, I can complete this projection. Perhaps time—the daily practice of returning here—will tell. There will nevertheless be an end. Indeed, there is an end, but it being complete?, it closing like a sphere and capturing some kernel of truth?, it feeling focused?, it offering a concise takeaway? I am not counting on it. When it closes, may it be in Kleiny fashion, and may it yield but the obscure dark wall of a dank cave dwelling. Here we—young one/self and I—are again: the ‘other’ side of that same, damn wall.

A Subsection

Some other strangeness surrounds this shape. The experiment of affixing two mobius strips together so as to yield in reality Klein’s projected bottle is not actually possible in the physical dimensions that structure this world. Three spatial dimensions cannot adequately contain the very Klein bottle that precipitates when two mobius strips become linked, boundary to boundary.

Figure 11. Cliff Stoll and his largest Klein Bottle,

https://www.kleinbottle.com/meter_tall_klein_bottle.html



What have I been showing you pictures of then? Sure, topology enthusiasts far and wide find creative ways to represent this shape. I am thinking in particular of the aforementioned Cliff Stoll (featured in Figure 11) and the creative cohort of which he is a part. They mold and shape materially real, and quite incredible (if you get the chance to hold one), glass Klein bottle models. Cliff even knits them, beginning, like Klein, with the mathematical components. He has created mobius scarves with zippers along the boundary such that suturing them together is, to an extent, possible. Together, the zipped components yield a sort of Klein bottle beanie. Or, that is, they would, if such a construction were allowed in this world. If the world and me did not get in

the way. These scarves, these bottles, these images, these words, these imaginations: they offer only an approximation. May they (n)ever the less in this only-ness prove powerful and, even if not con-structive, then in-structive. Indeed, isn't that—instruction—all, at the end of the day, I've claimed I can offer? And isn't that all that I've been claiming there is? For me? Positioned as a *phulaks* figure—a human, a guardian of being? If I must with my being manage the wall, the boundary, the surface—may my work move in several, approximate ways (in more than one way, in less than one way). May my work help bring something else—some other movement, and way of moving—into the manifold.

In the parameters of this world, any act of creating a Klein bottle—and every act of calling it to thought—requires that the craftsman—the conscious conjurer—cut a few corners, so to speak. Why? What, from form—idea, notion, theory, imagination—to thing, does not translate? Consider the aforementioned thought experiment of the very coming together of two mobius strips. In the bringing of each point along the boundary together into contact with its counterpart, what happens? At first, with these two, physical, very real mobius figures, the lining up proceeds smoothly. And then, as the zippers close in on each other—close to the end—things get messy, that *twist* rears its head, and I am left facing an impasse. Put another way, something—as two mobius strips threaten to complete their merging and manifest something else—gets bound up, lost in translation.

This mess is no mere conflict, but a disturbance that, upon its arrival, calls into question the ordinary, basic, foundational, and fundamental dimensions of this world. There is a wall. This is as far as I can bring you. Something seizes as the final pieces—points—of the mobius strips begin to find their selves sutured together; as their own edges—the edge they now share—begins to disappear and all that remains is that protracted, strange, and singular surface. This

world does not allow it. The Klein bottle makes neither physical nor metaphysical sense. There is—in experimental thought—a sense of what lies there—indeed, the Klein bottle—but it is not quite representable. It never will be presentable. It will never be present. This present moment cannot contain its contours. Its contours dis-integrate (space)time’s integrity—releasing space. May these approximations, musings, and imagination do enough—may they carry this work and these movements. May they meet you—young one—as a Kleiny sort of closure, an enclosure, a refuge for all that is and is to come.

As I anticipate and think through and pray for this act of closure, which is to say a strange, non-spherical, non-singular, non-Newtonian closure (the Klein bottle never will be—this world and its ontopedagogical standard require that I bend my self and my students into spheres, either through progression or through conservation), the sort of closure that is not allowed in this world (nothing uttered may never be)—which is to say an ambiguous, uncanny engendering closure, a closure that remains open, a closure of open remains...as I anticipate it, I meet, again, a wall, a grounding, a surface. There is this approximation, the figure that points me into my plurality. There is the cutting of corners so as to—with the discarded trimmings—make a strange, dulled, piecemeal point.

Representing a Klein bottle in this world will always require some form of approximation. Not only do the physical parameters buckle at its presence, but so the metaphysical—or mental, which is to say psycho-logical—ones. They buckle, even if not to break, or to break out, to break me out, but to bend—indeed, the Klein bottle buckle engenders a breaking in, a breaking within. Mathematicians, curious students, and quirky teachers nevertheless model, visualize, draw, and present very real interpretations of the Klein bottle. But they will only ever be *trans-lations*. They will be approximate, partial. I offer, accordingly, only

an incomplete rendering as I offer this figure here, and with it, a curious characteristic inherent to each Klein bottle brought into this world: an area of self-intersection, a precipitant of translation, a necessary aspect of the story I am trying to tell my self.

Elsewhere in their article, Sequin (2013) describes the bottle as a “a single, contorted, *self-intersecting* ‘tube’” (p. 5, emphasis mine). Here lies the sticking point. Klein bottles in three spatial dimensions characteristically carry points of self-intersection; they must. In Figure 9, Figure 10, and Figure 11 the ‘neck’ (or what I also think of as the handle, in this mouthy configuration of the shape) appears to pass through ‘the body.’ Even if not of the mouthy variety, any representation of a Klein bottle in this world is but an approximation that must intersect its self, which is to say that along its surface there are several points that occupy the same space, which is to say that, at some point, in this world, I overlap with my self—according to a Kleiny topology—at a different point. I am not one thing—no longer one thing.

Anything that I do—any move I make and any thought I think—then, according to a Klein bottle shape and sensibility will never, in this world, be enough. The Klein bottle simply does not live up to the ontopedagogical standard of this world. It is less than what this world needs. With this shape in mind, nothing that I do will be enough. Do you hear that hiss? A pressure begins to release. Young me, you—you freak of nature—have never been able to achieve the things the world and its prevailing, normal *phulaks* force and paradigm have told you—taught you—you ought to. Flee. Refuse. Release. Flee. If not out, then in.

An additional, fourth, *spatial* dimension, of which—at least this human’s—consciousness is unable to adequately conceive, is necessary when it comes to truly understanding this shape. But is that what I want when it comes to the Klein bottle? Adequate conception? True understanding? Perhaps I am. Perhaps I am not.

In four dimensions, both ‘neck’ and ‘body’ exist without interfering with and in the space of an other part, save insofar as they are conjoined to the same underlying shape, or fabric, or surface. And something else happens. Indeed, with the incorporation of a fourth dimension, there proves to be more to the ‘picture’ of the Klein bottle—to picturing this figure—than meets the mere eye/I. Indeed, in the three-dimensional, representational figures I have provided thus far, there may be more ‘there’—represented as being there, for the sake of a tangible, mathematical object—than would actually meet the I/eye, if we were to view it according to this additional, critical dimension. Which, indeed, is to say: there may be less/may there be less.

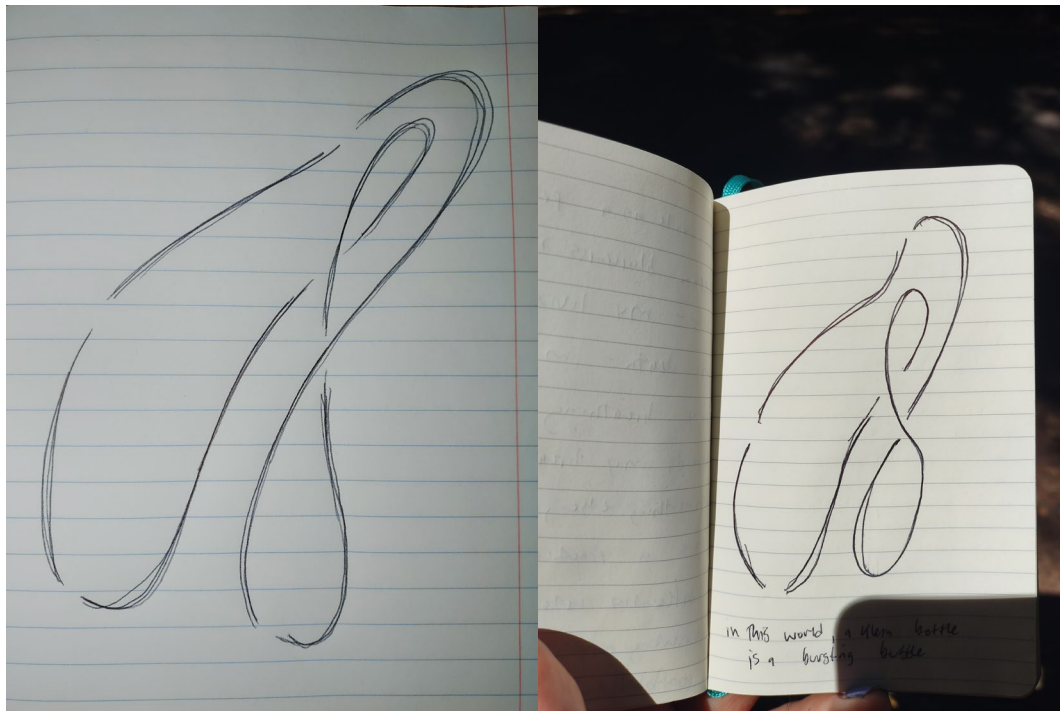
The creator of the drew’s campfire (2023) video attempts to visualize a Klein bottle by way of a fourth, additional, dimension, albeit a non-spatial one. In order to gesture at, still incompletely and imperfectly, a Klein bottle in four dimensions, onto the three spatial dimensions that structure the world, he incorporates time as an approximate (again, non-spatial) fourth. If we think of the fourth dimension that a Klein bottle requires as based in temporality, then only—and only then—with *the passing of time* can any given observer make sense of a ‘whole’ Klein bottle, which means that *at any given moment*, only a part of a Klein bottle exists, only a piece, pieces, can be represented at once. Of course, to reiterate, drew is clear: his time-guided Klein bottle representation is but an imperfect approximation. May you not concern your self with rightness, young one. Rightness is a story that you need not tell your self, at least not singularly, nor with such a force and focus so as to center it. You are not, here and now, whole. There is this voice of the not yet that guides you.

I nevertheless, in and to and through approximation, tell a story according to what I am thinking of as a Klein bottle (non)sensibility. drew and other teachers, creators, students, and visualizers of the Klein bottle, too, tell compelling stories, paint pictures, and offer lines,

topological leads to follow that, with talk of different dimensions, breaks my ordinary way of thinking, interrupts my one-track-way-seeking mindedness, and brings me to a pause. And indeed, I begin to wonder: where have these teachers pointed me? Where do they lead?

They have led me to draw Klein bottles like this. They have pointed me here, to this project, this projection:

Figure 12. Klein Bottle drawings



A Subsection—what does bringing a Klein bottle into the conversation do?

So far, I have indirectly pointed to a number of differences between a sphere and a Klein bottle. Along the way, I hope to have conveyed at least this message: the bringing of a Klein bottle into this here ensphered way of thinking that I feel I have been subjected to—a subject in and of and for this world (Biesta, 2017)—amounts to an imperfect inclusion of an additional element, something else, another figure, another shape, another voice in the conversation, which enters into a contest for space. It contends for space by allowing space to arrive and remain,

rather than by de-spacing it, which all logics that occur in the world fall prey to. The Klein bottle then occupies a strange relationship to the sphere. On the one hand, it is no different than a sphere in its being in this here world. Here we have this world: both Klein bottles and spheres exist. And on the other it, throughout its very emergence—on route its good becoming so that it might obdurately be—it ceases, which is to say slows, being. Which is to say, en route the occupation of all space, the route of the human, this figure—the Klein bottle—admits space. It bears a strange—non-spherical, which is to say non-normal—relationship to space, for it finds it self embedded in space in a way that does not automatically capture space. A Klein bottle has no volume—it does not need to enclose a cavity so as to capture vibration and attune it to the sort of frequency that meets your ear and resonates as sensibility. Unlike a spherical being which prides its self on an ability to remain detached, the Klein bottle figure emanates with the tension of the shrinking space, silence, and distance growing ever so little between you—young self—and this wall, this surface. You need not rush. May you end what you can so that you might—we might—endure what we cannot.

In their orientation to space—in the ways humans have historically oriented these figures toward the space in their lives—the Klein bottle and the sphere constitute radically different worlds. I bring the Klein bottle as an additional figure into the framing of my thought and thinking so that it might, with its uncanny quality, dis-integrate this here self (and this here harmful world) if only so that there might remain some space for it to breathe its self in and to breathe something else out, if only so that there might be the dissipating movement of the breath. Breathing, if/as nothing else, dis-integrates being. May my dis-integrating efforts yield space, movement, and space between movements.

There are also noteworthy differences between spheres and Klein bottles when it comes to their particulars, that is, when it comes to the pieces that make them up, their building blocks. Do these figures and their radically distinct constitutions comprise the same, fundamental pieces? How could they? One, when taken together, is closed and one. The other, when taken together, is closed and not one. What accounts for this difference? I wonder: what happens when I bring a Klein bottle and its pieces into the proximity of me and my ordinary self, which is to say into that which always devolves and revolves and evolves into the context of the human and their spherical order and orbit? Is a Klein bottle even allowed here? I am bringing this figure into this here conversation, this narrativity that I share with my self. I am allowing this spacious *phulaks* figure to guide me and my movement, to guide my guarding gestures, the pointed and pointing way that I am in the world. I work and offer it as an addition that dis-integrates, an addition that sub-tracts.

What are these pieces? Spheres and spherical shapes and cyclically similar movements govern the micro- and macro-cosmos. I imagine my spherical self as comprising an infinite array of miniscule, point-like, self-similar spheres. The only way to construct, achieve, and maintain an impenetrable fortification between self and world—which is the positive extreme of the one-track, way-seeking mind, and which is the sort of detachedness that objectivity, this world and its objective, ontological quality requires—is to ground this self within and on infinite stability. Which is to say: at their base, at their particularities, spheres must, for the sake of the larger structure, operate and find linkage back to an everlasting, endless core. Humans are committed, at their core, to such a project. If for nothing else, this drive, a drive which can only begin from such a sure ground, a confident footing, marks them as spherical, ensphered and ensphering—often violently, brutally—beings.

A Klein bottle hinges not on such stability. I cannot even offer it completely—I point to and through an approximation, the approximate. Indeed, it radiates with tension, if only because it has no core from which its intensity originates. Suddenly: a tension; attention! In short, Klein bottles comprise, at the level of basic components, pieces not static but kinetic; which is to say, pieces in motion, pieces in space, pieces making movements, pieces permitting there to be space between movements, between pieces in motion.

A sphere strives for oneness, for its fundamental pointedness to be but one-dimensional, for its self to find some rest, some day, on a sure core that is always already here and needs only recognition, realization. A Klein bottle strives not, lacking in the drive the prerequisite stable starting place the sphere takes as a given, takes for granted. It is something—a figure—of an accident. Its pieces occupy, at their least, in less-ness, two-dimensions, which is to say that Klein bottles comprise tense pieces, pieces of and in tension.

Spherical contours integrate both the conservative and the progressive project. Ontopedagogues of both orders tell their students a story that tends to promote a spherical sense, which is to say an all too human sense, of self and relationship to the world. Both narratives promote a sense of self (for those who shall take part in the promotion and growth of these projects) as a sphere, and they privilege the infinite potential and capacity of this figure, albeit en route different ends (one of infinite collapse, the other of infinite expansion), and employing different movements en route.

And they—these onto-pedagogical conservatives *and* progressives—share in this, too: endlessness, which is to say neither of these projects can end—there will always be this conflict, this battle, this war, this tension between. A sphere relies on this tension, this conflict, so that it might shape its self, so that it might produce a stable surface, a fortress, of defense against the

undesirable. The spherical figures of these projects point in different directions but toward the same end: endlessness, an undertone and pattern of, at the outset, de-spacing. The conservative project suggests that, in the first place, there is a oneness that commands widespread attentiveness. The progressives call this essentializing reduction a problem. They say that there is a solution; they operate from their outset—the stability of their first footing, their first thought of footing—with the firm belief *that there is one*; not one solution, but a solution in general, an ultimate resolution to the tension and with it peace of mind. Inasmuch as *there is* this peace, as *there is* the hope which drives solution-oriented thinking, there are pieces, tension, and pieces in tension.

This certainty emanates only from a sphere. It is the sort of story whose surety requires some stable core. May you—young one—no longer see the picture and hear the story so singularly. May you bring something else—another figure—into the fold, something otherwise, at least at the outset (at least in the first place), than what the gargantuan political forces—in their ordinary war—deem and (will everlastingly) reproduce as normal. Despite your proximity and immersion in these whims and winds, may your strength and your spirit allow you to lower your shield. May you face the brunt of the force of the world. May you breathe it in, and something else, in odd addition, out.

Conservation and progression both begin from an ensphered, human sense. They nevertheless relate to and move from their common ground differently. The conservative project infinitely compresses its self, its selves, and their attentions into and onto an innermost, pure core. The progressive project infinitely moves and flows and unfolds and emerges in order, first, to quell—and reform, and revolutionize—the existing state of toxic affairs, and second, to then incessantly abate the threat of resurgence, and of mobilized advances of the tyrannical, fascist,

imperial, supremacist, and essentialist thought and thinking habit of enwhitened humankind. Because conservatism and progressivism are humanist endeavors, they fall prey to the normal shaping and conceptualization of the world—a human shaping and conception, driven home, into the homes of all, by way of brutal, multi-faceted (and at one point unconscionable) incursion. And in particular they fall prey to the human’s *un-para-lleled* singularity, its seemingly habitual, self-centering, tunneling feature.

I advocate for the inclusion of a Klein bottle figure in addition—this move, I hope, constitutes ontopedagogical dis-integration, in large part because beceasing—the ontological energy I associate with dis-integration—is an “anti-humanist” (Warren, personal communication)/“dehumanist” (Singh, 2018) gesture and movement. I—a human—think of these moves I make as dehumanist if only in the sense that, in making these movements I am calling into question the integral and integrating and limited and limiting place of the human *in an effort* (for some reason, namely) to change and move otherwise in and through the course and current and currency of this here world. Here is where I am pointing you, young one: to the possibility of contribution that holds back, that allows space, and silence, and tension, to burst, to bubble, and to break you, to point you to the break. You need not find your self here with me. You need not continue to find your self only here with me. You will always have this. The human of horrific histories carries with it a baggage—a be-yondering residue—that cannot be lost because it must continue to fuel the human and its perpetually striving, perpetually awake state. A wake. That tension—can you feel it? You can nevertheless have something else in addition. My work is, on the one hand, to point you there, to a nowhere with nothing, an empty space. With the other hand, I challenge you just for this moment—as your eyes/your I passes these few words—to notice it, to watch it. There, again: the wall.

Pause.

As I begin to tell this story in addition, my sense of self breaks and moves from the schooled, churchd, and caved center and to the periphery, to the surface, to the interface. Here I am among the rank of the *phulaks* force, tense figures, figures of tension, caught between: how do I make this point without undermining my self? And what if that's exactly what I intend to do?

Here, on the brink, I move and story so as to dis-integrate this ordinary wall—a practice which does not dismantle it, but merely allows space to arrive and remain—and to affix by way of imagination—the lowest, darkest and most delusional/deluding level of cognition sense-making according to Plato—something else. In doing so, I am building a different kind of wall in addition and in relation to the wall that always already is—that wall that has been said to so thoroughly and necessarily be. I am creating a different kind of boundary, a different kind of surface—an interface—between the world and my self and, indeed, *within my self*.

While a sphere has two sides, an inside and an outside, it reduces to and is made up of infinitesimally singular, one-dimensional points. While a Klein bottle has one side, it reduces to and is made up of two-dimensional pieces. I am telling a story of both—of being guided by and guiding according to at least two figures. One, I must have—my coherent presence as such requires it. It is an inescapable condition. The other I need for the sake of the end. Even if not of the sphere's endlessness, then I bring this other figure into this manifold in order to bring to an end, to a close, in Kleiny fashion, my particular, rigid, and singular orientation toward this condition. Put another way, I end what I can so that I might endure what I cannot.

I encourage, if nothing else, the bringing of a different shape into your ordinary manifold. Young one—young self—I am talking to you. That tension, tearing through time in an intended

to be tender fashion, can you feel it? The addition of a Klein bottle reveals pieces, brokenness, and multifariousness. Indeed, a Klein bottle comprises pieces of tension, a tension that might break time; the strange shape requires that each of its building blocks point in several directions at once. A self-story as sphere points me to the singular and to oneness. A self-story as Klein bottle points me to plurality and multiplicity; points me toward both sphere and Klein bottle. I return to the ramifications of this new—to me—and in addition approach to narrativizing my personal experience, my relationship with and orientation to this self and world, in the final chapter of this project.

The break so far

More immediately, in the penultimate chapter, I turn to several stories that I am now telling my self, having been loosed and let to fall—a plurality of pieces, the division of which I now reclaim as I think about and through the figure of the Klein bottle—into and between the presence and absence of my primary, which is to say biological, or genetic, *phulaks* figures, mother and father, in my case; the coming together of guardians for the sake of conceptualization, otherwise. Telling these stories, in turn, re-shapes me, no longer thinking of and narrativizing my self according to a singular shape, nor only to a singularizing shape alone.

For now I find my self in, on the one hand, a descent through space and structure. The force of this falling—of coming to an awareness of this falling condition—has broken me out of, permitting me to put an end to the singularity of, my ordinary, habitual, institutionalized self-storying, according, first and foremost, to a one-track, way-seeking mind. And I no longer relate to this weight—the burden—of the world, the way it and its cadre of puppeteers, unknowingly (maybe) cruel *phulakes*. For on the other, I find my self on soft, mossy ground and rich, dark soil, growing—a loving, moving lathe. May these final few forthcoming stories convey, taken

together, the tension that remains and according to which I find my self found and unfounded, ground and unground. May these several stories I am telling my self in tandem evoke the tension that I have been pointing to all along: a loving tension, a gentle gesture to something massive, some-non-thing massive, to the masses, to the overwhelmingly—and for this reason unconscionable—ontologically terrifying state of the world. You are not allowed to see it. I have not seen it—I'm only translating the writing on and of the wall. I offer you nothing new, but a regurgitation according to and through this here self, no longer singularly ensphered but with a strange addition, an odd affixation. You—young one—witness the precipitation of this way of living. I channel to you a well of love, an offering, the sort of loving gesture that a parent gives to their young child, full of question marks, and hope, and despair—I could do better but I can't right now, so this is what I have to offer. Pieces. Tension. Pieces in tension. Space. Movement. Space between movement.

And, young one, that's all you have, too.

The Storyteller so far

On the one hand, the stories that my mom told me—I tell my self—pointed me toward a Kleiny-mindedness, and on the other, the cave, church, and school toward a one-track, way-seeking, and mindset more akin to a sphere. In the church, the story's undertone was one of ontopedagogical conservatism oriented toward the order of God. In the school, the story's undertone was one of ontopedagogical conservatism oriented toward the order of Capital. In the cave—and institution I continue to narrativize my self as within—the story's undertone was one of ontopedagogical conservatism oriented toward the order of the Good, but with a twist. I come to the cave in order not only to teach, but also to study. The church is a space where authority figures preach and preach only. The school is a space where authority figures teach and teach

only. The cave is a space where authority figures—*phulakes*—must continue to study if they are to teach. Put another way, Plato undergirds his ultimately conservative project with dialogue, plurality, multiplicity, and tension. His conservative project requires something the progressive project grounds its self on: continual work, incessant labor, and ongoing praxis. This apparent and puzzling nuance is what originally mesmerized me about Plato. It is what draws me to the progressive project: the discourse of the post-. It is a singular draw, so sure of its self that it is easy to get caught up in. Indeed, if for no other reason, the ontopedagogically conservative and progressive projects unite in their giving in to the singularly integrating and centering logic and gravity and grammar of this world. According to this force, they compel their students into spherical selfhood.

Spherical self-hood is not outright undesirable. Given the history of humans and their world—this world, it is a shape, however, that is hard to recover. There's so much baggage around this sharp boundary—the horizon—that imperial minded mankind has been chasing for ever (and Ever alone). Although I heard an alternative possibility from my mother at an early age, it took a long time for me to hear what she had always been telling me, a different kind of story. She compels and motivates me to narrativize my personal experience in ways less singularly closed and closing. On the one hand, I open the hand of thought, and on the other, I close it. There goes a conversation, pointed at an end, the end of this project: a personal and pedagogical practice, be-ceasing, an onto-mythagogy intended to attune selves to, in addition to their already normal habits, the energy of Ender (an emergent personae, which, alongside Ever, I undertake an exploration of in a future project, regarding study)—dis-integration; an often neglected energy. Indeed, Ender's is the energy of neglect. These hands point to an end; that

wall. They point to that end of me, and so too to me-ceasing, de-ceasing. Be-ceasing: para-normal *phulakos*.

I point to and through pieces. The sphere is a protective shape worth retreating to when under the press of an existential onslaught. You need not remain there alone. You need not remain there in community. I know, it is hard to let the walls down. I am not asking you to do that. I have never asked you to do that. Indeed, I have always been telling you—there are going to be walls. There is going to be a wall that you—young one—will never be able to get beyond. You might do something else. You might bring something else into the fold. You might do something in addition. Indeed, the question becomes: how are you to respond?

I no longer tell my self a singular story. I am no longer narrating my self and experience according to one thing. I am no longer striving to find inclusion in one conversation. Consider three—stories, things, conversations—with me.

3.4

Three Stories I am Telling My Self

I am telling my self several stories (bound to storytelling, bound to working with and thinking through my self in relation to the wall; no longer in such a singular, sure way)—stories in tension, stories of tension, stories that I have encountered throughout my studying and studies. The mere monikers ‘pragmatism,’ ‘pessimism’/’nihilism,’ and ‘Zen Buddhism,’ are insufficient as descriptors, and they do not capture the stories and how I tell them below, nor do they adequately convey how I feel they were presented to me. I am not out (nor am I going in) to capture. I am, again, pointing to and through, and to particular examples, explicitly, and through other examples, implicitly.

In the cases that follow, I frame the ‘stories’ (of pragmatism, of pessimism/black nihilism, of Zen Buddhism) as stories that I am telling my self. I do so according to the ‘in addition’ work I do. Which is to say, when I say that I am bringing something else—a Klein bottle figure—into the fold, or at least in parallel fashion, into proximity to my ensphered self for the sake of some breathing room, or onto pedagogical dis-integration, I am suggesting that what precipitates from the onset is, on one hand, tension, stretching. On another: space. On another movement. If nothing else: a subtraction and lessening of substantivity. This tension, the telling of stories that evoke tension, and the invitation—the guarding for—to allow tension to arrive and remain, the tension of the concrete state and weight of the world, its real contours and massive implications—this tension is what I point to and through in the simultaneous telling of these stories. If this were not concrete enough, the stories I tell my self take root in long-standing, human discourses: again, pragmatism/black pragmatism, pessimism/black nihilism, and Zen

Buddhism/buddhism. I devote space to each of these, as I see them, stories, below. They and their teachers, what they point to, and how they point, tend to run counter to what proves, time and time again, to be the *status quo* of this human world: a world at war, full of *phulaks* figures, political figures obsessed with order, ordering, and giving but not taking unless self-directed orders. These three stories and their storytellers acknowledge this state and desire to orient attention elsewhere, despite, and otherwise. Brought together—nevertheless as pieces in tension—in this slow fashion, may they precipitate something of a fascination in, as in and with the normal, the para-normal too. Young one: feel the fear of that dark—a deep, foreboding sense—and where and how it pulls you. It pulls you to. It pulls you through.

‘The story’ of pragmatism

The story of pragmatism that I tell my self takes root in the writing of Eddie Glaude. In particular, I draw from his 2020 book *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. Glaude grounds this text in stories. He pays close attention to the stories that people in the American context tell their selves, and how then the self-storying that tends to happen here reifies—beyond yet necessarily tied to the local, personal narratives people tell their selves—a structural—at large—lie. Different habits of story telling, with different narrative assumptions, Glaude assures readers, have the potential to rectify dishonest narrativization and engender a world (he writes specifically, again, about America as a country/context) more true, more aligned with truth, with the truth of what has happened. What has happened? America, land of the free and home of the brave rests—a microcosm of a world colonized by its imperial, ontosupremacist settlers—nevertheless on a skewed version of history, one in which its telling-force doubles down on the damage it deals by neglecting the neglect of dehumanization that

grounds its contemporary state. Indeed, according to Glaude, again, America and Americans—by and large—understands its self/understand their selves based on a lie.

The primary lie that Glaude (2020) points to has to do with the sort of dishonest stories people, in particular white people, tell their selves about race and a racial hierarchy. These stories revolve around what Glaude calls the “value gap...the idea that in America [although this heir of perceived racial supremacy and superiority does not end there, with these national borders] white lives have always mattered more than the lives of others” (p. 7). Thus, taken together *en masse*, these stories—this way of conceiving and understanding the white and white aspects of self and this self’s hierarchical place in the person and the world—begin to serve the people who hold and continue to tell them. Inasmuch as these stories and deceitful storytellers settle and seek to settle and bring to order the world they encounter around them, they begin to settle their own selves and senses of self. They calcify and manifest a place of comfort, security, necessity, and normal order (a place of ‘rest’ grounded on neglect, unrest, and a neglect of unrest). They concretize into a spherical logic, the logic of storytelling, from which, for the human, there is no out. They become “the narrative assumptions that support the everyday order of American life” (p. 7). With time and despite calcification, these narrative assumptions become, by *phulaks*, which is to say educational, force widespread and develop a current, a momentum, an inertia which people, through narrativizing their experience in these ways, then have their own hands in reproducing. The teacher has left their mark on the student—the class has ended, the relationship ‘over,’ and the impression remains.

Not only do people ‘simply’ reproduce it and keep this engine going, however. Indeed, they find their selves in a world with a long history, a human history where this sort of thing has never not been—as long as there has been that enlightened notion of what it means to ‘be’

‘human,’ and maybe even before—‘normal.’ The human requires it, this thing that is somehow both in and out of their hands. The momentum, even if they stop, continues to carry them; their ordinary conscious experience of the world has taken on the shape of this narrative that has found dominance. They are steeped in it. It has become normal; it is a part of the *status quo*; the state of things.

These stories and this type of story-telling constitute this *status quo*, the state of this here world. These lies pollute the air that Americans breathe. Because these lies and this dishonest practice of story-telling are in the air, so to speak, they carry a normal force, that is, a force that people come to expect and rely on, take for granted, and which they—through reification, socialization, and a nationalistic and authoritarian brand of onto-pedagogical conservatism, for example—ultimately deem unquestionable. Indeed, Americans “count them as truths...and absorb them into [their] character” (Glaude, 2020, p. 7). The lie, then, becomes “a broad and powerful architecture of false assumptions by which the value gap [who and what deserves humanity, who and what does not?] is maintained” (ibid.), whether or not, I will add, people actively perpetuate it (many, even if not most, do).

Devastating consequences for those who are not considered to be a part of this privileged racial class—this “political community” of human *beings* (Warren, 2018)—follow, fall-out. An integral piece of the telling and perpetuating of such a lie is an inability to face the truth of the past. Glaude points to the long history and still ongoing, unfolding present moment rife with violent and brutal antiblackness. “...the lie is the mechanism that allows, and has always allowed, America to avoid facing the truth about its unjust treatment of black people and how [this unjust treatment] deforms the soul of the country” (Glaude, 2020, pp. 8-9).

Ignoring these facts requires a great degree of cover-up; more lying. The surmounting amount of deceit and corruption that is required for this cover-up carries a great deal of energy. It violently bursts. More cover-up; more lying. The process of first telling, and then re-telling, and then calcifying and normalizing such a lie conjures up an immense pressure that cannot be contained in the object, the target, of the lie. It is firsthand and most egregiously experienced and felt by those who are on its receiving end, and worse, by those who are not even considered to be there in the first place, those who/which have been cast (the shadows) and are now caught in its wake (non-white people, black people, which is to say black-ness in this deadlocked to be(ing), antiblack world).

What does it mean to be a liar? What happens to those who lie?

There is a secondhand impact—felt by those having dealt the deceit, who live by the lie. This retroactive flow, too, is damaging and debasing, albeit on a distinct register. On the one hand, relying on the lie “deforms,” again following Glaude (2020), “the soul of the country” (pp. 8-9) that finds its grounding here, and, on the other, the souls of the people who take pride in—and those who merely abide by—such a nation. Indeed, the soul of such a country is not the only spiritual vessel at stake. Those who live by and find security in the lie bear a weight, a burden tied to those they have, metaphorically, through the dishonest narrative assumptions that guide their living (and we might even say their conscious experience of the world; their ‘a-wake-ness’ (Sharpe, 2016)), thrown to sea. Their souls carry this weight. No amount of cover-over, covering-up, can conceal this sort of spiritual burden. No amount of cover-under can support its weight. No amount of cutting-through can sever the tether.

An echo: attempts to fully expel ontological terror—black being (crossed out), the free black—are foolish; a remnant, a black kernel, always remains. There is no getting rid of the

existentially black—which is to say unknowable and tending toward that utmost unknowability and uncertainty: death, darkness—part of ‘me.’ I might call it complicity. Glaude (2020) cites James Baldwin on this point of retroactive flow, a repercussive force: “in this debasement and definition of black people...[white people] debased and defined themselves” (p. 7). Which is to say: even those who find security in the lie—security in the form, in the form of inclusion in the community of white hyper-valuation—nevertheless, at the same time, ultimately find their selves in their own way harmed, harmed in their own way. They recklessly believe that they are immune to the toxicity they spew out, as if it does not emerge within them and their own selves in order for it to be spewed, as if the privilege of being in the world, on its surface, extends to the innards, as if their esophagi were resistant to the onslaught, the force that underlies their wake and way. This reckless belief and their incessant pursuit of engineering and realizing it—through such storying—secures them, affords them a further line of defense.

Despite the apparent breadth of dis-ease associated with the telling of and relying on such a dehumanizing story—in targeted object and targeting subject of such telling—Glaude nevertheless continues to return to this hopeful, optimistic sentiment: we have to—and can, to great effect, even toward the possibility of change, of altering the course of this machine—tell our selves a different story. The story we tell our selves matters. The stories we tell our selves matter. (The stories we tell our students matter—we might, we very well are, at the outset, operating from a ground of lies.) Stories shape this world that rests on a lie—stories may point to unrest, to truth, to something else.

Glaude points to the importance of stories by referencing and paying homage to the prolific James Baldwin. And he does so through narrative and story. He does so with an attunement to an unrelenting pragmatic drive and hope and belief that these underlying stories—

these deeply steeped narrative assumptions—can change, and that this change—however and to whatever extent it may be—can help people heal their selves, their communities, their cities, their country, their world. People can change the stories they tell their selves; they can tell a story—and perhaps even multiple—other than the singular story they’ve always told, the singular story they’ve been taught to tell; an extension of the lie. They can, beginning at the local level, start by telling their self a different story. Indeed, it is their responsibility. As I read through Glaude’s words and work, I feel personally pulled: it is my (not solely mine; I am but a piece) *pragmatic* responsibility to do this work, cognizant of the impact authority figures can have and have had on this world/my world, to take these young, *phulaks* footsteps in the first place. This project begins a response, a response with an end. It’s coming. It’s here.

I bring in Glaude’s (2020) work as I formulate the story I tell my self regarding pragmatism because undergirding his work is a story of unrelenting perseverance—narrative assumptions *in the face* of the lie. That is, Glaude practices the work that he calls for—telling a different story, understanding self differently, and believing that through these different acts a change in the shape of the self and the country (and the world) is possible. Pragmatism begins with the local and resonates into the at large. Glaude’s pragmatism points me to this line of questioning: what can I do here and now? What is possible personally? Communally? What needs my attention? Who? Where does my attention normally go? How do I narrate my attention? My understanding of my self in relation to history? What shape does this make possible for me? For the world? How might I shape my self otherwise? Elsewhere?

“Elsewhere,” Glaude (2020) writes, “is that physical or metaphorical place that affords the space to breathe, to refuse adjustments and accommodations to the demands of society, and to live apart, if just for a time, from the deadly assumptions that threaten to smother” (p. 129).

Pragmatism is a critical piece of the paranormal *phulakos*—a personal pedagogy (a personal storytelling practice)—that I have been pointing to, a vital piece of this practice of bringing, inviting, and narrativizing some other shape into this here manifold of self. How do I narrate this breathing room? What space does this narration take up? As I dis-integrate my self, I find my self in the presence and at the whims of several energetic forces, forces that human hands have created, and which now guide the creative capacities of human hands (they constitute what Warren calls the horizon beyond which there is no getting). I mention them here only in passing, as passive figures in strange orbit passing by. Don't hold too tightly to them. They've been here all along. They hold you. They flit and fade away: four forces that coalesce into and through 'me.' Their presence—such existential, energetic forces—remains, a reminder of some nascent revolution, some revolutionary turmoil: Ever (an authority figure, a pragmatic guardian, and in my case, a mother), Ender (an authority figure, a pessimistic guardian, and in my case, a father); Mouk (an authorizing figure, a young one at the whims of the world, and in my case, my younger, stubborn, and susceptible self) and Moun (an authority figure, a shy, Zen guardian, and in my case, an discerningly aspirational sense of self (undergirded and by Ender, and by Ever, and in compassionate conversation with Mouk, and all his wandering, mad ways).

Each, I am finding, corresponds to or evokes a current/way of thinking—a way of relating to the thoughts that emerge in my mind, of relating and responding to the immediate world around me in which I am immersed, locked. I intend to bring these several stories to my everyday work, that work which I engage with my students *and* with my self. I take seriously Glaude's call to tell a different story, and I, with some of these steps, this stepping, this movement, follow in the footsteps of his pragmatic sensibility. I am not doing one thing. The story I tell my self separates me into my pieces, into the pieces of me, the pieces that pre-date me

and which, in their coming together, precipitate me. For me, this work of telling a different story must begin here on this imperial—and so imperiled—ground that undergirds and secures my ordinary, (un)conscious sense of self. It must begin on the sphere. It must begin here, with what I am and who I am and what I am going through. I piece together this project—which, as a product, reveals only pieces, perhaps rearranged—so that I might find an elsewhere, indeed, an elsewhere *here*—in me. May this here gesture comprise space, movement, and space between movement—and may I narrate this multiplicity, cluttered as it may come across. Bringing a new sort of shape and story into the fold is a starting point founded in a refusal of—pernicious though they are—these here foundations, a refusal not of who, what, how, and why I am, but of this assuming is-ness in the first place.

Alongside Glaude (2020), I, too, “believe an elsewhere can and must be found *here*: in our efforts to refuse to accommodate and adjust to the *status quo* and in those very small moments when we make choices that place us outside the norms and expectations that confine us, when we cultivate the capacity to say no. In both instances,” he writes, “we stand askance to the way things are. That affords us the critical distance to imagine our lives, and hopefully, the country differently” (p. 140). I posit beceasing as an additional orientation to the ontological—deadlocked—state of things as a pointing to the possibility of an elsewhere *here*—locally. Even if, at large, the state of things—there being a state of things—proves integral to this here world at large, on a small scale I do this work in order to bring an end to what I can (a small piece) for the sake of enduring what I cannot (end; that is, the inescapable ontological deadlock that humans have constituted and situated, by way of brutal, dehumanizing action and imperial subjection, their selves in, and that now their descendants find their selves in; an awakened state). Beceasing is that orientation which allows me to notice space, my incessant need and habit of de-spacing,

and to the possibility of allowing it to arrive and remain, of allowing my self to arrive in its midst, to continue moving, and working, and dreaming, and breathing. There is the possibility for such a something else in here, in my constantly collapsing process of thought and thinking, and in my sense of self as one and as such total, a closed sphere. Both of these tendencies, to think singularly of my self as becoming (progressing) and as (a) being (conserving), as an entity oriented in only one of these two ways toward the ontological state of things, left/leave me feeling as if I were without space, constantly bombarding a binary distinction, flip-flopping back and forth. Becoming. Being. No in between. All in between. I have always felt pulled toward something else, and so I becease, even though I have no idea what that means. I have no idea where this work is taking me. I have found it, that which undermines my finding, my foundations. Indeed, the story of beceasing withers and decays and evacuates away. I know where it leads me, and I am scared to admit it: dead space.

Still, here, we find our selves in a bit of a tension. I have chosen to include Glaude's (2020) words and work because he exemplifies, to me, a pragmatic disposition and an energy of persistence and optimism that, because this world and these narratives have been created and constructed they can be deconstructed and recreated. People have to do the work—people need to find their elsewhere here. They can. They need direction. And leadership. They need to know they have an, even if small, say over the directedness of their vector. They require space—this “critical distance”—to imagine their lives and their country differently. I think of Glaude, then, as an optimist (and not a pessimist) because he believes that these stories, by way of this space and recalibration and an honest confrontation with the truths of history and any given person's embeddedness and tethering to this history, can, at some fundamental level change, and, further, that these changed stories can change things, the material conditions that people find and might

find their selves in. It is not going to be easy, but at some point all that's really possible is doing something here and now—and this here and now brings limitations and requirements—walls and boundaries—with it. The way Glaude's work meets me thus resonates and evokes the energy of Ever, an everlasting energy that gives and gives, even when it's gone. For while this work may take a long time—in fact it will, and already does, require continual, incessant labor—a progression and movement of the stuck, sick, and sickening state of the world, the country, and the stories people tell their selves...a movement and revitalization, some sense of truth despite the lie, is, at a fundamental level, possible. There is something we can do. This world, this country, and all of the people who inhabit these places who live by and hold tight to the lie might yet find their selves—and their world—redeemed. It requires work, and working together, and more, and less. It might take forever—the constant struggle is worth it. It is necessary. It is my responsibility.

As he closes his chapter entitled “Ruins,” Glaude (2020) acknowledges that this road to redemption will not be easy. “Our after times,” he writes, “are indeed hard and rough, like untreated white oak” (p. 175). Working with or against this grain is not going to be easy. Indeed, it will be full of pain, failure, and of butting up against institutional and structural forces that are hardwired to remain the same, to resist change. “But if we aren't resigned to our fate,” he adds, “we must believe that we can still make our world beautiful. We must cling to hope, but it is a hope drenched in blood and disappointment. With that in mind, we have to gather ourselves to fight and to begin again” (p. 175).

There is always—everlastingly, so long as there is a human and their potential—the possibility of beginning again. Of falling down—assuming you were able to, or would at some point, find some sort of footing—and getting back up. Indeed, it is our responsibility, an

inescapable one. We—you, young one, and I—live in a world of unattended darkness. This neglect engenders other neglect, a dehumanizing, despacing degree. So goes human history. It is hard—it takes a particular kind of deceitful, dishonest story—to ignore it. Despite this ignorance, there is nevertheless persistently a call to respond. On the back cover of *Begin Again* Glaude includes a few more of Baldwin’s powerful words: “Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again.”

Pause.

So goes the pragmatic story I tell my self. The energy of Ever—of the possibility of change, the possibility of renewal, and growth and healing—takes root here. And not only here. There are other, critical pieces I must tell my self. For example, it does not feel possible for me to muse romantically and think only about what I could become (in binary contrast to what *I am*), from here. Put another way, I cannot only tell my self a story according to ontopedagogical progressivism, of which I see the pragmatic tradition as an offshoot. Indeed, such a story would not be different than the one I’d already been telling my self. It would only be an other one. Inasmuch as I become, I am, I have been, and, according to the subtractive addition that I now admit, I be cease. There are things that I am and have been—ways and habits of, and orientations toward, and assumptions about, and movements in relation to being—that I need to bring to an end. This project constitutes such a reckoning. In the end, what will I have done? I still do not know.

So unfolds, decays, and disintegrates the course of this project, a change of focus, from the singular to the plural and the sharp to the dull, from the straight-A student to the insufficient, just wanting, at this point, to get out and be done with all of this bullshit. From the scalding intensity of a solar beam to a, soft, snow-laden surface in a process of slow, dis-tense shattering.

Amidst obscurity—and indeed through it—there is the human hope that something else might arrive and remain, that I might allow it, that I might bring it, that I might receive it: something. What would it mean to bring this incessant act of disclosure to an end? I don't know if it will mean anything, but we're getting there.

What energy, if not of Ever, allows me to believe and be so sure that I am able to end even these personal patterns, especially given how pernicious and persistent human—I am a human and I can't not be—nature proves to be? What allows me to believe that this project will no longer nag me? That the 'end' of this project will truly constitute an end? A no more? May the end be the end—the point. Whatever may reach you—may it be the end. Nonsense? Frustration? Dread? I am there with you. You are not alone. May the flat points and when taken together dull edge constitute the end. In that sense—we've been where we're going all along, young one. I am not sure how to encourage you to continue to follow my lead. I've asked for trust too many times. I'm sorry. I'm lost—still lost—too.

A dark force bellows. The vacuous force of the dark, the void, does nothing and in doing so draws you—young one—in. Goosebumps. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will never let you go.

I point also to and through pessimism and the energy of Ender, a neglected energy, and, indeed, the energy of neglect. The pessimistic story does not allow me to wallow and give up, should this stuck state be the case. Indeed, the pessimistic/nihilistic story I tell my self informs my ability to, in the first place, respond, informs the context of my very responsibility. The spiraling gravity that pessimism provokes in me—a subtle, strong force—informs my response to the deadlock of my nevertheless human responsibility.

‘The story’ of pessimism/nihilism

The story of pessimism that I tell my self—evoking the energy of Ender—begins with at least two, fundamental hands. The pessimistic storyteller says, on the one hand, that the state of this world—the fibers that constitute its fabric, and with its integrity having been sewn so tightly into knotted binds—is, at some puzzling and irreducibly paradoxical—which is to say impenetrable—level (a facet of the unalterability), unalterable. Unpinpointable origins. Which came first, the human or its world? A beyond this world would first require its absolute unraveling, a dis-integration which would evoke and engender the onset of the inner ontological terror that humans and their consciousness have evolved (have shaped their selves) to outlaw: nothing (which is to say *anything goes—I am free*), being nothing (which is to say death—I am immortal), and nothing being (which is to say the end of the world—this world neverendingly everlasts; it must. There’s always got to be something, my basic human mind muses). The pessimistic storyteller finds this world—the ontological gravity of this world—to be inescapable. There is a wall. Beyond this world that is a wall would mean the end of this world and all that it and its contours contain—you, me, legacy, history.

On and with an other hand, the pessimistic storyteller simultaneously says nevertheless that there persists a need to live in and with and in relation to this world—doomed as it for its very being may be—in a way that does more healing than harm. Worse, we—you and I—owe it to the world, to humankind, for the wonder and beauty it makes—despite its inhabitants’ habit of marketing terror and terrifying conditions, of debasing their selves so as to make its manifestation profitable—possible. Put another way: the pessimist muses that although ‘everything,’ otherwise than Baldwin (Glaude, 2020), ‘*is and as such is lost*,’ there are nevertheless still processes of living and dying that warrant tending, cultivation, and care

(although I deign to use the word), and there are still qualities of life and circumstances of death and material conditions in which people move and breathe, domains that that deserve cognizance—recognizance (you already *know* how dis-eased things are)—and amelioration.

My pessimistic teachers are those figures who have pointed me toward the dark and its non-realm (its depths unpermitted on the surface of this enlightened, enwhitened, ensightened—A-WAKE—human world) and who have, through their work, provided me with what I feel is a sacred space that makes possible a re-orientation, even if not *of* the sick, fevered world, then *of and toward* my falling and newly felt and found sense of scattered, piece-meal self-hood. The figures that have pointed me toward and taught me about black nihilism and pessimism are Calvin Warren (2018) and Mara Van der Lugt (2021), respectively. I weave their work and the impression their writing and communication has left on me throughout this project, and explicitly in this overtly pessimistic part of it. Van der Lugt (2021) in particular introduced me to the long history of ‘pessimistic’ thinking (distinct yet related to Warren’s (2018) work, which he describes as ‘black nihilism’ (p. ix)), so let’s begin there.

Van der Lugt (2021) writes *Dark Matters: Pessimism and the Problem of Suffering* in order to probe into a series of questions “having to do with the dark side of existence, ‘the terrible side of life’ [referencing Arthur Schopenhauer],” such as, to cite a few: “are there more evils than goods in our lives? Is life worth living for all of us, for any of us? Why do some people choose death despite their blessings; why do some people choose life despite their sufferings?” (p. 20). Humans and their existential predisposition to de-space ontological terror create the context for this line of questioning, this array of thought with a question mark.

Who ‘chooses death’? Who is Van der Lugt (2021) talking about here? Who is the subject, and who is the object? It is an ambiguous question, with at least two readings. The first

reading regarding the question of ‘choosing death’ points, alongside Camus, to the philosophic wonder of *sui-cide*, the killing of one’s self. Why, indeed, “despite their blessings” (if nothing else than despite the blessing of being bestowed to them, a human) do some people choose to kill themselves? This question strikes a pessimistic tenor because it points to an apparent and often ignored—perhaps because it proves unconscionable—schism in the world. Indeed, what *leads* (*who leads*) or compels someone to end their own life, especially when it would appear that they have witnessed more ‘good’ in their life than ‘bad’? The pessimist suggests the problem of evil and suffering peaks through. Even marginal suffering (I might even say especially marginal suffering, since stemming from repression, a pushing to the margins, which is to say against the wall, there builds and bursts a violent pressure: power) can propel and project someone to the edge, with a force grand enough to thrust them over its brink.

There is another reading: why do some people choose *to deal out* death? Why, put another way, do some people kill, and worse, terrorize and subjugate? They do so, I can only imagine, in an effort to project and cast out their own horror—their own ontological terror—onto others. They are *phulaks figures* defending their selves—their self-same community—against unconsensual incursion, against anything otherwise. For when you approach, so the child learns in this world, the blurring of the walls surrounding my stable self—a safe and secure sanctuary—intensifies. And suddenly I don’t know what’s mine (what is of me?), and I begin to realize this dark fact, and I don’t like it, and I have to go back on my promise, and I have to take you down—you can’t be up here with me—and out, and out, for good. For your own good.

The question wanders, when the human chooses to bring death to another human, and to reify their own, living sense of human beingness according to this, to use Warren’s word, onticidal act, what happens? In this ontological debasement, is the debaser unscathed? Are they truly

free? Does brutality, dehumanization, and genocide—and here I reference those acts and conquests primarily fueled by imperial and colonial logics of white-supremacy, a superior sense of culture, of Western self-hood at the pinnacle of reality as an object to be understood, and the endless, everlasting expansion and spread of this way—operate along a one-way street, a singular channel through which no vile thing—none of this evil—can return? Put another way, does an objectively evil act of casting out—such a projection—actually cast out evil? Or does it linger and become a part of the world, a world which, inasmuch as it has been shaped, shapes, and with such great, immense, galactic weight? Such gravitas? If objectively evil, why is the landscape of human history littered and—the corrupt surface of a wall, a horrid veneer—lined with corpses? Why do humans do what they do?

How are such acts possible? How did ‘we’—a world—get to this point? What sort of contorted, death and dark defying and denying logic has permitted human history to unfold in the way it has and the way it does—has permitted humans hands to unfold history in the way they have and do? How do these actors, these people, live with (and not kill) their selves, having instigated and shaped such a wake, such an awakened state (Sharpe, 2016)? What sort of story—here as suffocation—do they have to tell their selves in order to inhabit a peaceful enough—to, at a minimum, merely carry on *as normal* in an every-day manner—inner realm after having committed such atrocities? Or even in order to find one’s self secured in the aftermath? For those innocent bystanders subject to this world that is a wake, what sort of story—here as safeguard—do they have to tell their selves in order to find some iota of meaning in this world into which they have been thrown? What, in this inner realm of the human, is left, as a result, as a residue, if not still the darkness and death—the unresolvable tension—they and their long lost ancestors sought to outlaw in their pursuit of the pinnacle, the peak, as apex predator of the anima-l

kingdom? How can light, pristine white, and clear, untainted sight—the utmost object of these enlightened ways of being in and shaping the world—remain here amidst the atrocious acts necessary for such sterilization?

The pessimistic story I tell my self settles on a ground, a bed of unsettling, disturbing questions. This litany of questions is not without a point. They are not *pointless*, and neither is the pessimistic pursuit. I do not pose these questions to imply that there is ‘nothing’ to be done in the face of the formidable but an endless spiral of remorse and shame and powerlessness. Nor does Van der Lugt (2021) with the questions she poses (of course, hers evoke considerably less drama than my own). Pessimism is not about despair. Indeed, particularly in her discussion of famous philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and what she sees as indicative of a broader lineage of pessimistic thought and work, Van der Lugt notices and points to a “deeper ethical drive present in the entire pessimist tradition, oriented as it is on compassion and consolation, as well as, more problematically, hope” (p. 336). That is, despite broaching, on the one hand, matters that are dark and bleak and frustrating, and, on the other, implicating—responsibility inducing, in my case—questions that are challenging—if not ultimately impossible—to answer, pessimists still, in the face of the formidable, do something, and not just any something. They exist and point to and through the basic, bleak contours of their position. They teach. They partake in Plato’s cave, in the human’s world and humans’ educational project: order and orders according to enlightenment. But you can’t see them. You won’t be able to see them. That’s not how this works. Something else is going on.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the pessimistic story I tell my self is necessarily ‘one’ of simultaneously pragmatic (an Ever-sense peaking through) action, indeed of telling my self and my students a different story despite my inability to get it right; despite an

ingrained, inescapable habit of getting in my own way, of bringing things into my own way, this orbit; that is, despite the problematic, intensifying presence of the *phulaks* figure, and more, the *phulaks* force. These words—these hands—point not to resignation. No matter the evidence, even if overwhelming, stacked in favor of throwing up my hands in defeat: I am not giving up; I am not giving in.

In the dark, there is a movement, there is a guide, there is a lead, there is a *phulaks* figure. Calvin Warren (2018) writes from within an abyssal realm, a space of non-ordinary-sense. Perhaps problematically, I think of Warren’s black nihilistic thinking as associated with the pessimistic tenor about which Van der Lugt writes—both spark something similar in me, a similar feeling. They pull on my thought in related ways. Nevertheless, Warren specifically writes and thinks according to black—and not explicitly ‘dark’—thought, and black thinking, he asserts, has been “given a tremendous task: to approach the ontological abyss and the metaphysical violence sustaining the world,” a metaphysical violence necessarily tied and linked to the human, their being, and the, again, atrocious (who chooses death?) acts that support the now normal linkage between human-and their-being (Warren, 2018, p. 7). I can only imagine that a prerequisite for this kind of black thinking must spawn in a thinker who finds their self in the interstices of the lines of the grid, amidst an a-voided territory. Nevertheless—and this point strikes me—he reached me. I continue to wonder about this point of connectivity, the relationship I have found my self in with this abyssal figure. I wonder about the force of his *phulaks*—and of other implicated, pedagogical figures—and my picking up on this low, drumming—building to and through some-non-thing—frequency.

Perhaps, I muse, ‘his’ reaching me has also to do with ‘my’ impressionability. Many—most—teachers in my experience have left their mark on me. I remember you, the things you

said, the ways you made me feel. I, a defiant young one, would obsequiously bow, even if not to your command, to your authority. I could not see that there was a role for me to play. You did not show it to me. You did not point me to my part. You pointed to and through yours. Now, bowing still to command but defying its overarching authority, I see this dynamic as a two-way street—that my way of studenting shapes the impression the teaching leaves. That I have played a role in how I experience and feel and witness and worship the world. I need not. There can be an end, to some of the ways, even if not the overwhelming way, things are. Then, I did not know I played a role, nor did I know that the role I had been playing was one over which I had little say, and, indeed, one shaped primarily by ontopedagogical conservatives—a monoculture—with little to no diversification, no otherwise, nothing from elsewhere. I did not know that flip-flopping from the conservative to the progressive front would leave me feeling similarly stranded, isolated, alone. I am returning to the depths of my impressionability. What happens in the first place matters and warrants an attentiveness, study (a point of this detour is to point to where my thinking is moving regarding my next project: studenting, and study). At some point, there is no undoing the movements that have been made, the context, the culture, the contours, the constitution. Sure, we can do something, but I can not tell a story that engenders the romantic hope that we—you and I, young one—can do anything, nor that we can do it all. There's just too much and yours is a practice of lessening, of dis-integrating, for the sake of community, connection, interconnection. And it's left you stranded, isolated, and alone. No man is an island, save for the one who finds his self there, a refuge, a dissipating stability amidst the tumult of a rising sea. No in between. All in between. In binary revolution. Incessantly.

These impressions undergird me and in-spire me to incorporate a pessimistic tenor into my onto-mythagogical *phulakos*. They constitute the contours, the painting and the writing on

the walls of my ego tunnel, stained like wood, soaked and saturated like a dyed wool (*Republic*, 429e). Sometimes, the way that people have shaped something is a done deal. There are repercussions for actions. Sometimes—and in this particular case, in the case of this here world—humans and their creative acts fundamentally alter—even if only through their observations—the fabric of space and time, to the extent that the impressions they leave are permanent. Even if healed, scar tissue remains and there is no getting to that first place again, nor is there a getting beyond it. Humans have stuck their selves here. This fickle moment, the impenetrable, unfolding wall of their cognitive, sensory-perceptive field, the fact of their presence, the present, a giftedness; they have contrived and not with ill-intent but with their hands of thought it such that it remains outside, objectively detached, everlastingly reliable. This human sense, this sense—an engine—that humans have created. Humanness, consciousness: again, in Warren’s (2018) words, these “creations,” like antiblackness, “...constitute a horizon...upon which human existence itself depends” (p. 24), the ongoing security of which requires a dark fuel (you/I/we don’t get to be if this machine stops; do not fret—these words, even if ultimately non-sense, propel its parts. May they nevertheless slow so as to stupefy and allow space into the ordinary, everyday, incessant, inescapable process and processing).

What, again I ask, would it mean to go back, to deconstruct, for example, the wall that structures and integrates the world, and to take away the *phulaks* figures which protect, by and large in the prevailing paradigm of the world, its integrity? To go back and crumble the very act of walling? Of managing a wall? Don’t we find our selves in the very bind we set out to dismantle? Of walling off, even if differently? Some features of this reality are out of our control. There are consequences for some creations, some unbroachable. Human history finds its self littered with inter- and intra-species antiblack, antidark, antiunknown, and antiunknowable

brutality on physical, metaphysical, mental, and spiritual registers. Warren (2018) deems antiblackness a technology necessary for the maintenance and ongoingness—where blackness serves as fuel—of the machine that is the world, and the mind of the masses that is its microcosm; a technology necessary for the maintenance of a metaphysical infrastructure of pure, objectively detached, enlightening ideals, concrete facts, laws of nature, of human nature.

I do not believe that there is a way out of this conundrum. I do not believe that there is a way out of it for me. For Warren (2018), any attempt to resolve the ‘problem’ that is antiblackness (and, indeed, it is a problem!)—and here an ‘attempt’ could even be telling a different, more optimistic, or pragmatic and romantic story *in the place of* the more pessimistic tale—reinstates antiblackness. Historically, imperial minded men have (to cite only one example of his damning act) deemed black people and blackness—the physical and metaphysical unknown and unknowable—a problem to be solved (“the Negro Problem”)—eradicated, dehumanized, animalized—through enslavement, forced in harsh labor, and worse. And still through policing, and mass incarceration, the global, universal exploitation of blackness—dark energy—for the sake of something, so that there might be something amidst overwhelming nothingness—deep, dark, dead space—otherwise.

Put another way, then, antiblackness *is* antiproblem. Approaching the antiblack state of the world—can we at least agree on this part? That antiblackness pervades the norm, the *status quo* of this world?—as if it were a problem to put to an end and resolve is to perpetuate antiblackness. I am not free of this bind, this bondage that I describe. Pessimism—this story that I tell, nor even the combination of stories that I tell—does not offer a way out. Forget that—we, young one, you and I, go in.

Throughout my piecing together this project, I strive for sense, coherent thought, and a sense of certainty, security, and centeredness—wholeness, even. I manipulate and secure and preserve through my participation in the necessarily antiblack metaphysical infrastructure inasmuch as I breathe space into it. Of course, I also employ some of the ready-made concepts that human thinkers have discovered and ensconced there. Indeed, my breathing space into it is a manipulation of it and, is, thus, a giving in to its reign. I do not refuse it. I could attempt to deconstruct it, and I could operate in the world as if I were beyond. It is too much for me—the act of outright refusal. Perhaps it is not for me. So be it and its way. I build an other, an additional way—ways, several paths and personae—into even not away from. I have work to do here, anyway. So goes my train of thought and thinking. I actively dis-integrate and disentangle the threads of my thought. Pessimism brings me from prose to poetry to prayer. You witness it here. You witness it there. I no longer focus them—these threads, these words, their medium, the media—and their intensity. Now, I find my self locked into a fall—and also I find a footing. I am able to walk here. What steps shall I take? How shall I move? Can the gait of the guardian, his attention on the wall, contribute something other than preserving it? And pushing for the sake of ever as if to progress beyond? Is something else possible?

The pessimistic story I tell my self begins here, with the deadlock. And here, with a question, a curiosity, and an openness nevertheless. In the face of the formidable, how am I to respond? I do not respond with a singular story, but multiple; a diversified palate. That is at least my hope!

My pessimistic point: a question: even if there is no way out, no way of escaping a world in which there is evil, or antiblackness, what would it mean to build, and in my case without structure, which is to say haphazardly, a way, now following Warren (2018), in? Into the abyssal

void that remains on and indeed renders the outskirts, the wall, of a world terrified of nothing, bound by this terror, and enamored, obsessed with that sense of one, the feeling of, a romantic musing about, and a desirous longing for—having been born into a world where suffering, and brokenness appears inevitable—wholeness, completion, and totality?

If the world at large proves irredeemable, what is possible in the local, the personal? What is necessary on this local, personal level? Where does this sense of necessity come from? It is a story I tell my self—Ever shines through. Can I aspire for healing more than harming? Where would that happen? In relationships, with my self, with others, with my ancestry, with my own past, with the world, and with my implication in the momentum of the world. And why, if nothing really matters in the end (ontological terror, for the human who takes their self to obdurately and supremely be, never lets up—and there is no end to this sort of egomaniacality), would I do so? What's the point? Even if, in the grand scheme, it is ultimately good for nothing? If, in the grand scheme of space and time, everything comes to an end, thoroughly de-coupled, de-cohered, entirely dis-integrated? My tunneled and tunneling I, eye, this certain, sure worldviewer is nothing against the whims of entropy. What can I, attuned to Ender's pessimistic energy, end here and now? And, again, why? In preparation? For the sake of endurance, for the time and space that I currently find my self and selves in, while I have space and time, while space and time has me?

If I cannot break and tear down the wall—it constitutes the boundary of my very thought, an inescapable tunnel, what am I to do? Can you sense my battering against it? My knocking? It is hard to break these habits. And so, in addition, I ask: what might it mean to practice nothing, to embrace a practice of nothing, in a world where nothing is outlawed? In a world that fears nothing? What might it mean to sit down, shut up, and stare at this wall? What would this do?

What can a pointless act accomplish? I challenge my self to face ontological terror, without gross glorification, without diagnostic pathologization; indeed, for some mundane middle between the two, and for no real reason whatsoever—it's just something that I feel I must do: sitting with the terror and majesty of nothing. It's not for you. It's not for me. It is not for. It is not. We now turn to the story I tell my self regarding Zen Buddhism.

'The story' of Zen Buddhism

The story that I tell my self regarding Zen Buddhism initially took root in me at an odd point in my life; I was beginning my PhD coursework online in the middle of a global pandemic, and I was months away from learning that my mother was very, very ill. A teacher of mine asked his students to watch a short video featuring Shohaku Okumura, a Buddhist teacher and student who practices, now, in Bloomington, Indiana. The title of the video alone conveys the strange weight of what he states throughout the video: *Zazen is good for nothing*.

What is *Zazen*? *Zazen* is a part of a pedagogical branch of Buddhist lineage stemming back to a figure named Dogen. The meditation aspect of this practice—a prominent, so to speak, aspect—is called *shikantaza*, and its practitioners concern their selves with sitting; just sitting. This sitting practice is good for nothing. It does not have a purpose. It does not have a point. Its practitioners seek to bring about neither any-thing, nor even nothing. *Zazen* is meant—if it has meaning—to amount to nothing—nothing nothing, not even the romanticization of nothing: zero, nil—because, taken together, all that the practice yields is but the act and practice of sitting down. And it hardly amounts to that, to the words I use to describe it.

just sitting.

If the practice becomes *about* anything, or finds a center, a goal, or point, it falters because it ceases to just be about sitting. This practice is not one in or for orderly revolution. It is

not ‘in’ or ‘for’ anything. It centers nothing—that is, it has no center and is non-centering. Any desire—a centering of want on an object—associated with the practice of just sitting collapses the project through/*via* the onset of this object- and ego-asserting act: the tunnel, the first-person perspective. It nevertheless continues to be about just sitting, and the practitioner finds their self encouraged upon the mundane call of *Zazen*. All I have to do is sit, and if I can’t even do that, I may continue to return to the sitting posture and I may let go of the judgment that I feel well up in me as I reflect on that first lapse, falling short. *Zazen* is not good for judgement. I realize, alongside Shohaku, that I do not need to be a good boy, to strive for goodness. I can just sit. If only it were that easy. Shit—it is that easy.

And, nevertheless, because it has no object, the practice proves to be good for nothing. It is not meant to get or propel the practitioner to anywhere, to any particular destination, or any destination at all. It is not good for ‘me’ because approaching *Zazen* so that I might be and feel better as a result ceases and seizes up the initial project: just sitting. It is not good for the world because approaching *Zazen* with any sight set on affecting or contributing to positive social change at large undermines the very outset: just sitting. It is not good for ‘enlightenment’—a knowledge, understanding, or insight from far beyond/deep within my self and inherent, true, to this world—because approaching *Zazen* with a desire for, or even the vaguest expectation of, enlightenment halts and obscures the basic idea: the very act of just sitting, and of continuing to just sit down, of returning to the sitting act, the seated position. Emptiness.

‘Four points,’ Shohaku (2019) calls them as he models with his hand a collection of supports, almost like legs of a table, inform *Zazen*: upright posture, deep breathing, not sleeping, and letting go of thinking, or releasing and opening the hand of thought (Uchiyama, 1993). *Zazen* calls for the continual return to these four points. Critically, Shohaku notes, it might not be

accurate to think of this practice as meditative, or that Zazen is primarily a meditative practice. Indeed, there is a busy-ness to it: constant return, to these four points: upright posture, deep breathing, not sleeping, and letting go of—or opening—the hand of thought. Nevertheless, the foundation of the practice remains the same: Zazen is good for nothing. Painted this way, though, not only does such a practice require doing one thing—‘just sitting’—for the sake of nothing. There are these four components to attend to, in a non-attending sense, or non-sense, or sort of way.

The practice is beginning—if it had not already—to sound quite challenging, and indeed foreboding, frustrating; that way-seeking mind persists. There must be a way to authentically practice Zazen. Must there be?

Shohaku acknowledges a basic conflict inherent to practicing just sitting. It is impossible to begin just sitting without an expectation, without an original desire and inclination. Just sitting requires a prompt: “just sit.” Something—notably not nothing—compels me to sit, to practice just sitting. I think of this conflict as an irresolvable tension, a place of impasse, a wall, or what Shohaku calls “the dead end.” Those who practice just sitting meet this end as they continue to practice just sitting not only without any expectation, but also without resolve for the question of how to authentically begin such a practice *in the first place*. The first place, for Zazen, is compromised. It begins with ego. It begins with the constitution of an indestructible wall—a wall that has always—as long as you, young one—have.

A prefabricated pull—some desire, some want—compels sitting—the practice calls for forgetting the ego compulsion that got ‘me’ here, expecting nothing (and not even nothing), and continuing to practice just sitting, returning to the sitting position. Such a return requires shutting up and staring at the wall, not paying any attention to sensation (non-sensing, forgetting—but not

foregoing—body and mind; indeed, they are prerequisites); put simply and effectively, such a return—such a practice of returning without expectation of where this return leads or of the nature of the entity which returns—calls just for sitting.

If ‘just sitting’ truly is a practice that is good for nothing, why do I point to it?

The tension that *Shikantaza* engenders is powerful. It calls for space, for allowing space to arrive and remain—space, that is, at the level of mind and mindedness, body and embodiment. The one-track, way-seeking mind is a mind of expectation, desire, and need from the outset. The perpetual movement—a tunneling feature that subjects the ego-holder to a coherent, smoothed personal perspective, or which makes such a perspective, of self and of world, appear (Metzinger, 2009)—of this kind of mind finds its spark in the assumption that fundamentally there is something ‘I’ should be striving for, that ‘I’ need in order to be ‘me’; a vicious, automatic cycle. There is no space here, and there is no nothing.

The practice of just sitting, I think, offers or makes possible space, spaciousness, and opening as an option when it comes to mindedness, (again) *in addition* to closing, tunneling. In Buddhist thinking, there is a name for the figure in the mind that secures the domain of expectation, desire, tunneling, and ego: the watcher; indeed, an ‘inner’ *phulaks* figure. And so we can also think, then, of this ‘just sitting’ practice as a call to call into question the presence, again, of *phulaks* figures in this world and in the selves of those occupying the world. Here in particular the practice encourages a calling into question those figures of consciousness posted on the boundary between self and world (indeed, as protectors and preservers of this private space), those figures which shape and manage the tunnel, the wall. Such a questioning is not an effort to rid the self of these guardians, but to engage and orient them—and my self, as a result—differently toward this wall that always already is. Or, at the very least, to just notice them, and

perhaps even to allow them some rest, some space of their own. Of course, I am getting ahead of my self. Zazen is good for nothing—neither good for noticing guardians, nor good for orienting them otherwise. It is easy to confuse the matters at hand.

In his 1991 book *Orderly Chaos: The Mandala Principle*, Buddhist thinker Chogyam Trungpa (whose teaching stems from the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages of Tibetan Buddhism—that is, distinct from Zen Buddhism and Dogen’s lineage) points, in the fourth chapter, to ‘The Watcher’s Game’ and related *samsaric* patterns. *Samsaric* means ‘confused/confusing,’ and ‘*samsara*’ is, in Buddhist thinking, but one side of a coin, on which the other is ‘*nirvana*’—enlightenment. If with enlightenment comes clarity and a seeing and sensing of ‘things’ and ‘nothing’ as they truly are, then con-fusion occurs through a fusing together of pieces, aspects, and energies that do not and need not go so tightly together. Con-fusion collapses the space between things, between things and nothing. Confusion, as such, abounds in and integrates this world. People prove, with their ways of being, to be thoroughly confused. Why? Human consciousness relies on an ego-tunnel, and the ego is this con-fused and con-fusing entity. Where there is the ego, there will persist confusion. Integral to this confusion and connected to the ego is the work of the watcher, that observing—watching—aspect of conscious experience. The watcher acts so as to maintain both the satisfaction of desire and the meeting of expectation, and, of course, the having of desire and expectation in the first place. Trungpa thinks of the watcher as “the workable situation that we [humans, ego-brains] deliberately manufacture out of nothingness, out of the open-minded situation” (pp. 39-40). Those who practice Zazen that is good for nothing, or just sitting, (aspirationally) return to this pre-watching state, a state of nothingness, a situation of the mind that is open: no tunnel, no self, no thing, nothing. Not only does the watcher deal in

wants and desires, but needs, too. What do I need? What, in addition to just sitting, do I need to do? Do I tell my self I need to do? Where and how do I orient this watching part of me?

The presence of the watcher multiplies the project, and gives the practitioner a purpose: a pointing, on the one hand, to just sitting. And on the other, to the lineage, the past, the how we—you, young one, and I—got here. Put another way, on this other hand, the practitioner points to context. The good for nothing pedagogue points to and through just sitting—and so defies their practice, defies their self, so gets in their own way, so creates—and creates the notice of—the conflict in the first place. An echo of a teacher: the finger that points to the moon is not the moon. There is something else going on. It's good for nothing, so don't worry about it.

Nevertheless just sitting cannot just be about just sitting. That should track given what I have told you so far. If this sitter remained here, just sitting, forever (and ever alone), they would die; not only their mind—a workable situation—but also their body would return to this nothingness and they would cease to be. If the sitter remained there, there would be no teacher. Long story short: the sitter stood up and started to tell a story.

Put another way, at the thought of death the watcher intervenes. The watcher of human consciousness fights against physical and mental death and so compels the Zazen practitioner from their sitting and into, mentally, attention and thinking, and, physically, hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. The watcher watches out for the ongoing livingness of the self—and fights against death, the end of this life, its life—by, on the one hand, closing the hand of thought onto any and every sensation passing through or going on and, on the other hand, by pointing, in times of physical need, the psychosomatic hand of thought toward food, drink, and rest. The watcher habitually and incessantly, for the sake of preserving this conscious experience, an experience that is fundamentally *samsaric*, confused, fights and struggles against death, darkness, the void.

It fights against the nothing, the providential good for nothing prospect of just sitting, and against the unknowable means of authentically beginning, and then of sufficiently practicing. It fights against blackness. If not fighting against, there is a conflicted relationship, a contentiousness, the feeling of a contest, as if there is something to be gained, that necessarily there is something to be gained. Just sit. What if there really is nothing to be gained at the end of all of this? And what if that nothing—the end—is so overwhelming that it has broken time and is already here? Just sit. Attend to posture. Open the hand of thought. Breathe deeply. Return to the wall.

The watcher works to keep the self in these living bounds, and even goes to far as to play a distracting role. The watcher takes its post at the wall so that the self need not. The self—this self—is not supposed to be at the wall. Nor is it supposed to know that there is such a wall, a wall so close to nothing, to ontological terror. It is not safe here. Even knowledge of the wall routes the self toward risk and existential crisis. Especially here on the precipice between inside and outside—the site of the watcher’s game—threats to security abound for this sheltered self. This brink is no place for that entity which is to—for its own sake—believe and take as a presuppositional foundation its own consistency.

Far from the wall inland, on that settled, inner territory: that is where the self should and can continue—so the stories of the ego and legacy and everlasting life go—to be. Here and only here can this entity dream of possible futures, can this entity re-write the story they tell about the past. Only in this fortified inner realm, and inner realms after it, its descendants and lineages, a long genealogy, might the self and the community (of selves) of which it is a part think, act, and realize their potential, imagined and otherwise. ‘Oh!,’ this entity, secured by the watcher at the wall, marvels at the possibilities: ‘what could be!’

The watcher is a confusing figure. “The whole *samsaric* structure,” Trungpa (1991) writes,

is based on making something eternal out of something impermanent and transitory.

Things are transitory—they cease to exist because they have been born. But by a twist of logic, we come to the conclusion that this transitoriness is happening all the time, and we try to make the transitoriness into an eternity....[The] ultimate hypocrisy [is]...believing in transitoriness as something that is continuous. And that is watcher. The watcher validates its existence out of falsity; it tries to manufacture falsity as truth. (p. 40)

An echo: the inadvertent absolutism of onto-pedagogical progressivism—a desire to get beyond and a belief that it is possible to de-construct and get past this wall, the step-by-step, block-by-block realization of which requires incessant labor, turns the piecemeal, the multiplicitous, into a totalizing project—shines through and casts out, in the process, ontological terror. I offer beceasing—onto-pedagogical dis-integration—as a way into, not out of, this mess, with no eye to sorting, nor even to seeing, but to feeling, and to just sitting amidst, the pieces within and around you. I am leaving you with pieces. They need not go together. They need not.

The watcher, a truly transitory thing—I will die—nevertheless finds a certain strength in the assertion of its permanence, in its ensuring that it, its work, its wake, and its ways will go and live on. The watcher alone finds grounding—settles—on a lie, the lie that because it is now it will always be. The watcher remains alone, lying to its self that it always will until it simply cannot; and then there is no reconciliation. From nothing my human mind creates the watcher and to, with me, nothing (at least nothing *like this*) it returns: to the depths of the cave, to the mouth, to the depths, to the mouth. The watcher knows that it needs to just sit, to pause, ponder, and assume the seating position, but cannot bear to face that which they already feel so close to,

on their brink: nothing, no reason, no judgement. And so the watcher makes small movements, returning, practicing return for the sake of its end, an idle process, an idling process, every once in a while, every so often. Not always. Not never. Occasionally. It's not enough. It must be. Must it be?

For my sake, my security, my life and living—for me and this self-same sense of me—the watcher lies and tells me a story that is ultimately false. Its deceit does not stay with me—I cannot contain it. It bleeds into my interpersonal watching work and way in the world, work which, at least in the world of teaching and pedagogy (indeed, the world of watching and *phulakos*) tends to, because this world is one of watched-walls, gravitate toward, as I have been pointing, EITHER onto-pedagogical conservatism OR onto-pedagogical progressivism; one or the other, no in between, all in between: totality, infinity: a one-track-way-seeking-mind. The watcher distorts and contorts—con-fuses—the piecemeal of progressivism, the desire to slowly take apart with human hands what other human hands have put together, bears the weight of the pressure of this world and, a sole project, collapses into a totalizing project akin to conservatism.

I write so as to break out of and into this either/or binary of thought that compels me to believe that I must either practice either/or thinking or both/and thinking. I write so as to pre-figure a both-and way of thinking, a multiple at the outset that ultimately, when taken together, when taken apart, a part, withers and decays away, indeed, subtracts: a way. I write for the sake of multiple watchers, and different kinds of watchers—not just one, nor its monocultural world. Indeed, I do not seek to rid my self of the watcher, in the same way that I do not intend to break out of the ego tunnel, in the same way that I believe that there are some aspects of this world that have been created and, because of the psychological impression in the wake of such creations,

cannot be changed. What, in response, might I then do? In this world that is—with the grandiose weight inherent in this word—“a wake” (Sharpe, 2016), and when I incorporate ‘just sitting,’ which as part of its base calls for ‘not sleeping,’ that is, that very ‘a wake ness,’ how shall I nevertheless proceed to move around, and live (and sleep when I need to), and die?

The watcher will persist, and will distort any project that takes place in its walls, the walls over which it has dominion. The guardian—watcher—will not let go; and so suffocates. The guardian—watcher—will not let go; and so supports.

Returning to the state of open-minded, pre-confusion, is impossible, as impossible as it is to begin ‘just sitting’ without expectation. It would be the watcher who guides the removal of their self. The *phulakes*, the teachers, and the storytellers, who, through the practice they—I—wish no longer to perpetuate (because it hurts, frustrates, harms, and confuses), attempt to practice otherwise, to change the fundamental narrative, to undo the residue lingering in that ancient cave; a confusing bind. A problematic bind. I need not escape it. I find my self here. I unfound my self here. I allow there to be space between me and my self here. Right here. Be-ceasing, para-normal *phulakos*, has, from the outset, been good for nothing; an onto-pedagogically dis-integrating gesture, not because I want it to be; it is.

Indeed, escape is not my goal. The story I tell my self regarding Zen Buddhism motivates me to proceed, in part, on this journey without expectation, or goal, or destination in mind. Is this even possible? A good question. I can not know.

Pause.

I tell my self this story about Zen Buddhism, about the watcher and its inescapable, persistent presence, and about a practice of just sitting that is good for nothing because, in contrast to the way I have been taught and told to think—a way which situates me at the center

and, indeed, regarding *centers* assumes that *there is one*—this practice opens a possibility for orienting my self toward nothing, or perhaps nothing in particular. It points me toward nothing and calls for me to alter my relationship toward this underlying fact of my life: from nothing—unpinpointable origins, a tension (nothing concrete)—I emerge, to nothing I return. I am not speaking in a negative sentence. Nothing is not negative—nor even neutral, nor even zero. Nothing is not. I need not cling tightly to this glimmer of being that I have found and have been taught to find my self and my center in. Telling my self the story that there might not be a center—that there may be nothing substantial, or at least nothing stable, static, or everlasting, at my core; that there may be nothing—alongside the integrating, confusing narrative of the watcher, after all, does not unravel me here and now. Indeed, there is a watcher who does not let go. There is a watcher who does not let go. Indeed, any story I tell happens alongside the story that I have been told to tell. To this end, I do not seek to rid my self of the litany of stories that I have heard. May what I offer constitute an odd addition—and if there is a take-away, may it be the fact that this addition takes-away.

I desire their healing. I desire to heal them—these cosmic energetic, *phulaks* figures and their forces. The watcher needs to rest, to sleep. At least two parts of me, Ever (pragmatism) and Ender (pessimism). work together, ending what they can—the type of watcher that is Mouk, a figure and energy that is on all the time and, as such, allows no space through and in his way of watching over the wall. They end what they can for the sake of enduring what they can not—the fact that the watcher will wake again, and again, and again; indeed, there are some boundaries that require sustained, ongoing vigilance (against fascism, against incursions on bodily autonomy, for example) and in his mind, he is the only one who can face some of these tasks, those which fall to him, those for which he is responsible. The watcher will wake and work until

it does not (I point to being nothing), and then nothing will wake (I point to nothing being) and then nothing (I point to nothing—at least in part).

Even if the watcher cannot leave the wall, for it—that tunnel—follows wherever it goes, what about me? Am I the watcher, or is it but a part of ‘me’? ‘Just sitting’ is another story that dis-integrates me, revealing pieces in tension working together and working apart. I am not one thing. Although it and its presence prove permanent, the watcher, a *phulaks* figure, is not the only figure of authority—of authorship—at play here.

The practice of ‘just sitting,’ we might say, then, gives (some of) these guards a day—or at least some time—off from their incessant patrol—indeed, they do not have a job when the practitioner dabbles in this particular meditative state. May they find rest, even if only for a moment, a respite, a deep breath. Again, a guardian always remains; even when they appear to be gone, there is, at the end of the day, the lasting impression of the guarding presence that sent them away—that presence, the presence of creators, always remains. A mark on the earth, from the perspective of the moon—Moun, that fourth, persona-fied figure.

These *phulakes* cannot take a leave on their own. And even if they should, the wall—the tunnel—indeed would follow closely behind; they are tied by tether and cord together; between them, this irresolvable, inseverable tension. Nevertheless, the possibility, the very thought, the very non-thought, of temporary reprieve—even if momentary and lapsing, ultimately collapsing—dis-integrates the stuckness and reveals, for a moment, a space and allows for both breath and breathing and an opening up of multiple, a branching *into and through this human world*, and the chasm against which it defines its selves. The space allows for a turning attention away from the tunnel—that oneness—and onto something else, or some-non-thing else: nothing,

the wall, the wall that butts up against nothing—a different image, shape, and story of self. Something in addition. Some odd thing in addition. Somenothing in addition. It subtracts.

Pause.

So go three stories—dis-integrated and thus bearing remnants of that one—that I am telling my self. Each, I hope, conveys what I see as a distinct energy. The story I tell my self regarding pragmatism evokes Ever’s energy—an ongoingness, an optimism: the fact that I become. The story I tell my self regarding pessimism evokes Ender’s energy—a cutting through romanticization, a call, in the face of the formidable, endure: the fact that I be cease. The story I tell my self regarding Zen Buddhism evokes Moun’s energy—a return, a turning again, a turning back: the fact that I am. Mouk’s singular energy—the energy of singular selfhood—is what I bring to an end.

So go some persona-fications, characterizations and narrativizations of spiritual energies that necessarily comprise me. Indeed, I find my unfound, dis-integrated self amidst and through them. They are a story I tell my self. They are a story I am telling you.

The Storyteller so far

To tell a story is to point a listener in a direction, through words, through the ways words move, through the way that story teller places words, spaces points, and moves gestures. To tell my self a story is to point my self in a direction, is to orient my self. What story do I tell my self? What do I orient my self toward? And what about you? Perhaps a more helpful question is: how do I orient my self toward it? What’s it? I point to and through it.

The world, the wall: how do I position my self in relation to this wall? This wall between me and the world? I tell my self several stories that point to different hows, several hows. On one hand, I conserve its definition, its integrity, not because I like it, but because at some deep,

fundamental level, I realize that I can't not. This hand is only part of the story, part of the pointing/pedagogical/*phulakos* gesture. Moun. On another hand, I seek to redefine it, to progress the notion of what is a wall, what it keeps out, what it keeps in, what it allows—makes possible, and what is outlaw—makes impossible. This hand is only part of the story. Ever. On another hand, I approach the wall slowly and gently. I stare up at its towering, infinite stature. I glance down at its base, crafted blocked set firmly and surely on bedrock—a created wall, made by titans the strengths and powers of which I cannot fully comprehend. And so I breathe into it, into the air-tight crevices that are not openings, but echoes of where openings once were—now collapsed. Ender. Dis-integrator. Dust billows, the stones remain. For a moment, outside of time, there is a space, and some-non-thing arrives. I admit it. It ushers me along. I walk along the wall, breathing in this world inside the wall, and breathing out something else. There is, along the way, space. There is movement. There is space between the movements. Something deep down in me buckles before it returns to where it has always been, to where it has always been going to, and coming from; a cycling, with an end.

All storytelling happens in relation to the wall that always already is, that wall that humans have noticed and concretized with their actions, and thinking, and ways of acting and thinking. Some humans more than others; a human problem nonetheless. Storytellers are *phulakes*, are pedagogues—leaders of the young.

To what does this storyteller point? How does this pointing happen? I point to and through a piece of what I am doing, and to a piece of what I have been doing all along, throughout the course of this project: a para-normal *phulakos*: onto-peda-gogical and onto-myth-agogical dis-integration: that is, to the possibility of be-ceasing, of allowing ontological terror and the anxieties—nothing, nothing being, and being nothing—it engenders to arrive and remain.

I point to be-ceasing, the ceasing to automatically and harshly deem non-being, nothing being, and the fact of my own imminent death as outright, no questions asked threats. I point to be-ceasing, a practice of mindfully approaching the end of this gut-reactionary automatism, the end of such a 'me.'

'I' need not be the sphere with a rigid and harshly enforced boundary and surface between inside and out. I need not tell my self the story that those who have aligned their selves—whether consciously or not—with the prevailing, dominant, and dominating current, momentum, and inertia of the world have told me. I can tell my self—and my students—a different story. I might be—I tell my self a story in an effort to re-shape my self into—according to a different kind of topology, one where inside blends into outside; a shape comprising not singular, individual points in tension with each other, but pieces necessarily of tension in relation through this shared sense of tension, and of pieces in tension: a shared sense of multiplicity, of self comprising several pieces, parts, and personae, of both inter-connection *and* dis-connection, of both boundaries and of shared space.

I might bring this sort of shape into the fold as an addition that makes space. May there be space, emptiness, nothing. May there be movement, tension, energy. May there be space between movements.

Epilogue

They are building a house across the street. The electric's going in. The workers, their power tools, and their heavy machinery shake me. I vibrate. I watch and I feel this process: the cutting into concrete; the grind that such a cutting through—so precise—requires; the low frequency that reverberates out and into the local space of impact as the backhoe tears the asphalt away. The process: putting down new lines, new power lines in a settled, deeply impressed—

irreversibly so—world; all sunk into onto-metaphysical concrete. A cemented world, opening onto new lines that grant access to power—the same old source of power.

Green leaves.

Although this world—the world we want—needs people to cut into concrete, I am not here to do this very thing. I don't fault those who are, nor those who find their selves to be here (here for this very purpose—progressivism). Nor do I fault those pouring this growing mass anew, regularly, and on an everyday basis, nor those who find their selves to be here (here for this very purpose—conservatism). I cannot fault you, nor can I fault my self; I am here too. For I require—and way beyond me, the world requires—this fault between, the fault lines; the room for, given to, allowed for breathing, space between tectonic plates; movement between tectonic plates; space between the movements. We have poured concrete into this earth, and in doing so we have turned it into a world.

I have. I write so as to cease my being in the world in this particular way, or at least my (resorting to) being about it, so quickly, aggressively, impatiently. I write so as so cease my being and feeling singularly and uniquely central and integral to the world, the universe. Here, you have my target; that elusive entity at which I have been taking aim all along: my younger self. And this here point, this edge: I write so as to heal and guide and undermine him—I write to bring him here. At the very least I point in this direction—he's stubborn. The unalterable past—that which IS (that solid state)—nevertheless grows, emerges, and reaches—and so BECOMES—this here me: how am I to respond to these facts, the fact of my being, the fact of my becoming—indeed, a human, an antiblack guardian of being, of these forces of being? I call and think my self a dis-integrating entity. I write so as to situate my self *less* singularly—and perhaps even *more*, at some points; anything but only one. I write so as to slowly shatter—may

there be breathing into and through the various ventricles that open. I write so as to bring a strange shape into this ordinary manifold—a disruptive, dis-tending figure.

I slow so as to reach a frequency of deep resonance with the young version of me, and the war he wages, for his own sake, against the world, a vision of the world, that I—this here me—still want to see. I want to see it differently—still waged, and now with intended rage. I want to engage more senses, and less common sense, less common cents, less this currency, less this current of the state. I do not want to be at the center. I need you to see the world—as I paint it, how it appears to me. I need you—my younger self—to see why, why things happen the way they do—and why they were always going to. This world. I need you to see this world, and I need it to shatter you. It's coming whether you want it to or not.

I do not want to feel singular. I do not want to have a core. I do not want there to be a core to the story that I tell—no kernel, but rather the rampant dispersion of an entity that only knows its own compression. What I want proves additional and thus antithetical to what my young mind sought and saw, to where he thought he might inevitably, without re-course, be and be moving: destiny, singularity.

There is a fissure I cannot breach with you, elder one. There is a wall I've built that there is no getting beyond. I both am and am not trying to get you to see it—the wall and the abyss just on the other side. And from a distance—with some space between, that is, in parallel fashion (which is to say both familiar and strange to you)—I am trying to get you to watch what I am doing, and to feel it without being given direct access. Here is this something particular and which I cannot name because I run the risk of rendering it null, or worse, capturing it. We need not go there. I need not take that sort of step, that particularly protective gait. There is something else. There is this space right here for breathing. Without clarity, it nevertheless, it—this thing I

point you to—lingers. Can you feel it? Scar tissue. Trauma. Indeed, the deep wound of the world. It bleeds into me. I narrate in and around its presence. In, and out, and around—toward an end.

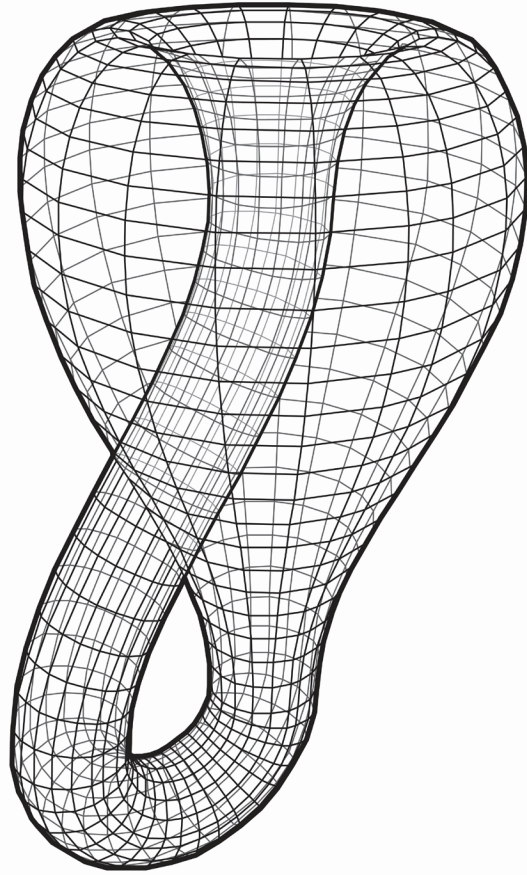
Brown branches.

My tools—these here tools, the parts that remain—are neither sharp nor precise enough. I project for the sake of a dull edge of what remains, an ambiguous series and line of points, pointing gestures. That's all I claim to offer. A dis-integrated and dis-integrating—ever so slowly, aware of, at least, the end—worldview; and a decomposing person working to re-shape the contours of his own wall. A lost process, I get lost in the process, wandering around in the dark, the depths of the cave. I do not cling to the memory. The vistas remain: where I first found my self—this self; where I first found foundations—the wastelands of this world. And there is something up ahead, there's something, my guts interject, up at the head. I write so as to guide it back down, through my hands, to my body, and further, deeper.

Black backgrounds.

Interlude Four

Figure 13. Some(non)thing else, https://www.flickr.com/photos/knee_jerk/8811686801



Part Four

“My objective, then, is to build a way into an abyss – without recourse to the metaphysical finality-teleology of an answer...[T]he lack of language and grammar to describe what preconditions Being makes the enterprise a difficult one—inevitably encountering explanatory impasse. We [black thinkers and black thinking], however, attempt to undermine metaphysics as we deploy it.” (Warren, 2018, p. 14)

“What can’t be watched? What violates the idea of security and surveillance, makes this idea unworkable? Short-circuits and overflows and overheats and enrages the watch? This watch chain that allows for policy questions like who watches the watchers. Checks and balances. No, we bounced. The unwatchable are the intolerable. Who does not accede to being watched but turns unwatchable instead? Was always unwatchable but not in relation to the watchable? Never there, never a population, but declare, in violation of being watched, ‘watch meh now!?’ We, that’s who, to more + less than one another, which is us. Who can’t you look at? Who you lookin’ at, motherfucker? Who’d rather go blind?” (Harney & Moten, 2021, p. 151)

4.0.1 An immediate question

Where is ‘my’ place, the place of a watcher, a guardian, a *phulaks* figure, in this ‘us,’ in this “more + less than one” that Harney and Moten call a ‘we’? I am a part. I am not the black thinking part that Warren describes. I nevertheless bear a relation to this black thinking part and I venture in to this abyss, along some abyssal vector, following a lead and allowing there to remain some space between.

I work in a middle ground between discourses, caught between disciplinary gestures that have all left a deep impression on me, sensitive as I am in these moments in my life. Sporadic, I am no where completely. I am always pulled between. What am I a part of? I am a *phulaks* figure—a teacher, a storyteller—working in a warring world, of conflict, tension, discord, and turmoil—at the base. The question becomes: how am I to be here? What is my responsibility? What role might my piece play? Conscious of my habit to evacuate space—feeling my self singularly compelled by both conservative and progressive logics—I am shy, I shy away. I stick to the shadows. I am making an opening move. It begins here—in this locality, a dark domain,

with my position, my com-position—my role in the historic equation of domination—evident. I can't not see it. It can't not see me. We continue to allow it. I am calling into question the evidence. Indeed, I now proceed through de-com-position; this project, the compost remains of what I've put into this slow machine, the story and stories that I have told and am telling my self en route an attention to the possibility of onto-pedagogical dis-integration in the first place. I must be clear here that I do not pursue such a possibility for the sake of solution, for a way out. In case I have not been clear so far: I write so as to navigate the depths and the dark, the pitch-black dark, a place in which the human is challenged to find its self. I wade in these depths and I walk in the dark. I am practicing a new vision, a new gait, a new way of gating, of relating to the threshold, of managing the wall. It begins, for me, with ontological dis-integration, a fraught first place—indeed, at the point of fissure: beceasing, a personal pedagogy and practice of paranormal *phulakos*.

It isn't anything. It is a projection. It is this project. This act of projecting, an assemblage of words. May you encounter them, in the kind words of a colleague of mine, as non-compulsory food for your thought and thinking. And nothing more. And nothing less.

CHAPTER X: BECEASING, IF NOTHING ELSE, A PRAYER

4.0

Cold, Open

These last four years have fucked me up. Nightmares. A nightmare. Figures to follow. They disappear. I just keep on walking. Following along the landscaping of this world that is on its last leg. On its last leg forever. What does this world make possible? And profitable? Things are becoming dim—the light is going out, and then, what will you do? What would you do if you found your self alone in the dark? Bombarded by a chaotic tumult, an inability to consistently, persistently attend? I am scattered. And I am following the energy. I seek not to bring the disaster back together. It's blowing up and away and I remain here, as pieces of me fall, and as the tensions between them pull me apart, into outer space.

In 2007, I go to the theater with a friend to watch *Paranormal Activity*. I'm wary, easily scared, and cannot face horror. I nevertheless want to impress her with my fearlessness, my courage, my capacity to face terror and not buckle. Five minutes into the film, I am sunk down into my seat with hands clenched over my own eyes, allowing them the briefest of gazes through the slimmest of slots my fingers might make. I am stuck there, perpetually on guard, petrified for the remainder of the film. I can only take in one frame at a time, and slowly, sporadically at that. Halting the visuals does not end the experience of fear. What I can hear still chills me. I am barely watching. Watching nevertheless, inasmuch as I am sensing. The big screen beckons. I cannot keep out all of these senses, and so I continue to flicker fingers so as to afford a glimpse every once in a while. I need not see to know what's going on on the screen in front of me. There's a ghastly figure in the house, and it's knocking over plants, busting open doors, and dragging people out of bed. What is paranormal about this activity? Is this real terror?

What I am thinking of as paranormal *phulakos* both is and is not connected to the paranormal force exemplified in this film. My prefixation of the para to the normal should suggest that I am doing work in parallel to you—alongside but with some indeterminable space between. Words get lost in translation. There is confusion. Nevertheless, I am here, so too the impression I—strong as this figure is and has been forced to be—leaves where ever I goes, if for no one else than for you, young one. I reach beyond space and time. I am a guardian for you that is not really there—an absent presence, a distortion, a distension, a space of evacuation, and to and through tension, and all that mumbo-jumbo I've been expressing all along.

Which is to say that while I am not trying to scare or frighten you, there is an element of fear involved in what I am doing here. I am asking you to consider that you, inasmuch as you are (which might not be up to you), are always already operating on the basis of fear. I do not want you to consider that you might be, but that you necessarily are. In this experimental, verging on the oh, so real, thought, what happens? When you admit this? When you admit that humans and their beingness—the surety of their being that permits and enables them, and the more imperially-ordered and -ordering minds of their lot, to move in the ways they do, and have—require it, antiblack fear? A fear of what is dark, and in the dark, which is to say a fear of what is not, and what is inconceivable, unable to be sensed, nonsensical? What is not in the light and so cannot be seen? Metaphysics is the light. There is a metaphysical form to my being—to the being of me. Something makes me sure of it. Metaphysics casts out doubt and renders a harsh certainty—a sense: there is something, if not always already here, then in the incessant pursuit of getting there. Both, the conservative and the progressive font, on the surface, de-space nothing. You cannot see it. It is invisible. Plus, your hands are in the way.

What has happened? For and to my being, to the being of me? There's a pressure, a monstrous momentum to bend and bow. I feel it in my bones. I piece it together on these pages, throughout this project. I repeat my self: the human's being is a machine that needs fuel and the human has set its self up once and for all and for ever. This world orbits a radiating core of intensity—in tension—according to the orders of imperial minded, white-and onto- and auto-supremacists who have institutionalized their dogma so that all under the sun might adhere to their enlightened way. They have ensured that their reach be and become total and so it is. They institutionalize awakesness, their singular sense of a way. It is my way—the inner, protected realm, *and your place in it*—or the highway. I need not actively make such an ask to get caught up in the weight of this wavelike motion that structures the present moment of humans and their kind. They have set their selves on the long arc of being and becoming so that they might never die, so that they and their kind—humankind—might never cease to be. They hold on to history. They must. History holds them. Holds on to them.

The certainty of this project relies on a normal function of this human world: to predate blackness and consume it, first and foremost in the self—that inner ontological terror, and so that it might not overwhelm me (I need to be able to use my hands, not clench them over my sensory inputs)—for the sake of every sensational waking moment, for the sake of retaining awakesness through the little death of sleep, by dreams and nightmares, so that I might wake up consistently me, which is to say the same, upon the coming dawn, the next day. I am not trying to scare you—I'm telling you a story from the dark about how it appears, from elsewhere, to be going for the human and their world. At this point, I retreat to prayer. Where are we at? Take a cold, hard look. What do you see? Now, close your eyes. What do you feel? What remains in the air? What's going on on the screen in front of you? What's written on the wall?

First and foremost, paranormal *phulakos* is a personal pedagogy, an auto-onto-pedagogy (a way of leading and orienting and moving and guiding my self in relation to being). I am riding and writing according to the current of the fragmenting force that I am finding my self in and amidst. This force dis-integrates me. I am letting my self go with it. I am sitting with the tension that this obliteration engenders. This is not suicide, nor auto-onti-cide. These words constitute a tether leading into and out of the depths, a tether in pieces, frayed threads strewn along a tattered path that goes no where. All that you know is that someone was here. Someone has passed through.

I find my self in and with fragments, and fragments—some dead, some alive and growing, some that are just there—are all that I can offer to you. I write to my young self—I know, at the very least, that he is here, somewhere in this cave. I write with a thrust I hope might reach you—it's okay if it doesn't. I appreciate your reaching out. Perhaps we can try to connect at another point.

These fragments; I have forced them—I hope you know how harshly I have forced them—into a coherent syntactic structure—subject-verb-object—and for what? In hopes of communicating something to you, somehow to you. Even though this is not for you, not about you, but 'me.' It's easy to feel like I am beating my head against a wall. Then I remember that I am walking along the wall, beating my feet against the wall that is the ground, and that I can slow down; I don't need to get where I am going fast. I offer pieces, remnants, and remains. I am thinking in the dark, and I am writing from a void, fingers cold, bones chilled by a wintering, unwinding air.

I write not about the abyss into which Warren (2018) builds. His endeavor nevertheless inspires my own trek, this project. In response to *ontological terror*, I find my piecemeal—

shattered—self stuck in the cave, amidst space and walls. I’ve walked the way up and out and have learned a harsh lesson. The sun scolds and scalds me back inside whenever I attempt to leave—it is a limit. Why do I continue to try? To learn something from such an intense being? To learn only from such a figure? There is a wall, beyond which there is no getting. The light of the sun radiates an intensity that I cannot unravel, nor resolve, nor withstand, and so I am hiding, and forgetting, and losing. The wall leads somewhere. I extend my hand as fingertips graze the solid surface. I move along the wall, within arm’s reach. Is this my patrol? I walk along the wall, down and into the depths of the cave, into the realm of shadows and further, finding my self in pitch black darkness. The wall has disappeared from sight but I can still feel it, fingertips following. I pause, I ponder, in this space, how might I re-imagine my self? According to what shape? What form? What grammar? What order? What story might I tell my self? How might I relate to my self as I piece together this project? Right here—in this open, inquisitive, unsettled space—is where I need to be, at least for now. Here are the pieces that I have sent out. May they bounce and reverberate and resonate off and into the walls. Can anybody hear me? Is anybody here with me? A rhetorical question—a question with a point, a paranormal *phulakos* gesture. I am writing to my self, to ‘the self’ ‘of me.’ The question becomes: are you a me? Do you have a sense of self?

Really, they—these words, this writing practice, the gestures and movements that I make and offer—are for me, and they constitute—in all their dis-integrity—an attempt to communicate where I feel I am, and where I am taking my self to be, and how I am taking my self to be.

Recap, Pieces

The Storyteller

In chapter six, my goal is to point to and through what I am thinking of as the *phulakos*-pedagogy-mythagogy connection, a conceptual weddedness between the work of guardians, teachers, and storytellers. They find their selves and the work they do wedded together inasmuch as they each at some fundamental level, do their work in relation to a wall. Their work consist of pointing people—those whom they are tasked with protecting, their students, and anyone who might hear and adhere to the narrative thread they weave out and into the world. Plato noticed this connection—this project rests on the work of Plato, who I think of as both a describer and prescriber of the human world. He identified a way of being in and thinking about and shaping the world that later, colonizing, settling, and imperial minded humans would infuse into the mantra of their movements, the way they move, the why they move the way they do.

In chapter seven, I suggest that Platonic and imperial minded logics reach even to this contemporary era, and that I feel something of a pressure to bend and break in accordance with their way. In the Plato's cave, I hear a story that resonates with *the one* that I heard in the various churches I went to throughout my earlier years—and the preachings I attended to and learned from therein. And In Plato's cave, I hear a story that resonates with how I feel I had been socialized by my encounters in the U.S. public school system—and the teachings I attended to and learned from therein. Each of these institutional spaces pressured me to make my self one for the sake of moving through ranks, for the sake of spiritual growth, and intellectual growth, and physical growth. I began to shape my self according to this pressure to grow in particular ways, reinforcing the boundary between inside and out, closing my self in. I began to realize the weight this world had had on me, and so began to close it out. The shape that emerges is an

unsustainable sphere, one I am not equipped to keep together. The world—as far as I have shut it out—continues to break and fall and falter, ill, around me. I feel it. I let it in. And it breaks me. And I don't stop letting it in. Somehow, I made it out. I competed against my peers and I climbed the ladder to a higher rung. What do I have to share from this advantage? What kind of story do I bring back down?

In chapter eight, I narrativize a break, a fissure. I reflect upon stories that my mother told me throughout my life, and make an effort to point to the break I feel in the world around and in me. I do not point in an effort to diagnose or return the break to its unbroken condition. The break is real. The brink is real. I find my self posted on it, on the surface of a shape, and I have a say. In the second part of this chapter, I reflect on the overarching shape of the stories I heard in the cave, the church, and the school, and consider how the shape of these stories has landed on me. I feel a pressure to shape my self similarly. The world of imperial minded men, and their culture, into which I feel a pressure to submerge my self, given my positionality, and what the world expects—and what I feel I must expect—of someone who looks and is like me: a human. I bring into the singular manifold that is the sphere—the premier shape that people take to be and to be fundamental to this world—an additional strange shape, a Klein Bottle. Whereas the sphere distinguishes between inside and outside by way of its closed surface, a Klein bottle, paradoxically in these spatial dimensions, retains closedness and openness simultaneously. Bringing such a shape into the way I view the world and my self engenders something of an eruption into pieces, and of those pieces nevertheless retaining some sense of connected across the expanse—the tension—of the dead space between them. This shape—and the story that my mother told me when I was very young—compels me to admit and work with this sense of self as non-singular, but several.

And so, in chapter nine, I debut three stories that I am telling my self, counter to and in the face of the singular story that I feel the world I grew up in and the normal-minded figures posted along the way mindlessly bestowed upon me (this bestowing did not begin in a mindless manner—indeed, there was an intent, originally, an in-tension that needed to be hidden, cast out, outlawed, ignored, felt but not felt). I follow Eddie Glaude and James Baldwin into the realm of (black) pragmatism. I follow Mara van der Lugt and Calvin Warren into the realm of pessimism and black nihilism, respectively. I follow Shohaku Okomura and Chogyam Trungpa into Zen Buddhism in particular and Buddhism more broadly.

The Pedagogue

In chapter three, I solidify what I am thinking of as the *phulakos*-pedagogy connection. Here I show that pedagogues, like *phulakes*, do their work in relation to the wall and law of being, inasmuch as they, like storytellers, are managers of the boundaries of thought.

In chapter four, I attempt a grand task: suggesting that to teach in this world is to participate in ontopedagogical bipartisanism. Two gargantuan forces contend for prominence: conservatism and progressivism, a politico-pedagogical compass of conflict, tension, and competition. At least throughout my life, I notice a pattern: teachers either tend to do their work in such a way that reinforces the status quo, or they do their work in such a way that inspires a movement of the status quo. Sometimes teachers bring both kinds of practice into their classroom. The structure of the school, however, as I try to show in the first part of this chapter, incentivizes capitulation—studenting—and teaching practices that preserve the ordinary, normal order of the world. The current institution of the school is—and might well should be, I will add—a jobs program. Students find their selves with career preparation—or at the very least a means of making money—in their minds as they navigate the halls of, at least, the public school

system in the U.S. I reckon that most schools insinuate such a push, however. I think of those pedagogues whose teaching practice effectively points students toward an uncritical acceptance of the current state of the world—and in particular the economic state—as ontopedagogical conservatives, inasmuch as through their teaching they reinforce capitulant behavior in relation to the wall of the world. On the flip side of this conflict, and indeed pushing back, are what I think of as ontopedagogical progressives. These pedagogues want their students to believe that they can change—even if at local levels only, or at first—the state of things. Inasmuch as this world has been built by humans and their hands it can be taken down and built differently. Ontopedagogical progressives find their selves in perpetual conflict with ontopedagogical conservatives. The conservatives keep pressure on the wall of the world, and the progressives are trying to dismantle it. The harder one side goes, the harder the other fights back. Each—and every—side tells a story. If a storyteller and their story cannot escape the wall in relation to which they do their work, are they at least able to tell a story that does not contribute to this incessant conflict? To either the intensification or the eradication of this here conflict and tension? Can a storyteller, a pedagogue, a *phulaks* figure point somewhere, somehow, else?

In chapter five, I suggest that this very ordinary and normal human phenomenon, the conflict, or push and pull, or tension between progression—movement—and conservation—nonmovement has a deeper, existential ramification. Ontopedagogical conservatives rely on rigid, authoritarian, and order-obsessed tactics to send a message—the message they want—to their students. They are sure that their way is correct, and their task is to instill in students an outright support and acceptance of their point of view. The certainty of their ground, the footing from which they make a strong statement of fact, relies on a suppression of the possibility of the unknown, and an oppression of existential blackness. I contend that, because ontopedagogical

progressives necessarily find their selves in conflict with ontopedagogical conservatives, they too share in this casting out of blackness—the unknown and unknowable—in the first place. They are sure that if they work hard and long enough that they will find a way out, that they can make things better. Don't get me wrong, I am inclined to believe this too. However, what is new to me is my honesty about what this certainty—at a metaphysical, existential register—requires. I cannot ignore it any longer.

The Phulaks

In chapter one, I take up the task of sitting with the fact of this problem—that I cannot, at some level, escape my own inner antiblack habitude. To a certain extent, I need antiblackness for the sake of this here self—an apparatus of human consciousness--through which I experience the world of phenomena. I allegorize this problem through Plato's *phulaks* configuration. And in an effort to accept the fact that I am to some extent stuck, I take on the mantle of Plato's *phulaks* figure, following again the wisdom of Warren (2018), who in passing suggests that *humans* qualitatively guard and protect BEING. Assuming the role of a *phulaks* figure—which is to say a pedagogue, a teacher, a mythagogue, a storyteller—I am careful in this chapter to make sure that you—readers, students, whomever—know why I do this work that I do, and how. What, in my *phulaks* force, am I trying to keep in, and what I am trying to keep out? How do I orient you—young one—toward this wall? Toward this world? Am I suggesting that you give up? Am I suggesting that you give in? My hope is that you notice tension and feel it and that you do not outright, automatically dispel it. If nothing else, may this project afford you some space to practice sitting with tension. Just sitting. And noticing the wall. And feeling the tension.

In chapter two, I deep dive into a brief and passing but critical scene in Plato's *Republic*, wherein the *phulakes* as a class in the city first arrive. The context of their arrival is important,

for once they arrive they are unable to leave, and with their arrival emerges tension, a split, a pull, a feeling of being one but pulled between. Plato suggests that *phulakes* bear divided souls, inasmuch as they must grapple with this tension: when am I to be tough? And when am I to be tender? Who deserves kindness? Who deserves harshness? Inasmuch as these *phulakes* face tension, so too do they face terror, for anything other than one, according to Plato, strikes fear and anxiety in the human and, indeed, constitutes their demise. Inspired by and yet counter to Plato, I then wonder in this project if there are other ways—than which normally pattern the surface of the world—to orient my self (and my students) as a *phulaks* figure toward this wall? Am I locked only to being? Or only to becoming? Is there another way?

In the sense that I piece together this project for ‘students,’ I do not know if this ‘other way’ resonates. In the sense that I piece together this project for my self, I know, and I know what this knowledge needs for the gumption with which I assert it: there is an other way. I point to and through it.

Beceasing...

The rest of the stuff is fluff. Beceasing is an ontological counterpart to becoming and being, nestled between. Beceasing is an ultimately undermining energy, and often neglected. Indeed, it shares a resonance with the energy of neglect. Beceasing is about decreasing, doing less, becoming less and being less. An impossible task with an end, an end to the trying. There is a trial period, something I am working toward and through in these moments. Who knows what is next? Beceasing allows for space in the first place, a suffocating safeguard, a supportive safeguard. Beceasing alone undermines its self. I cannot bring beceasing alone—inasmuch as I becease, I become, I am—the integrity and coherence of these words (the fact that I offer words and not a completely incoherent mass of uninterpretable symbols) ensures this fact of my

humanity. Beceasing alone undermines the very outset of beceasing. Although I have focused my efforts on pointing to beceasing, I point through a host of ontologies. I can't not—that's a part of the problem, and bringing beceasing into the manifold of the eternal conflict humans wage between and according to, whether they realize it or not, their being and their becoming allows me, first, to feel the conflict of this world that is at war with its self. This conflict is hard to feel, and so I point to and through a hard feeling. Second, bringing beceasing into the fold makes it possible to sit with and admit this bleak state of affairs, the bleak—even if in some sense wonderous, monumental, far-reaching, game-changing—impression that humans and their enwhitened—and the antiblack extent to which they have pushed in order to achieve this pinnacle—concept of self have left upon this world. Beceasing helps me admit it and not immediately outcast it—this impact, this mark; a base, a bane.

Such a movement draws me out and slows me down so that I might sit with and in the depths of a question that Christina Sharpe poses: “what happens when we proceed as if we *know* this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we attempt to speak...? (2016, p. 7). What happens? Who is we? I am not sure—I feel like I am a part, a piece, of this problem that is so much bigger than ‘me.’ Beceasing is something that I can do that does not insist that I seek an answer to the question Sharpe offers—beceasing is a movement that allows me to let this question break me. It is a pressure valve—it allows the world to pass through me—to hold me—and not just incessantly pile on top of me. It is a movement that allows ontological terror—Calvin Warren's pointed work—to break me—a suffocating, supportive safeguard. I break alongside a world breaking similarly around me. Falling apart, into disrepair, fubar. It's not new, it's new to me. If I accept this diagnosis, the stage of this diagnosis and where we know something like this leads—and, notably, this is *not* the question that Sharpe

asks—what happens? Beceasing does not diagnose—it asks a di-agnostic question: how did I get here? What contexts pre-date me? And people like me? Who is like me?

The question Sharpe offers emerges in the opening pages of (in) *the wake*. As a lead in, she asserts that “the ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on. And that it *is* the ground lays out that, and perhaps how, we might begin to live in relation to this requirement for our death.... What happens?...” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 7) and the quote proceeds as above. I do not pose the same question that Sharpe poses. Nor am I one of these black people about which Sharpe writes. I nevertheless feel as if I walk on this same ground. Human history (there’s writing on the wall) is a ground, a surface, a wall that the imperial minded men of humankind have built for all. This normative force supports my being, the certainty and integrity of my being, of the being of me. There remains dark matter between the blocks, a sticky residue. I walk along the wall and on this ground and do not face an immediate threat, of being thrown over and cast out. Indeed, I am a *phulaks* figure, a guardian of being, a human being that the world and its people take to be white. I operate on the basis of a lawful, inlaw-able privilege baked into the walls of the world. And now in addition to that, I am ceasing ‘to be,’ beceasing, ceasing ‘to me,’ me-ceasing, ceasing to de-(space), de-ceasing. And at the very least slowing...knowing that I cannot end it all. Knowing that I need not. I end what I can so that I—and those with whom I find my self, which is to say we—might endure what I and I’s alone—all one—cannot. Dispersion. I slow down. I feel the ground. And the space between. I move according to both this normal force that Christina Sharpe points to, as well as to and through a paranormal force, a force in relation to the normal but with some indeterminable, impassable space between.

So goes and moves the tone and tenor of the story that I am telling to and through my self and my students. Cryptic as it may be—and that is neither a diagnosis nor a judgement—this is what I feel like I can offer. A coffer, full of holes, an ineffective stronghold. **Crypt. Cataphract.** Perhaps at this point you are beginning to see why, why I offer in the way that I do, why I choose this how. It would not surprise me, however, if you're not quite there yet. Because that's not really the point. Indeed, I am not sure if I can bring you here. If you're still there. In fact, I'm not sure I ever intended to. I've been trying to leave less of an impression, and so I piece together all of this ontological jargon, these metaphysical musings, as inside-out and outside-in exemplifications of a strange train and strain of thought and thinking—going nowhere, slowly. They remain here. Remains. Here. They start and end here. Right here.

Please, do not think of what I am doing here as merely abstract. This—these words, the grammar that I cannot escape: a wall—is at concrete as it gets. I'm pointing to the wall—becoming points me toward the wall. And through. To ward. And I'm just sitting here. That's all I've been doing. And moving, I am walking. Sometimes here, sometimes there. Sitting, and letting some words come through. Moving. Moving words. Walking words. Space. Spacing words. This project is a pedagogical play on some words. It—and its strange, fragmented point: becoming, etc.—is about my self and the space that I manifest, allow, and admit in a simple word normally sutured together. Between my and self, may there remain some space to breathe, and to endure. This is not an out, it is an in, an in to struggle, conflict, tension, and impasse. I find my self scattered and shattered and nevertheless held here. As you read, may you find or notice your self faced with an opportunity to practice something like breathing and endurance (even if because of exasperated frustration!) too. A prayer, a hope, and some humor—too little too late?

...leaving a lackluster impression, haphazardly heeding my human responsibility, and a personal practice and pedagogy of paranormal *phulakos*, which is to say the end

Even if I am, as I have been claiming, pointing, making a pointed and pointing gesture, I am not pointing you to any particular where—nor have I been. If you have felt that pressure, then please know that I was not intending to leave you with that sort of impression. I point so as to undermine the point. I build so as to undermine the build. Wall...wall. May there be space. May there be movement. May there be space between movement. And thus, beceasing looks more like retreat and less like entreat. Indeed, if less is more, may this mass be less. Here's to the counterintuitive and nonintuitive thought and act of being less.

I have responded.

I have drawn my shield.

I have laid it down.

Look—the inside is the outside.

A faulty and fraught defense;

May it nevertheless tell a story.

Thank you for reading.

The end.

Interlude Five

Figure 14. Green Leaves, Brown Branches, Black Backgrounds,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ginkgo_Biloba_Leaves_-_Black_Background.jpg#file



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APPENDIX A: INTERLUDE SIX (THE END)

Figure A15. Beauty Berry, Greensboro Arboretum, Fall 2021



Figure A16. Full Moon, Fall 2023



Figure A17. Pendulum, the same day

