

LIQUID PHILOSOPHY

LIBERATING PLATO'S PRISONERS

In his trial for the killing of Officer John Frey, Black Panther co-founder Huey P. Newton recounted how he taught himself to read, painfully and belatedly, by reading and rereading Plato's *Republic*. Later, in his autobiography, he tells how he shared Plato's infamous allegory of the cave with his "brothers on the block": "They enjoyed it... The allegory seemed very appropriate to our own situation in society. We, too, were prisoners and needed to be liberated in order to distinguish between truth and the falsehoods imposed on us" (*Revolutionary Suicide*, p.77).

You probably remember the story, too. As Plato has Socrates tell it, we humans are prisoners in a wide-mouthed cavern, shackled so we cannot move or see one another. All we can see are the shadows produced by puppets, which are manipulated by some other people situated above us, behind a fire and a low wall. One prisoner eventually gets free and makes his way up into the light of the world. Little by little, first by looking at shadows of things, then at reflections in water, then at things themselves, this man is finally able to look directly at the stars and even the sun, the good itself. But watch out: when he returns to the cave to enlighten his enchained comrades, he'll be mocked, punished, and even killed.

The moral is to achieve liberation through education, and the episodes from Huey P. Newton's life seem to offer a more politically palatable twist on that ancient lesson. So why were my actually-incarcerated students sceptical of this story, and in particular, of Brian Sowers' 2017 intertextual account (to which I am greatly indebted in this essay) of "the Socratic Newton"? The pandemic interrupted our course in March 2020, but in their correspondence, they objected to reading Newton's character and activities through a Eurocentric frame. To do so set up an implicit hierarchy in which Socrates is the model and Newton the mere copy, one student suggested (drawing on another famous Platonic idea to critique another).

But some go even further than my student, rejecting the moral structure of Plato's parable altogether. In their now-classic 2012 article "Decolonization is not a metaphor", Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang insist that decolonization must involve actually repatriating all stolen lands; common metaphorical usage like "decolonize schools" and "decolonize the Classics"

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substitutes a bunch of feel-good, do-nothing strategies for this goal. They critique six specific “settler moves to innocence” – stories or rhetorical tropes that help settlers and their descendants feel okay about continuing to occupy others’ lands – including “settler nativism”, the comforting myth that a settler has Indigenous ancestry. Number four is, to my mind, Tuck and Yang’s boldest target: “free your mind and the rest will follow”.

Tuck and Yang acknowledge the importance of critical consciousness in the work of Franz Fanon and other decolonial thinkers. Nonetheless, they assert that, at best, the emphasis on consciousness building is no more than a “stop-gap”, “harm-reduction” measure. At worst, it gets in the way of decolonization. They specifically call out Paulo Freire, author of the highly influential *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, for his Platonic vision of a common need for liberation through progressive education. “Freire’s theories of liberation resoundingly echo the allegory of Plato’s cave, a continental philosophy of mental emancipation, whereby the thinking man individualistically emerges from the dark cave of ignorance into the light of critical consciousness”, they write.

I DON’T BELIEVE WE CAN JUSTLY HOLD PLATO ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE IMPERIALIST USE OF HIS ALLEGORY BUT THE HISTORY OF COLONIALISM DOES HIGHLIGHT THE VIOLENCE ALREADY WITHIN HIS ALLEGORY

At this juncture one can’t help but think of the many colonizers who framed their violent projects as the liberation of native peoples from their shadowy myths into the civilizing light of reason or Christianity – colonization as helping the prisoners exit the cave. As Edward Said has written, “Every empire... tells itself

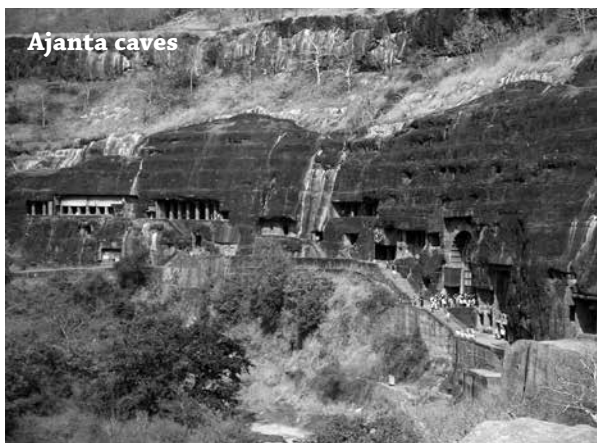
and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate”. The prisoners need educating, and the world beyond the cave is imagined as empty, virgin territory, from which to extract truth. The template for colonial consciousness persists both in and outside of the cave.

I don’t believe we can justly hold Plato accountable for the imperialist use of his allegory – his own anti-democratic activity is a different matter – but the history of colonialism does highlight the violence already within his allegory. Socrates first asks us, vaguely, to “suppose that *nature*” releases someone from his chains (emphasis added to the translation by Tom Griffith and G.R.F. Ferrari). But Socrates imagines that the new situation is so painful, so confusing, that the individual thereafter will have to be “dragged out of there by force” and “forced to look at the light itself” by unknown and unnamed agents. Does truth really require such violence? Or (as Fanon might suggest) does this liberatory violence pale next to the everyday, accepted violence of the prisoners’ capture?

In truth, Tuck and Yang’s objection does not concern either type of violence, and, crucially, they do not abandon the cave framework. Instead, they pitch their counter-model of liberation as a dwelling *within* the cave. Through the work of queer Black feminist poet Audre Lorde, they sketch an image of a dark place of feeling and wisdom that is the true source of knowledge and freedom. They quote from her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (1984):

[T]hese places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.

Lorde paints these dark feeling places as the true source of knowledge and meaningful political action. They are also the reservoir of poetry: the revelatory way women in particular give voice to the nameless, the way in which women transpose and share “what we feel within and dare make real”.



Another poet-activist, Muriel Rukseyer, inspired by the Buddhist caves in Ajanta, India, likewise rejects Plato's attempt to lead us by other means (the etymological meaning of allegory) out of the cave. As I learned from Johanna Skripsund's essay "A 'Most Human' Call: Responding to Muriel Rukeyser at 100 years", for Rukseyer, we are not passive consumers of images; rather, images invite our free response:

Art is not in the world to deny any reality. You stand in the cave, the walls are on every side. The walls are real. But in the space between you and the walls, the images of everything you know, full of fire and possibility, life appearing as personal grace... There is here reciprocal reality. It is the clue to art; and it needs its poetry (Rukseyer, *Life of Poetry*, p.60).

It is no accident that Lorde and Rukseyer link poetry and the deep dark cave. In Plato, too, songs and stories help keep the prisoners riveted on the shadowy projections. Tradition has it that Plato was a playwright before a philosopher, and perhaps this is why he so stringently legislates the poets in his ideal city. Comparing poetry to optical illusions – like those that captivate the prisoners – Socrates argues that verse activates the irrational element in the soul, corrupting decent citizens and their city. Only a certain kind of poetry will be permitted in Kallipolis: the kind that praises the gods and good men. (For much more nuance on how Plato constrains and produces poetry in the *Republic*, see Ramona Naddaff's *Exiling the Poets*.) So Lorde and Rukseyer point to the cave as a reservoir of a power that Plato too recognized and feared for its ability to effect revolution.

Yet the possibility of escape remains ever-alluring. I found I could not stop thinking about the problem of freedom as transmitted by these authors: to exit the cave or to stay? To strive, painfully, for a lonely freedom that may be out of reach – that may be dangerous if not impossible to share – or to embrace the poetic freedom to create that bubbles up within the world of appearances? For some reason, the problem felt personal. Stuck on the proverbial horns of the dilemma, I began to assemble a syllabus for a class on Plato's cave, a class I might never teach.

As I gathered my scraps of texts, in between doing other things, I realized that the choice is so difficult because Plato's ancient parable of liberation has been sedimented by centuries of re-examination and retelling. In recent cultural memory, for example, the cave has surfaced in the film *The Matrix*, José Saramago's novel *The Cave*, and Toni Morrison's literary masterpiece *The Bluest Eye*. One day I re-read Plato and then re-read the relevant chapter of Newton's autobiography. See if you notice what Newton leaves out:

In the cave allegory Plato describes the plight of prisoners in a cave who receive their impression of the outside world from shadows projected on the wall by the fire at the mouth of the cave. One of the prisoners is freed and gets a view of the outside world – objective reality. He returns to the cave to tell the others that the scenes they observe on the wall are not reality but only a distorted reflection of it. The prisoners tell the liberated man he is crazy, and he cannot convince them. He tries to take one of them outside, but the prisoner is terrified at the thought of facing something new. When he is dragged outside the cave anyway, he sees the sun and is blinded by it (p.77).

Newton productively recasts Plato's metaphysical truth as "objective reality" and offers a psychological gloss on the resistance to it. But it's not just scholarly quibbling to note that he omits the fate of the would-be liberator. "As for anyone who tried to set [the prisoners] free, and take them up there, if they could somehow get their hands on him and kill him, wouldn't they do just that?" (Rep. 517a). In the Platonic context, the line is a pointed reference to Socrates, who was tried and executed by the hands of the resurgent democracy in 399 BC. Newton himself died at the hands of a drug

dealer and rival political gang member in Oakland, CA, in 1989, in the same neighbourhood where he had struggled with addiction, founded the Free Breakfast for Children program, launched the Black Panther newspaper, and advocated for Black armed self-defence. What Newton leaves out in his retelling is the story's built-in warning to him – the warning that the story's teller will be rejected and killed.

This is a significant omission, because in Plato's hands, the threat of violence *against* the truth-teller functions to justify the violence *of* the truth-teller, and the elitist politics he embodies. For Plato's parable twines together an epistemology, an ontology, and a political theory. A halfway decent intro philosophy lecturer will show you how the cave allegory picks up on the preceding analogy of the Divided Line, which separates and ranks different types of mental activity, from mere conjecture to true understanding. The allegory of the cave pins those categories of knowledge onto geographic space, as stand-ins for levels of reality. The political result of these two moves, however, could be called knowledge-authoritarianism. For Plato, true knowledge of the form of the good, attained by the few, must overrule the differing opinions of democratic debate.

Every authoritarianism begets its own opposition, so it's not surprising that there's a rebellious counter-tradition of the cave allegory. Indeed, skilled readers have located this parallel plot within Plato himself. The counter-trend surged with Friedrich Nietzsche, who flipped Plato's preference for metaphysical truths over the world of drives, deeds, and language. Then there is the brilliant political thinker Hannah Arendt, for whom the philosopher's return to the cave represented the death of politics and the beginning of the tyranny of the knowers. Or take French philosopher Luce Irigaray, who reads the cave as the womb, the material and maternal world that the male subject is always trying to escape and conquer. Contemporary art historian Kaja Silverman's *World Spectators* resists the cave's ontological binary of appearance versus Being, by theorizing that Being calls on humans to love its appearances. It's probably not an accident that the counter-tradition has a feminine sashay.

For the counter-tradition, to leave the cave is to abandon something that matters deeply: politics, the material world, art and poetry and beauty. And for what? After

the phenomenological turn, most thinkers consider the possibility of unmediated access to true forms to be a fantasy at best, and a tyrannical myth at worst. To stay in the cave, with Lorde, or try to find an escape, like Newton? In which direction is freedom – which side should I believe? As I circled around and around, the dilemma started to remind me of how, in the depths of depression, happiness seems like a delusion, while to the happy, depression likewise seems like a simple mistaking of the shadows for the true. As always, the binary choice is both impossible and illusory.

The generative interruption came from another poet-critic, one who doesn't write about Plato at all. Maggie Nelson's forthcoming book *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* refuses the fantasy of total liberation. Instead, she insists on the complex co-presence of freedom and constraint. She often returns to a quote from Brian Massumi, the philosopher and translator of Deleuze and Guattari: "Freedom is not about breaking or escaping constraints. It's about flipping them over into degrees of freedom. You can't really escape the constraints. No body can escape gravity... Freedom always arises from constraint – it's a creative conversion of it, not some utopian escape from it."

FOR THE COUNTER-TRADITION, TO LEAVE THE CAVE IS TO ABANDON SOMETHING THAT MATTERS DEEPLY: POLITICS, THE MATERIAL WORLD, ART AND POETRY AND BEAUTY

Between the rock and the hard place, Nelson tapped a spring of questions in me. What else is in the cave with us – dripping water, troglodytes, mineral riches, ancient paintings, bones? Can we map the cave acoustically by experimenting with our voices, as our prehistoric ancestors may have done? I was reminded that most caves are formed by the erosion of rock by flowing water. Indeed, an echo of the cave allegory in Plato's *Phaedo* pictures humans living in watery "hollows of the

earth” (109b-110b), like sea creatures unable to reach the real world above. In the *Republic*’s version, liquid appears only once the prisoner has exited the cave, as a reflective surface in which he begins to see the truth. Mixing new rivers of tradition into that still water, I began to see something else: that exiting the cave and digging in are just two among multiple strategies for pluralizing (if not decolonizing) Plato’s allegory of liberation. There are infinite ways to activate or re-politicize the cave’s dynamic of freedom and constraint with new generations of inhabitants.

Huey P. Newton’s strategy we could call *translation*, in the geometric sense: shifting the ground of a figure from one plane to another without rotating it. In a later article, Brian Sowers outlines the way that Newton continues to draw on Platonic dualism (transmitted through Christian texts) to critique both the carceral system and consumer capitalism in America. As in *Revolutionary Suicide*, a spiritual ascent from ignorance is possible. I can imagine some of my students dismissing Newton’s move as “spiritual bypassing” – the practice of invoking spiritual wisdom to evade political issues that need to be worked through. At the same time, Newton’s organizing efforts point up the possibility that translating Plato’s dualism can fuel rather than thwart other modes of political struggle. In a new neighbourhood, the same shape becomes a different doorway.

EXITING THE CAVE AND DIGGING IN ARE JUST TWO AMONG MULTIPLE STRATEGIES FOR PLURALIZING (IF NOT DECOLONIZING) PLATO’S ALLEGORY OF LIBERATION

The strategy in “Decolonization is not a metaphor”, by contrast, might be called *inversion* or reversal. Tuck and Yang invert the valuation of the binary so that the negative value of the cave becomes positive; this was also the classic strategy of the 1930s Négritude movement. Despite their critique of mental emancipation, it could

be said that the authors do carry out their own form of it: in this case, raising a critical awareness of the ways settlers erase their/our guilt through metaphors of decolonization. But Tuck and Yang’s primary challenge is not critique but to dream new indigenous futures, ones that forward the possibility of repatriation. “Decolonization is not an ‘and’. It is an elsewhere”, they conclude. That elsewhere might remind us of the cave: the indigenous world not subject to forced external “enlightenment”.

And the strategies multiply. In “Reimagining Liberations”, Lewis Gordon attacks the tendency in the global North to celebrate diversity while denying the necessity of liberation. In his quest to challenge epistemic colonization, or the suppression of non-European ways of knowing, Gordon frames the cave allegory as the discovery of the outside. But he disputes the assumption that this movement belongs either to philosophy or to European tradition. On his philological analysis, “sophia” (Greek for wisdom) originates in the Kemet (ancient Egyptian) word for wise-teaching. Thus “philo-sophia” is a Greek love of a far more ancient African wisdom tradition. Gordon shares a quote from Kemet king Antef that predates Plato by a millennium or more, including this line: “[seekers of wisdom are those].... who are clear-sighted when they are deep into a problem”. The fragment suggests to me philosophers who retain their clear vision even when deep in the cave – unlike Plato’s ex-prisoner, whose eyes are “swamped by the darkness” when he returns.

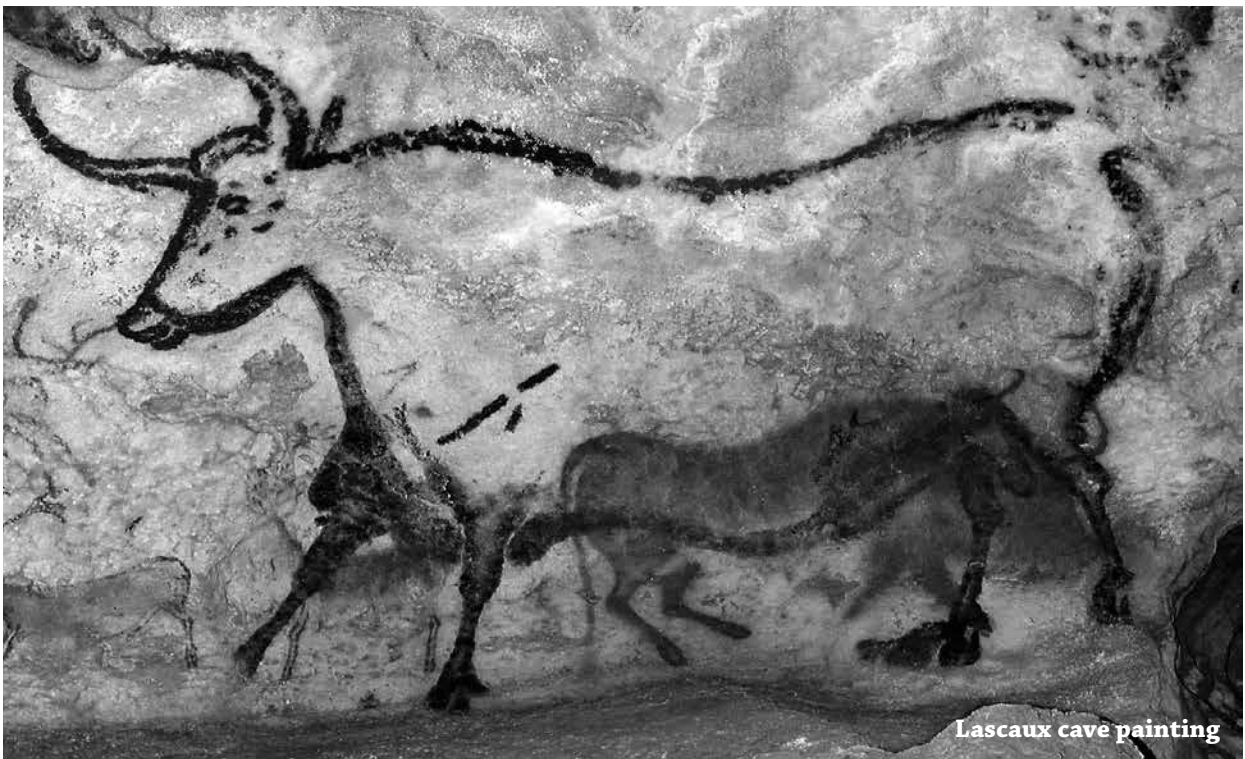
But Gordon is too sophisticated to suggest simply that “earlier is better”, or that an Egyptian origin for philosophy “purifies” the discipline of its racist history. Rather, his point is that so-called European philosophy is a mixed or creolized endeavour from the start. Gordon thus advances a line of argument most famously put forward by Martin Bernal in his two-volume work *Black Athena* in the 1990s, which is finally gaining broader acceptance in Departments of Classics and beyond. Where Newton transposes Plato’s cave and Tuck and Yang invert it, Gordon’s move is to *re-root* the classical tradition, as prominent classicist Emily Greenwood might phrase it, in a decidedly multiple or polygenic account of origins. The result is reminiscent of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who develops the indigenous Aymara notion of *ch’ixi* in order to reject a sterile hybridity and insist on a “motley” society that “expresses the parallel

coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not extinguish but instead antagonize and complement each other” (“Ch’ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization,” p. 105).

Moving the other direction on the line of time, the philosopher Charles W. Mills (best known for his majestic 1997 *The Racial Contract*) re-situates Plato’s allegory in light of a history that followed it. In “Getting Out of the Cave: Tension between Democracy and Elitism in Marx’s Theory of Cognitive Liberation”, Mills first zeroes in on the epistemological-political elitism inherent in Plato’s allegory. He then carefully tracks the problem of mental emancipation in the Marxist tradition. Unlike Plato, Marxist metaphysics is supposed to be immanent, or rooted in experience. Yet commentators continually trip over the rift between the ideal that proletarians will self-emancipate, and the reality that capitalists will dominate ideologically. This contradiction necessitates a critical theory, which, as with Plato’s knower-guardians, tends to give rise to an intellectual elite characterized by arrogance and self-righteousness – a phenomenon Mills deftly describes by developing a “phenomenology of vanguardism.”

Mills’ account of how intellectual elitism feels and functions isn’t just for kicks – it helps explain the specific case study of Grenada circa 1980, where infighting in the newly victorious People’s Revolutionary Government led in a matter of days to the arrest and execution of popular leader Maurice Bishop, the disintegration of the people’s support, and the regime’s overthrow by the United States. Drawing on first-hand interviews with participants, Mills illuminates the complex dynamics of these events as a concrete exemplar of the problem of elitism in revolutionary movements. In the Grenadian PRG, as in Plato, the theory-wielders dominated over those with street smarts, political intuition, and practical forms of knowing. And, on Mills’ account, this elitism was central to the PRG’s undoing.

Mills realizes that we can only leave the cave behind *collectively*; the engineered escape for the privileged metaphysician fails, even in Plato. His series of moves is the most extended I have treated here, and not easily or justly reduced to one term. His groundwork provides an analytical critique and account of intellectual Marxist reception of the cave; together these enable a *historical re-materialization* of how cave psychology worked in



real-world political terms on at least one occasion to entrap rather than liberate:

[The PRG] had convinced themselves that, in possession of the knowledge of the laws of history, they didn't need to pay any attention to the fallible opinions of the masses. The vanguard had become the Vanguardians. But far from being in a position to liberate anybody from the illusions of the Cave, they were, by that time, deep in a cave of their own – a Cave of pure ideas, the inverse of Plato's... so deep were they in their alternate reality, that even then, with the shambles of their policy all around them, some at least were still convinced they were right (p.42-3).

Mills' brilliance is to demonstrate how the outside of the cave becomes, in time, its own insular realm of illusion. But he doesn't stop with comparing the Marxist vanguard to the Platonic Guardians and Marxist theory to Plato's cave. He also offers a workable paradigm for the political intellectual: to eschew both theoretical vanguardism and naive populism, and to engage in a reciprocal dialogue between the theoreticians and ordinary knowers. In this solution, he takes the Gramscian "organic intellectual" (like Huey Newton?) as a model: a thinker who remains connected to the existing cultural world and "renovat[es] and mak[es] 'critical' an already existing activity" (Gramsci, in Mills p. 45). Just as Mills brings together Plato's allegory and Caribbean history, he urges a rapprochement between intellectuals and the world. In effect, Mills' historical re-materialization works to conjoin the realms which the cave allegory would radically separate – thus striking directly at the fateful intellectual-political alliance of elites.

SO-CALLED EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY IS A MIXED OR CREOLIZED ENDEAVOUR FROM THE START

It strikes me that Mills' historicizing operation might be valuably carried out on the original site, too. Caves and quarries really were used as prisons in ancient Greece. After the disastrous Sicilian Expedition, thousands of Athenians were imprisoned in a quarry for over two

months, where they "had to do everything in the same place for want of room, and the bodies of those who died were left heaped together one upon another, intolerable stench arose; while hunger and thirst never ceased to afflict them" (Thucydides 7.86-87). Long ago, Richard Wright argued that the fire and shadows of Plato's cave may have been inspired by the religious rituals at the nearby Cave of Vari, which physically matches his description of the cave. More pertinently and recently, Marcus Folch has argued that imprisonment of elites was a powerful political tool in Athens, with Anaxagoras, Protagoras, as well as Socrates among the philosophers who fell prey to political machinations ("Political Prisoners in Democratic Athens, 490–318 BCE", p. 336-68). In other words, Plato may have had good reason to fear incarceration (in a cave or otherwise) for his aristocratic commitments. And, almost despite himself, he gives us good reasons – and a powerful image – for rejecting incarceration as a tool for maintaining political hegemony.

Street organizing, poetry, etymology, intellectual and political history – each of the thinkers in this piece took what was to hand to practice a knowing of Plato that transforms and re-activates the liberatory potential of the allegory of the cave. I have collected their work here to stage a dialogue between different epistemic and political traditions, as Achille Mbembe has forcefully advocated in "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive". Through this process, the "strange picture" and "strange prisoners" of whom Socrates and Glaucon speak become "no more strange than us", again. "Strange" translates the Greek word *atopos*, which literally means "out of place" or paradoxical. The strategies identified in this piece – geometric translation, inversion, re-rooting, and historical rematerialization – dis-place and re-place Plato's allegory into new political landscapes, making it strangely familiar. We need to recognize and continue to proliferate such techniques of estrangement and re-activation, because the cave allegory and the problem of freedom are nothing if not resonant today.

I wonder what my students would think.

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