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Title: The Cave of Whiteness: Du Bois, Baldwin, and Wright Recast Plato's Imagery

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Source: *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, vol. III, no. II (Spring 2024), pp. 38-61

Published by: *Memorial University of Newfoundland*



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*Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies* is published by Memorial University of Newfoundland



*Janus Unbound: Journal  
of Critical Studies*  
E-ISSN: 2564-2154  
3(2) 38-61  
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2024

## The Cave of Whiteness: Du Bois, Baldwin, and Wright Recast Plato's Imagery

Ryan J. Johnson

### Abstract

This essay seeks to locate a means for counteracting the philosophical canon by re-reading Plato's allegory of the cave with three Black thinkers—W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright. Rather than direct argumentation or strict historical analysis, my strategy attends to the images, allegories, and metaphors in Plato to unleash their conceptual force and meaning. Attuning to these nonargumentative elements of thinking is one of the great strengths of Black thought, one underappreciated by the discipline of philosophy. Doing this will generate three images: (1) Leisure or Crisis?, (2) The Examined Life, and (3) Twilight Philosophy. Next I place these images into Richard Wright's posthumously published *The Man Who Lived Underground*, and then conclude by clarifying my general strategy and finally reducing it into a simple argument.

*Keywords:* Allegory of the Cave, Shadows, James Baldwin, W.E.B. Du Bois, Plato, Richard Wright

"The paradox is that human extinction provides the answer and the corrective to the modern project of whiteness."

—Saidiya Hartman, 2020

### Introduction: In the Shadow of Two Great Mountains

Although written decades apart, an intriguing phrase is repeated, without change, near the beginnings of W.E.B. Du Bois' autobiographical works: "I was born," he writes, "by a golden river in the *shadow* of two great hills" (1979, 51). W.E.B. Du Bois returned again and again to that shaded scene in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Something originary and essential must have occurred there to continually call him back. Looking through his oeuvre, shadows are everywhere—from the "shadow of death" in *Souls of Black Folk* and the "Shadow of Years" in *Darkwater* to the "shadow of slavery" in the *Autobiography*, the "hateful mental shadows" in *Black Reconstruction*, and perhaps most of all, the "shadow of the Veil" across many works. Living in the shadow of the Veil sparked in him the development of a facility to read and interpret

shadows as they are cast by dark bodies caught in the white light. Du Bois calls this facility “second-sight,” and this is why, James Baldwin later claims, Black Americans are in a better position for doing philosophy.

In the philosophical canon, shadow imagery invokes what is perhaps the most famous image in ancient thought: the “allegory of the cave” from Plato’s *Republic*. Nearly anyone who knows anything about Plato, academic or not, likely knows this allegory. By now, philosophers, mostly white and European, have nearly wrung the allegory dry. But the discipline has mostly ignored how Black philosophers have evoked it, even though many Black thinkers—including Ralph Ellison, C.L.R. James, Huey P. Newton, and Martin Luther King—engage the cave imagery in fascinating and powerful ways.<sup>1</sup> Part of my claim in this essay is that the social-political-historical position of Black subjects, traditionally excluded as they have been, is critical for being able to offer powerful yet still underappreciated ways of doing philosophy as well as identifying who are and who should be considered philosophers.

My strategy for making this claim may seem imagistic, but it is an attempt to learn from and emulate a way of thinking I value most in Du Bois. I want to attend more to what he calls “some little alightings of what may be poetry” than to “sterner flights of logic” (2016, xxi). Attending to these “little alightings” is a strength of Black philosophy yet underappreciated by the discipline, which partly explains the exclusion of Black thinkers from the canon. While Du Bois admits that these “tributes to Beauty” may be “unworthy to stand alone,” I find in them a conceptual force that makes Plato and other classical thinkers impactful. More than any single argument placed in Socrates’ mouth, it is the “Thought for the Fancy—or the Fancy for the Thought” that really sticks with us (Du Bois 2016, xxi). Making this claim—that images, allegories, and metaphors carry conceptual force and meaning that straight arguments cannot—reflects Kevin Thomas Miles’ hermeneutic for reading Du Bois. To “give some attention to the repetitions that make an appearance in an author’s writing,” Miles attends to the “bars of music Du Bois has situated at the beginning of every chapter” of *Souls of Black Folk* (2000, 199-201). But rather than music, I track the movement of sight, light, and shadow. While some scholars have touched upon or mentioned these “little alightings” and fancies for thought, few (with the exception of Christina Sharpe (2016)) have taken them seriously as *doing* philosophy independently of straight argumentation.<sup>2</sup> Arguments are just one form of philosophizing, and not necessarily the best form.<sup>3</sup>

Attuning to the “Thought for the Fancy—or the Fancy for the Thought,” I try to locate a means for counteracting the canon, white as it is. Reading the allegory of the cave with Black thinkers—Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright—I seek to push philosophy to see them *as philosophers*, with the not-so-small aim of turning our whole disciplinary history inside-out.<sup>4</sup> While this aim may seem too high, the “impossible,” C.L.R. James says of Toussaint L’Ouverture, “was for him the only reality that mattered” (1989, 290). Rather than trying to sort out the precise nature of their difference (that would take a whole book), this article only follows the imagery of the cave in Black Thought through these Black thinkers and derives images therefrom.<sup>5</sup> Here are the three images I

## The Cave of Whiteness

found: (1) Leisure or Crisis?, (2) The Examined Life, and (3) Twilight Philosophy. I then show how these images are dramatized in Richard Wright's posthumously published novel, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, which is, in a significant sense, a translation of Plato's allegory to a subterranean life below the streets of New York City.<sup>6</sup> Listening to how these Black thinkers engage with the canonical cave shows that *who* is doing philosophy matters when identifying *what* is considered philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

## The Cave in Black Thought

In *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois describes life in the shadow of the Veil. Be sure to listen for echoes of "Book 7" of Plato's *Republic*:

... looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, see[ing] the world passing and speak[ing] to it; speak[ing] courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head. ... It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate. Some of the passing world stop in curiosity; these gesticulations seem so pointless; they laugh and pass on. They still either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly, and even what they hear, they do not understand. Then the people within may become hysterical. They may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in. (1986a, 649-50)

While Du Bois echoes Plato's cavernous imagery to express the Black experience, a question emerges: *Who* is *who* in this dark cave?<sup>8</sup> To answer, split this question into three: (1) Who is the prisoner still chained to the wall? (2) Who is the prisoner turning away from the shadows to see the rest of the world? (3) Who is behind the prisoners, pulling the strings of the shadowplay and perpetuating the illusion? For Du Bois, the entombed prisoners are Black folk, while the world beyond the cave is the white place where pale bodies live freely and cheerfully, shrouded by their self-annointed ontological innocence.<sup>9</sup> While I do not challenge Du Bois here, it is interesting to extend his thinking by placing his imagery closer to Plato's, simultaneously recalling ideas that appear elsewhere in Du Bois' writings.

First, make the prisoners white, their eyes fixed to the dark shadows on the wall. Second, make the ones who have broken free Black, those able to see the world beyond the cave and thus discern the shadows on the wall for what they are—mere appearances manufactured to construct and corroborate a false worldview. On this reading, Black eyes have a wider, deeper, more accurate vision of reality, while white eyes are imprisoned by their mistaking shadows for reality. This misapprehension leads white people to become highly invested in

the “truth” of the shadows, which in turn leads them to stubbornly reject the plea of Black folk for white people to free themselves from the blinders of whiteness and see beyond the “Veil.” To make it even clearer, let us imagine that the Black folk, though broken free from the blinders fixing their vision, remained chained to the other prisoners, the white people.

What follows from this recasting? All the prisoners—white, Black, and otherwise—were educated through the same shadowplay in the cave of the white lie, the pernicious lesson of which is clear: whiteness is superior to Blackness. At first, both white and Black eyes internalize the lie of whiteness; they only see the shadows on the wall and believe that what they see—the supremacy of whiteness—is true and real. Black prisoners, however, free themselves insofar as they distrust, then outright reject, the depiction of the projected bodies because they realize these are mere shadows. The Black prisoners thus turn their heads and discover the rest of the cave and the world beyond. They see beyond the Veil and discern the machinery that goes into constructing and maintaining the white world. This is a version of Friedrich Nietzsche’s Greatest Weight, now called the “heaviest chain.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Heaviest Chain**

On this recasting, the only way to find true freedom, outside the cave, is to convince all the interconnected prisoners to collectively reject the shadowy appearances. This connectedness, however, seems to be the heaviest chain of all. Du Bois knows well what makes it so heavy: “[H]ow should I explain and clarify its meaning for a [white] soul? Description fails” (1986a, 656).

Since there are far too many to list, here are just a few attempts to raise the heaviest chain so others can see: Frederick Douglass narrating chattel slavery and its aftermath; Ida B. Wells reporting and tabulating the thousands of Black bodies brutally lynched; Du Bois accounting sociologically of the economic, political, and social disadvantages and exclusions resulting from racist policies, norms, and laws; Brian Stephenson graphing and charting the numbers of the drug war and mass incarceration; Black Lives Matter recordings of brutalized bodies and videos of shootings and killings. No matter the type of description, no matter how detailed or visceral, no matter how many times it is repeated, nothing seems to make white eyes distrust the immediacy of the shadows, or even to look away for a moment. While it is true that it “take[s] two to hold a chain,” as Toni Morrison says, the “chained and the chainer,” what makes it so heavy is the chainer’s denial that he holds the chain and the existence of the chain itself—a kind of anti-black gaslighting (1975, 39:50). Thus given the centuries of repeated rejection and denial, Du Bois expresses great personal turmoil at this inability to see and hear: “I suffer. And yet, somehow, above the suffering, above the shackled anger . . . above the hurt that crazes, there surges in me a vast pity,—pity for a people imprisoned and enthralled, hampered and made miserable for such a cause, for such a phantasy!” (1986c, 926). The way this phantasy dulls the senses is what makes the chain so heavy.

Whiteness is too convinced by the play of shadows to recognize what Du Bois calls the “unknown, unapprehended Truth” that would alleviate the heft

of the phantasy (1986a, 664).<sup>11</sup> Whiteness enjoys watching the shadows on the wall *too much*; it finds *too much* comfort, coherence, and security in believing that the way they see the world is the real world itself. To extend Frank Wilderson's words, white life is too "dependent on Black death for its existence and for its conceptual coherence" to realize it already holds the means for true independence (2020, 228-29). Hence Du Bois reluctantly admits: the "greatest and most immediate danger of white culture, perhaps least sensed, is its fear of the truth, its childish belief in the efficacy of lies as a method of human uplift" (1986a, 664). After travelling across the United States and much of Europe, Du Bois is amazed that "so many intelligent people believe . . . in it so deeply," continuously and repeatedly deceiving themselves to the point of making "an art, almost a science, of how one may make the world before what is not true (664)."<sup>12</sup> Given its near global extent, it is hard to deny that whiteness is, as Bobby E. Wright says, a "psychopathic racial personality" that is bred into the structure and psyche of the world (1990).

Not many years later, James Baldwin revived Du Bois' insights but in a slightly different key: "Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be" (1963b, 94). Too much is at risk—reality itself—to reject how they have always seen and understood the world. It would be too painful to see their false reality as merely a distorted reflection of the world beyond their heads. Unwilling to admit the truth of these lies, white people then project their festering fears onto Black bodies. Like shadows projected on the wall, Baldwin writes, the "white man's unadmitted—and apparently, to him, unspeakable—private fears and longings are projected onto the Negro" (1963b, 103). White folk thus reject the claims of Black folk, who, in so many ways and so many times, try to show them that the shadows are not only fake but toxic for all and deadly to many. "It is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction," writes Baldwin (1998a, 474). Yet cling they do, as if everything, everywhere depended on it, and blame they do also, Black people for the suffering whiteness created but cannot quit. The bluest eye, to evoke Toni Morrison (1970), only sees dark bodies.

Thus white folks dismiss or laugh, Du Bois writes, even when a freed Black person "speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world" (1986a, 650). With eyes fixed in one direction, restricted to the play of dark figures on the wall that contain their unattended fears and rage, white prisoners do not see themselves, will not reflect on their selves, and cannot see how whiteness itself confines them to a distorted, dangerous account of the world. This is the perspective of holes poked through white pointed hoods.

## Second-sight

The Black prisoner, freed as he is from the restricted vision, sees *both* the shadow world of white sight *and* the white light producing the shadows. Such double vision is not a choice but a matter of survival. Du Bois calls it “second-sight” (2007, 8). It is a “second” because it sees twice: Black eyes see both what white people see and the world beyond whiteness. Blackness sees with both sorts of sights simultaneously.

The second-sight and corresponding after-thought (*nachdenken*) of Black eyes and Black souls show something white eyes never see, something white souls cannot know about themselves and their shadow world. So foreign to whiteness, second-sight seems almost magical, a conjuring of worlds beneath the surface. The “Negro is a sort of *seventh son*,” writes Du Bois, “*born with a veil*, and *gifted with second-sight* in . . . a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (2007, 8).<sup>13</sup> In African American folk culture, this conatal veil refers to “children born with a caul (a membrane from the placenta covering the infant’s face at birth) [who] are gifted with prophetic and psychic abilities” (2007, 209).<sup>14</sup> Priscilla Wald calls it the “embodiment of the uncanny” (1995, 177). Hence Du Bois says, “I am singularly clairvoyant” of white souls because he can “see in and through them” without white people even noticing (2016, 17). Richard Wright’s (2021) translation of Plato’s cave allegory into the New York City underground will show how confused white people are when they get close to seeing this magical world behind the veil.

While white souls are enrapt by the play of the shadows on the wall, second-sight allows Black souls to “view [white souls] from unusual vantage points,” perspectives that white eyes cannot see because of the types of foreclosure in the structure of whiteness (1986c, 227).<sup>15</sup> Such a perspective allows Du Bois to see the inner “workings of their entrails” and they are not pretty (227). “I see,” he writes, not God’s chosen gift but just an “ugly, human” (227). Such unadulterated acuity threatens to expose and embarrass white folks so much so that they resent those who possess the the power to see things they cannot. From the days of slavery to Jim Crow segregation to the prison industrial complex, drug war, and police brutality, Black souls have witnessed that white people are most vulnerable and mistaken.<sup>16</sup> But when Du Bois points out that what white people see is an elaborate sham of shadows and smoke, his words sound, to white ears, filled with “bitterness” and “pessimism” (1986c, 227). His clairvoyance humiliates white people and they resent him for revealing something about themselves that they cannot (and do not want to) see. Thus a resentment festers and eventually foments an “American Atrocity” like lynching and other forms of racial terrorism and barbarism (Lancaster 2021).

Yet white people know, deep down, that the shadows and darkness playing on the wall are the shades of evil. To prevent the confrontation with such disagreeable truths, white people go to extreme lengths to retrench in their worldview through new excuses and exclusions. As Charles Mills shows repeatedly in *Blackness Visible*, they are extremely creative in their ability to prevent the airing of the uncomfortable and unsettling truth of the distortions of whiteness.<sup>17</sup>

They instead choose, with every passing day, to risk nothing, to keep looking at their shadows, and elaborate and evolve new iterations of whiteness. Hence the social (racial) contract depends on an “*inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made*” (Mills 1997, 18, emphasis in original).

Here Baldwin sees one of the great impediments to racial progress: “One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself—that is to say, risking oneself,” Baldwin writes; “If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving” (1963b, 94). By turning away from the shadows, the Black freed prisoners risk themselves, though in this risk they could, if they give everything up, gain themselves in ways unimaginable and unseeable from within whiteness. The question is: what price are white people willing to pay?<sup>18</sup>

Notice Baldwin’s insight into the kind of freedom that white eyes do not see: “[O]ne can give freedom only by setting someone free” (1963b, 94). The dangerous white delusion is that freedom means freedom *from*, when it is always and only a freedom *with*. Freedom is a *relation* not separation.<sup>19</sup> Through Baldwin’s eyes, we see that the Black prisoner, by turning away from the white world and gaining the power of second-sight, cannot deny that he remains shackled to whiteness. His freedom, like his slavery, is intimately chained to whiteness, while white freedom, according to white sight, mistakenly sees itself independently of Blackness. Seeing this sense of intertwined and interdependent freedom requires the second-sight of the Black former prisoner, something that the white prisoners refuse to, and thus cannot, see. What is needed is the kind of vision that comes from reading images from Black interpretations of the cave.

### Images from the Cave

We have now racially recast, with Du Bois and Baldwin, Plato’s allegory of the cave. As with all good allegories, there are many images to see, more than any one person can enumerate. For now, I sketch just three: (1) Leisure or Crisis?, (2) The Examined Life, and (3) Twilight Philosophy. These, respectively, articulate the insights from above: (1) second-sight, (2) the heaviest chain, and (3) the play of shadows and light. After this, we will bring these three images into life by turning to Richard Wright’s posthumously published novel, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, which sets Plato’s allegory in the sewers and caverns of mid-century New York City.

#### *Image One: Leisure or Crisis?*

In my recasting, the freed Black prisoners offer a model of doing philosophy distinct from the canonical Aristotelian model of thinking under conditions of leisure. Perhaps closer to the critical model of thinking that Kant articulates in his Enlightenment accounts of freedom, Black philosophers are often forced, by the demands of whiteness, to think under the weight of crisis. Remember



that Du Bois founded (and edited for decades) the NAACP publication: *The Crisis*.

One of the lasting problems I see in much of western thinking is that it starts from a place of passivity, as is dramatically exemplified by Plato's depiction of where the prisoners in the cave begin: seated, chained, vision fixed in place. But I have always wondered: How did the prisoners get there? Who put them there? Why *these* prisoners? A whole system of underground torture and confinement lurks unsaid in Plato's account. It just begins with prisoners shackled in place.

One great benefit of Du Bois', Baldwin's, and (we will see) Wright's rearticulation of thinking is that they show how *activity*, not passivity, is at the origin of philosophy. Context and culture are essential to and inextricable from Black life. Black Thought often occurs not during times of leisure, safety, and passivity—often scarce in positions oppressed by white supremacy—but under the threat and force of compulsion and oppression, or amidst the urgency of unstable and dangerous conditions—from the end of a whip, gun, or threat. Given such critical conditions, one might not think because one has time and leisure, because one has an endless series of unimpeded choices, or because one begins in passivity. Rather, one thinks because one *must*, because one is compelled to think, because one does not have a choice but *to think*—right here, right now, and with existential exigency.

This is a kind of thought that occurs not out of freedom from suffering but from the body of *pathos*. It is one of George Yancy's most poignant refrains.<sup>20</sup> Baldwin says it well: "I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering ... but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are" (1963b, 106). White prisoners, saved from racial suffering by the blinders of whiteness, are not forced to think critically, and thus do not learn much, if anything, about the world beyond the cave. They do not, in short, ever grow up, but remain stuck playing language games and thought experiments. How can the American philosophers be so enamored with endless iterations of the Trolley Problem yet be almost silent on lynching, Jim Crow, Japanese internment camps, and so much more? White philosophers detail elaborate interpretations of the shadows on the wall in order, it seems, to ignore very real histories far more deserving of their insights and brilliance. By contrast, Baldwin writes of one "who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach" (106). Black thinkers do not have the luxury of ignoring their bodies, histories, and material conditions. Rather than wonder, G.W.F. Hegel says, "fear of the master (*Herr*) is the beginning of wisdom" (2018, §195).

Thinking from the body of *pathos* produces a keen ability to see the truth beneath appearances. A person, writes Baldwin, "achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable ... because, in order to save his life, he is *forced to look beneath appearances*, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words," or in my recasting of the allegory, to see the shadows for what they

are: false copies of reality (1963b, 106, my emphasis). This keen ability to see beneath appearances leads to a shedding of fears. “If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring,” Baldwin continues, “one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring. . . . It demands great force and cunning continually to assault the might and indifferent fortress of white supremacy,” depicted here as the play of shadows on the wall (106). Such great force and cunning lead to a kind of inner strength of which the Stoics would be envious. It “demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck,” whose heavy chains are tied to yours, “and an even greater miracle of perception” (106). This miracle of perception is, in the recast cave allegory, the second-sight of the Black prisoner who turned away from the shadows and looked beneath the superficiality and falseness—as seductive, threatening, and violent as they are—and witnessed the fire and the dangerous shadows they cast (last time, this time, and surely next time).

Here is one of the many great virtues of Black philosophy, a virtue that proves the aristocracy of the highest, sharpest, most powerful form of thought. As Baldwin reminds us, the descendants of slaves are the “Negro boys and girls who are facing mobs today [and who] come out of a long line of improbable aristocrats—the only aristocrats this country has produced” (107).<sup>21</sup> They are aristocratic because they see that, even though the white perceptions of dark bodies differ from the perceptions of Black folk, this difference does not, in any way, entail racial superiority. A general understanding of the role Black thinkers played, and continue to play, would, if acknowledged, reveal a great deal about whiteness to white people than white philosophers want to admit. As Lawrie Balfour emphasizes, Baldwin never shied from holding up such a “disagreeable mirror,” yet few are brave enough to look directly into that mirror (2017).

In the original allegory, the philosopher is the one who has broken free from the chains and diagnoses the shadows as false reflections of reality. Plato sees this freedman as *the* philosopher, whose task is to free other prisoners from their shackles. As this racial recasting shows, such a task is especially challenging given that it is so difficult to philosophize from within the conditions of crisis of the Black person who has freed himself from the illusions of whiteness yet remains chained—by the heaviest chain—to those clinging to the illusion. “It is hard under such circumstances,” Du Bois well knows, “to be philosophical and calm, and to think” (1986a, 650). Who can think clearly when one is constantly distracted by crisis after crisis, with images and stories of anti-black violence on silent but violent repeat? As Toni Morrison said, the “very serious function of racism . . . is distraction. *It keeps you from doing your work.* It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being” (1975, 35:46).

And yet, these are the circumstances in which Black philosophy has been forced to operate for centuries. Yet given the dominant, oft overlooked colour of the canon, it is easy to forget that Frederick Douglass was a contemporary of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, that Alain Locke was four years older than Martin Heidegger, that Baldwin was five months older than Gilles Deleuze. But it is time to change that; it is long past time, in fact.

The first images pulled from the recast allegory are thus: philosophy done in and from crisis, not leisure, brings a more powerful, more effective, and more demanding kind of critical thinking. This is the image of second-sight.

***Image Two: The Examined Life***

Another image emerging from placing racial considerations inside Socratic imagery pertains to the meaning of an examined life. In saying this, I am joining the chorus of scholars who read Baldwin in the Socratic lineage. Cornel West called Baldwin the “black American Socrates,” a “blues-inflected, jazz-saturated democrat” exercising “a powerful and poignant self-examination—always on the brink of despair, yet holding on to a tragicomic hope” (2004, 79). Similarly, Joel Alden Schlosser “explores how James Baldwin’s essays and fiction continue and modify a kind of Socratic examination transposed to the context of racial domination and white supremacy” (2013, 487). Echoing this chorus yet with the emphasis on images, allegories, and metaphors, I point to a shocking scene wherein Baldwin came to realize that classic dictum: the unexamined life is not worth living. Please be forewarned, this scene includes description of sexual violence.

Baldwin describes the “unbelievable shock” he felt when he was sexually assaulted by a powerful, slobbering drunk Southern white man (1998a, 390). In the face of this man’s “despairing titillation,” Baldwin recalls what he thought while looking into his glassy wet eyes (390). At that moment, he realized a deep American truth about the structure of his Black sexual organs in relation to the reach of the white groping hand: “as my identity was defined by his power, so was my humanity to be placed at the service of his fantasies” (390). As Saidiya Hartman elegantly and powerfully demonstrates, Black identity and humanity are seated, almost completely, in the delusional, ever-dangerous, fantasies of a sexually repressed, intoxicated, unreflective whiteness that is never called to be responsible for itself (2022).

Though he likely knew it long before, at that moment Baldwin fully realized that the possibility of becoming property is one of the defining features of the racial erotics of the colour line.<sup>22</sup> As Cheryll Harris brilliantly shows, whiteness mutated from a racial identity into a kind of social-political-economic property enshrined in and protected by layers of American law (1993). Whiteness, in a deep sense, is not only drunk on its own fantasies, as in this shocking scene, but is situated in a world designed to foment and feed those fantasies. Realizing this, Baldwin quickly recognized the danger engulfing him like a tidal wave: “This man, with a phone call, could prevent or provoke a lynching” (1998a, 390). In American law and history, Black bodies are considered white property. When whiteness is left unexamined and Blackness is legally protected property, Du Bois asks, “how should I explain and clarify its meaning for a [white] soul? Description fails” (1986a, 656).<sup>23</sup>

In a flash of fear, Baldwin recalled the sexual asymmetry of slavery, wherein the Black person was “a slave because his manhood has been, or can be, or will be taken from him” (1998a, 391). In slavery and its afterlives, the Black man (Baldwin’s focus here) has no rights to his relations—wife, children, family,

etc.—because all are owned, and at the pleasure of, the white enslaver.<sup>24</sup> This is what Orlando Patterson calls “social death” (1982). Who could forget that horrid phrase from the Dred Scott case: a Black person possesses “no rights which the white man was Bound to Respect”? Although the Fourteenth Amendment brought legal changes, the societal conditions of that defining American moment persisted through Baldwin’s time and continue today.<sup>25</sup> As whiteness and maleness are the ground of all legal and political rights, a white man can kill, sexually assault, rape, whip, jail, maim, etc. any Black body with near impunity. Correlatively, a single white word, gesture, even silence has been fatal for innumerable Black lives. The power of whiteness, Baldwin realized, consumed everything like a rapacious parasite.

By violating Black bodies, Baldwin also recalled, a white slave owner not only satiates his sexual fantasy and seizes his violent pleasure, but increases—or would increase, in nine months—his wealth and social-economic status. These sordid, heavy truths are, sadly, easy to see in any honest history. But what is more difficult to see is Baldwin’s next point. Through the violent impregnation of Black female slaves, white men *inscribed themselves* into the plantation production process. As Baldwin realized, “Blacks were not the only stallions on the slave-breeding farms!” (1998a, 391). Possessing “every conceivable sexual and commercial license” not only destroyed the dignity of the enslaved peoples who suffered the enactment of that license but also, in turn, “emasculated [the masters] of any human responsibility” (391). Such destructive relations defined hundreds of years of white-Black relations, and they continue to structure the colour line today.

Amidst the intensity of this realization during the sexual assault committed by that drunk Southern white man, Baldwin experienced what is often considered *the* defining philosophical insight in Plato’s oeuvre: “When the man grabbed my cock ... I watched his eyes, thinking, with great sorrow, *The unexamined life is not worth living*” (391). Let us pause here, if we can stomach it, to consider the difference in context between Socrates and Baldwin.

Socrates was on trial for his life when, Plato reports, he uttered that famous dictum. While it is true that he did so in the wake of a death sentence, it is also important to remember that his trial was conducted *by his peers*. Those who heard, judged, and sentenced him were his political and social equals, so he could have legally done to them what they did to him. Now compare that pivotal moment in the ancient Athenian’s life to the moment when Baldwin had the same insight. Baldwin was travelling through the American South on assignment to report the effects of de-segregation in Charlotte, Little Rock, Birmingham, and other Southern schools. Until then, Baldwin had lived almost exclusively in cities. Born and raised in Harlem, he had just left Paris, after living in Europe for a decade. It was his first time in the South, and he was a Black, gay man. Amidst the constant terror of his experience, that sweaty white hand grabbed his genitalia, and Baldwin’s sharp brown eyes locked into the reddened, dilated, glassy pupils of his assailant. At this exact moment, structured by the physical intensity of racism and sexual assault, that founding philosophical adage erupted in Baldwin’s mind.<sup>26</sup> The difference in context is everything.

The point of tarrying with this brutal scene is to reach a tragic Baldwinian lesson: *growing up Black in America better prepares one for being a philosopher*. We see this insight in Baldwin's reflection on lectures that he gave to high schools in Watts, the primarily poor African American neighborhood in southern Los Angeles then known for the Watts Uprising. Through his visits to Watts, Baldwin noticed, that "these despised, maligned, and menaced children have an alertness, an eagerness, and a depth which I certainly did not find in . . . students at many splendid universities" (431). Forced to grapple with the psychic effects of living under constant oppression, violence, malice, threat, and more, growing up Black in America carved out what Baldwin calls an "alertness, an eagerness, and a depth" of thinking akin to prime philosophical thinking. Compared to the privileges of whiteness, "it is a very different matter, and results in a very different intelligence, *to grow up under the necessity of questioning everything*—everything from the question of one's identity to the literal, brutal question of how to save one's life in order to begin to live it" (431, my emphasis). Such questioning is not, as we saw in Image One, a result of leisure but lies under what Yancy calls the "violent weight of whiteness" (2017).

Correlated to "alertness, an eagerness, and a depth" is a critical capacity for endless, indefatigable questioning of everything. This is the existentially imperative form of questioning that Socrates would surely have recognized as quintessentially philosophical and the key to an examined life: to be part of "a people under the necessity of creating themselves *must examine everything*, and soak up learning the way the roots of a tree soak up water" (1998a, 432, my emphasis). Baldwin thus notices how the racist conditions of the United States instill in Black souls a social, intellectual, and existential disposition that prepares them for the art of philosophy as depicted, thousands of years earlier, in Socrates, though now within a key and context that the Athenian lover of wisdom could never have known.<sup>27</sup>

This second image is thus double and interconnected, depending on one's subject-position. For white subjects, there is a call to look directly into the disagreeable mirror, to break habits of evasion, to let go of the heaviest chain, and to learn from Black thinkers and history. For Black subjects, the lesson is that growing up Black in America better prepares one for being a philosopher. These different images are interconnected because, as the recasting of the cave allegory shows, Black and white freedom are chained together. Seeing this sense of intertwined and interdependent freedom requires the insights from Black thinkers, better positioned as they are to philosophizing, and a corresponding honesty among white thinkers to listen and learn from Du Bois, Baldwin, *et al.* To repeat what Baldwin repeats: "I repeat: The price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the [B]lack, the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind" (1998b, 342). This is the image of the heaviest chain.

### ***Image Three: Twilight Philosophy***

Plato stipulates that, when a prisoner escapes the cave and enters the world outside, he will emerge into midday, the hour when the sun is perched at its

peak in the sky. It seems more likely that it would be nighttime—or dusk or dawn—when the prisoner leaves the cave than it would be high noon. When the prisoner emerges, it could be that the moon and the stars, not the bright sun, would cover the sky with diffuse twilight.

By re-reading Plato's allegory through the lens of Black thinkers, we learn that sunlight and daytime are privileged perspectives because they assume that one will be able to see, grasp, and consume everything that one sees whenever and wherever one sees it, without bias or blunder. Recall how much trust René Descartes put into clarity and distinctness. Put differently, assuming the ever-presence of sunlight and daytime implies an unchanging ability to discern truth, beauty, and goodness. By contrast, Du Bois writes, "I am the child of twilight and night, and choose ... that air of humility and wonder which streams from moonlight" (1986a, 658). Twilight philosophy does not assume the clarity and distinctness of perfect sight and full light but the murky yet penetrating vision that comes from being forced to see through a veil.

To see it, let us return, for a moment, to that Socratic maxim from Image Two: "the unexamined life is not worth living." This maxim contains the heart of the western philosophical tradition. It would be childish to deny the importance of self-examination. But as we saw with Baldwin, it is equally childish to leave *it* unquestioned and decontextualized. Examination is a powerful intellectual tool in almost any domain, including philosophy, science, race, and gender, but it does not guarantee success in discovery. Perhaps this is why Du Bois amends the classic Socratic dictum: "Of course I knew that self-examination is not a true unbiased picture" (1986b, 1117). Du Bois knows from personal and professional experience that self-examination does not necessarily lead to the truth. Far too many white people have examined their lives yet failed to notice the whiteness blinding and binding their vision. This is by design—whiteness is supposed to function invisibly, perfectly, like an unbreakable law of nature.

The assumption of daylight is the bias that one can be truly unbiased, or better, the assumption of universality. This is perhaps clearest when thinking about American history, with its perpetually problematic (ab)use of "all." To assume that daylight is always and ever-present is another way of denying that "all" often masquerades as pale and male.

At the same time, Du Bois does not discard self-examination, for without it no picture is complete. His point is simply that it requires a keen ability to see during the twilight hours, in between the light and the night, and this ability requires the presence of others. When out walking in twilight, one cannot see as far as during the day, so the need for others is stronger. Even if skilled at hearing and reading echoes, others are necessary to bounce off the sound. No matter how hard I try, some parts of me remain invisible and inaccessible. Human vision cannot illuminate everything, just as no one can erase their particularity and assume a purely universal position. We can only see ourselves *through and with* others, and from many different angles and degrees of light and darkness. Given that no one person is privileged enough to see it all and that the sun does not shine bright or long enough for complete self-transparency, the second-

sight of Black philosophy provides a perspective that has been refused and wasted for far too long.

Self-examination, in short, is a collective process developed not in the clear light of day but at dawn and dusk, in the twilight of a past that seems too heavy to bear and the haze of a future for which we cannot but risk hope. To be sure, it will be tough and we may, in the end, fail, as Baldwin notes: “This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives” (1998a, 475). But escaping history should not be the point, just as living only at noontime cannot bring perfect wisdom. Birth is never so easy.

The third image of a racially recast Plato’s allegory is to become, like Du Bois, children of twilight so that we may examine each other, clumsy midwives that we are. Twilight philosophy operates neither in pure light nor pure darkness; it is neither pure pessimism nor the arrogant optimism of one who feels entitled to speak for “all.” Baldwin said it best when he was asked if he were more optimistic or pessimistic:

... I can’t be a pessimist. Because I’m alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter. So I’m forced to be an optimist, I am forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive. But [inhaling] ... the future of the Negro in this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country. It is entirely up to ... the American people, whether or not they’re going to face and deal with and embrace this stranger whom they maligned so long. What white people have to do is try to find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a [n-word] in the first place. Because I’m not a [n-word]. (1963a)

This is the image of twilight philosophy as reflected in the disagreeable yet always honest mirror that is James Baldwin.<sup>28</sup>

## The Man Who Lived Underground

To bring this story to a close, I will attempt to put these three images into practice by turning to Richard Wright’s 1942 novel *The Man Who Lived Underground*. Written between *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), it was finally published in 2021.<sup>29</sup> Wright described it as an unexplainable blend of his grandmother’s devout religiosity, the non-logic of surrealism, jazz and blues improvisation, and true crime stories.<sup>30</sup> Reading Wright’s book in light of our recasting of Plato’s allegory with Du Bois and Baldwin brings together all of our themes and images—crises and chains, examination and second-sight, light and twilight. As Wright’s grandson, Malcom Wright, as well as Kathryn T. Gines (2011), notice, *The Man Who Lived Underground* is “Plato’s allegory *in reverse*” (Wright 2021, 215). Wright places the allegory on and below the streets of midcentury New York City.

*The Man Who Lived Underground* is the story of Fred Daniels, a Black man who is walking home after work one day when three policemen accuse him of committing a double murder. Despite his pleas of innocence, they take him to

the station and torture him until he signs a written confession stating that he was too disoriented to be able to read. The scene is brutal, and it is the theme on which Wright improvises the rest of the story. As we learned in Image Two, it is hard to think when one is constantly distracted with never-ending crises. After signing the confession, the police take him to see his pregnant wife, find she just began labor, and take her to the hospital. In the chaos of the hospital, Daniels breaks free from his chains and flees down a manhole. Thus begins his cavernous surrealistic world of improvisational living in shadows and twilight. Yet more than a single cave, as in Plato, Daniels explores a seemingly endless underground world of murky caves, twisting tunnels, rushing dark water, and shaded stairways. To survive down there, a keen sense of second-sight is required.

From below, Daniels assumes an almost *unheimlich* (uncanny) perspective onto a series of intimate spaces that observes, enters, and pilfers almost without detection. Digging tunnels, removing bricks, drilling holes in walls, Daniels survives those “mist shrouded labyrinths” through improvisational agility (58). He is living behind the veil. Along the way, he gathers food, tools, and objects that he reimagines and deploys differently however is needed. He uses diamonds, watches, and rolls of 100-dollar bills as wallpaper, lining the room with his stolen typewriter. Crawling, swimming, burrowing, and using what he finds randomly, Daniels peers through keyholes (a year before Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous scene), listens through walls to voices and singing, loosens bricks so he can remove or replace them at will. Look at this vivid depiction of second-sight. What “Fred Daniels sees underground is overdetermined,” explains Wright:

They are things seen through a magnifying glass of such strength that they take on a new meaning. Little events, which we perhaps all see each day, take on an entirely different significance. Emotion charges them so that they grow red hot and are fused with everything that happens in the world. Meanings slide together. Events are telescoped. (193)

Living underground is the kind of improvisational existence that only comes from such a forced surrealistic perspective. There is no assumption of day or universal outlook. Wright depicts Daniels doing what Du Bois says: “view[ing white souls] from unusual points of vantage,” allowing him to see the inner “workings of their entrails” (2016, 17). To get a better sense of living underground, I recall a few scenes.

Early on, Daniels sees a slimy rat bearing its fangs in anger, following a tiny floating brown baby, which had drowned and been discarded like garbage. Twice Daniels finds himself on the other side of a wall of a singing Black church, which brings a “pain induced by the naked sight of the groveling spectacle of those black people whose hearts were hungry for tenderness, whose lives were full of fear and loneliness, whose hands were reaching outward into a cold vast darkness for something that was not there” (63). The split in his consciousness divided further while below. Later he sees a naked Black male body stretched out on an undertaker’s table. In another scene, he happens upon a furnace room reddened by the glowing coals tended by an old man who never



turns on the light. Soon he finds a movie house where “people were *laughing* at their lives, at the animated shadows of themselves” (74). Could there be a clearer example of a modern Cave of whiteness, eyes fixed by the play of light and shadow on the wall? Next he stumbles across a real-estate office that contains a safe and a sleeping Black guard, as well as a radio store with a safe where “he saw an eerie white hand, seemingly detached from its arm, touch the metal knob and twirl it” (81). Through cracks and crevices he also sees a sweaty butcher, intimate scenes in basements, a jeweler’s shop, and many other bewildering sights until he was swirled into the unstable epiphany that “he was *all* people and they were *he*” (106). When he eventually regains his composure, he returns to some of the scenes and realizes in horror that the same policemen who had accused him without cause were now accusing other Black people of the thefts that Daniels had committed. His underground life had come full circle, and it was time to return to the surface and tell others of the “terrifying knowledge” he had gained (63). For now he possessed the full power of seeing in between light and dark, which others might call clairvoyant.

After an uncountable number of days—for time passes differently underground, away from the sun—Daniels reemerges, with a new understanding of that heaviest chain. I read his return as a result of the phantom chains that had, for so long, bound him to white bodies staring at the shadows on the wall. Like the freed prisoners from Plato’s allegory who return to the cave to tell those still imprisoned about the world outside—but in reverse—he runs to the police station to turn himself in and tell his three former torturers of the lessons he learned.

But no matter how hard he tries, they do not—they *cannot*—understand him. Since he escaped, they found the actual murderer, so his seeming clairvoyance humiliated the white cops, and they resented him for knowing something they could not admit. They thus try to get rid of him, even burning, to his dismay, his signed confession. Still, Daniels pleads with them to see that he is guilty—not for the double murders of which they accused him, but for living underground, behind the veil, in between the shadows on the wall and the two great hills. Down there, he stole money, tools, radios, and he wants to return it all. Most of all, he tries to teach them that *they* are guilty too, as is *everyone!* Daniels pleads: “Yeah, I know I’m guilty. Everyone’s guilty. I’ll show you everything underground ... we’re *all* guilty” (148). Yet as always, description fails.

Daniels begs them to come see life underground so that they can experience the world that he saw, beyond the Veil, where he could reach out to within inches of unsuspecting bodies “sleeping in their living, awake in their dying,” eyes fixed on the wall of the white world (75). He had seen the imagery of the heaviest chain and begged the white police to help him lift it so they could all break free and leave the dangerous delusions of whiteness. But they do not believe him. Their eyes remain imprisoned by the shadows on the wall. To them, he is a raving madman, and his words sound even more bitter and pessimistic when he proclaims the white world is dead.

Eventually, he pesters (like a gadfly) enough to get them to leave the precinct and see the underground firsthand. And for a moment, it seems like they might

actually see the shadows for what they are. As they drive back to the point of escape, he recounts the wild tales from underground. After more torture and belittling, they find the manhole and remove the heavy cover, unknowingly close to turning their white eyes away from the wall and seeing beyond the Veil. Daniels is ecstatic. Then a siren screams. And there is an air raid: “Soon the rainy air was full of screaming. The policemen stood with lifted faces. A huge bright beam of light shot from the horizon and stabbed the white sky; another rose and crossed it; within ten seconds the air was full of bright, roving columns of light” (157). With the scream of an emergency, the cops are lured back into the white world by that same play of shadows on the wall, now the sky itself. As twilight philosophy teaches, the daylight will not save us just as examination does not guarantee truth. Feeling his chance at liberation slipping away, Daniels stops halfway down the hole, between the world above and below, begging them to follow, to break their gazes from the sky above. “Mister, *this is it!* LOOK!” (158). But it is too late. The policemen, too mesmerized to notice the apocalypse of whiteness erupting around them, jam Daniels down. “Get into the hole, now!” shouts one policeman (158). When he won’t stop pleading, one shoots him in the chest, sending him crashing into the sewage.

Long ago, Plato warned us about this. Telling the truth to those still imprisoned can be fatal. If his escaped prisoner “went down into the cave again and sat down in his same seat ... wouldn’t he invite ridicule? ... And, as for anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn’t they kill him?” (Plato 1997, 516d-e). This is almost exactly what the policeman says after killing Daniels: “You’ve got to shoot his kind. They would wreck things” (159). As explosions shake the ground they stand on, they replace the manhole cover, sealing off Daniels, placing the Veil firmly back in place.

Down below, the sewer water carries Daniels away: “He closed his eyes, a whirling, black object, rushing along in the darkness, veering, tossing with the grey tide, lost in the heart of the earth” (159). Up above, the shadowplay of the white world goes on until it all, eventually, burns to ash. But it should be no surprise. Baldwin already gave us Noah’s rainbow sign: No more water, the fire next time!

### Conclusion

My major goal in this essay is to change the canon of philosophy. While I do love the canon, I desperately want it to change—*immediately*. But as much as I may try, canonical change is collective. One way others have done this is to make a case for the inclusion of excluded voices through the very currency of the canon—direct argumentation. This is what John McClendon and Stephen Ferguson show in *African American Philosophers and Philosophy* (2019), and many others do too.<sup>31</sup> This is a worthy and essential task, and I hope my work complements theirs. But there are many other ways to bring change, so I have taken a different strategy.

My strategy seeks to exploit features of the canon that have been canonically assumed yet underappreciated: imagery, allegory, and metaphor, or what Du

Bois nervously called “some little alightings of what may be poetry.” Many scholars find these interesting and amusing, but few take them as seriously as the “sterner flights of logic” (2016, xxi). Thus my strategy claims that the very nonseriousness of imagery, allegory, and metaphor provides an opening for not simply including excluded voices but for deforming and reforming the canon from within. While philosophers are smiling at the cute little allegories and focusing more on their inferences, they do not realize, until it is too late, that those very thinkers they diligently excluded are already on the inside and turning the canon inside-out. To evoke Du Bois’ imagery, my strategy is to think between great hills and ascend up their backside under the cover of shadows.

But for those who prefer sterner logic, I can reluctantly put my overall argument in four claims. First, images, allegories, and metaphors are ever-present but underappreciated by the discipline. Second, not only do images, allegories, and metaphors carry conceptual force and meaning that straight arguments cannot, but they are often better ways of doing philosophy. Third, one of the strengths of Black thought is what Du Bois calls “Thought for the Fancy—or the Fancy for the Thought” and we should take these as seriously as “sterner flights of logic.” Fourth, learning how Black thought approaches non-argumentative forms of canonical philosophizing teaches us therefore an indirect strategy to elevate Black thinkers and change the canon. So, there it is—a straight argument—if you need it. But I hope you don’t. For taking it so directly misses my point. I thus ask you, reader, to pay more attention to the nonargumentative features of the canon. Placing these in the foreground and arguments in the background allows us to seize upon a strategy for turning the canon of philosophy inside-out *on its own terms*. While some might deter, complaining, for example, that Christina Sharpe’s strategy can only be done with certain terms, I respond: *Every word is polysemous* (2016).<sup>32</sup> And add this: *Images, allegories, and metaphors can do things no argument can*. So I ask the reader to see the images of Black Thought, to seize upon all the underappreciated images in the history of philosophy, to explode the polysemy in every word, and to turn the canon inside-out so that the future of philosophy will be richer, more diverse, and more welcoming than its past.

## Biography

Ryan J. Johnson is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Elon University in North Carolina. He has written two monographs, *The Deleuze-Lucretius Encounter* and *Deleuze, A Stoic*. He is co-author (with Biko Mandela Gray) of *Phenomenology of Black Spirit*. Additionally, he is the co-editor of *Nietzsche and Epicurus* and *Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics*. His teaching is an experiment in improvisation and occurs almost exclusively outside. He loves Spinoza, John Coltrane, and trains.

## Notes

1. In more of the analytic tradition, Kristie Dotson also uses the Allegory. See Dotson (2014).

2. While Robert Gooding-Williams (2009) does evoke shadows, he does not consider their full philosophical content.
3. In a discussion of modes of writing in C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins*, Fred Moten sees a kind of improvisational thinking and doing history that operates "[n]ot by opposition; by augmentation. This means an attention to the lyric, to the lyric's auto-explosion, to the auto-explosion the lyric gives to narrative" (2017, 3).
4. Though Cedric J. Robinson does not include Baldwin, but instead Richard Wright, he does make it clear that his drawing of the tradition is meant to be an opening, not a closing: "as a scholar it was never my intention to exhaust the subject, only to suggest that it was there" (2000, xxxii).
5. Baldwin's critique of Wright is well trod ground, and Wright's relationship to Du Bois is fascinating but too much for me to handle here.
6. It is, of course, more than that. It shares much with Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, an inspiration for Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as well as plenty of Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, and many other works.
7. On the question of "who" is doing philosophy, recall that Thomas Holt claims all readings of Du Bois must reckon with Du Bois' insistence that his "own life became the text, the point of departure, for each of his major explorations of race, culture, and politics" (1990, 307). Nahum Dimitri Chandler says this in his chapter "Elaboration of the Autobiographical Example in the Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois," where he characterizes Du Bois' writing strategy as a "hesitant" yet "insistent" "apology" (in the Socratic lineage), noting its complication of Enlightenment assumptions about objective truth through a "subjective genesis" and a variation on Jacques Derrida's insistence on the interplay between history and *logos* in his "tracing of the problem of genesis" in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (2014, 777).
8. See also Tom Hawkins (2019).
9. For more on Baldwin's comments about the white "Presumptions of Innocence," see Lawrie Balfour (2001, 87-112).
10. For more on Nietzsche and Du Bois, see Kathleen Marie Higgins (2006).
11. For a diagnosis of white self-(mis)recognition, see Ryan J. Johnson and Nathan Jones (2021).
12. Also see Elvira Basevich (2020).
13. Emphasis added. On the figure of the seventh son in Black folklore, see Yvonne Patricia Chireau (2003). See also Shamooin Zamir (1995).
14. David Levering Lewis speaks of a "unique angle of vision" (1993, 280).
15. The "structure of whiteness forecloses (what the Germans call) *Schuld* and shame" (Johnson and Jones 2021, 4).
16. For a powerful and elegant historical example of this, see Annette Gordon-Reed (2008).

17. Due to its resonances with vision and light in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, see especially "Non-Cartesian *Sums*: Philosophy and the African-American Experience" in Charles W. Mills (1998, 1-20).
18. This is one of the lessons I draw from John Brown in my forthcoming book, *The John Brown Suite*.
19. Here one might draw upon Martin Luther King's use of Paul Tillich in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in particular the notion that "sin is separation" (1964).
20. See H.A. Nethery IV (2020) or George Yancy (2019).
21. Here there is an interesting difference in reading "aristocracy." While Baldwin reads aristocratic status as conferred by crisis, early Du Bois argued for the value of elitism. For him, neither Blackness nor crisis alone produce the aristocratic virtue of second-sight. Only the "Talented Tenth" possess such a gift, which bears a moral duty to free both whites and the Black folk from their respective illusions. On Du Bois' elitism see Adolph L. Reed Jr.'s chapter "Stratification, Leadership, and Organization: The Role of the Black Elite" (1997, 53-70).
22. For more on this, see Jack Turner (2017). For a more recent and expansive take, see Rinaldo Walcott (2021).
23. See George Yancy (2017).
24. For more on the afterlives of slavery, see Saidiya Hartman (2007, 6). And for the gratuitous intrusion of property relations, see Hortense J. Spillers (2003).
25. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois tracks the emergence of this process (1998).
26. For more on the libidinal violence of racial politics in Baldwin, see Marc Lombardo (2009).
27. This seems a variation on what Stephen H. Marshall calls "Black Prophetic Politics" (2011).
28. For more on honesty in Baldwin, see Johnson and Jones (2021).
29. A short story version (which cuts the first police brutality scene, condenses the underground life, and alters the final apocalyptic scene) was published in 1942, and republished in 1945 and 1961.
30. For more on gender in Wright and Nietzsche, see Cynthia Willet (2006).
31. Other examples include Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman (2003) and George Yancy (1998).
32. "Wake," *et al.* strike me as variations on what G.W.F Hegel means by "speculative words." A speculative word has "two dictionary *meanings* [*Bedeutungen*]," a double signification that Hegel delights in because a "language has come to use one and the same word for two opposite meanings" (2010, 81). Speculative thinking is satisfied when it seizes upon such speculative words because it locates, in ordinary words, a language's speculative spirit, the obvious example of which is *aufheben*, which means (roughly) both to cancel and to preserve. A useful and enjoyable game is to search for speculative words in other languages. Catherine Malabou's reading of Hegel sees "plasticity" as a double-sig-

nifying speculative word (1996). For more, see Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda (2018, 56).

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