



Toward a City of Free Thinkers

A Journey across the Theatres of Knowledge

PETER KAHL



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*A poetic–philosophical odyssey through student dependency,
institutional theatre, accreditation’s seal,
the crack of doubt, and the city of free thinkers*

PETER KAHL

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About the Publisher

Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics. Our work integrates legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies for public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

Toward a City of Free Thinkers: A Journey across the Theatres of Knowledge is a multimodal odyssey of seven movements — from the dependency of the student, through the theatre of the university and the seal of accreditation, to the crack of doubt, the act of self-emancipation, and finally the manifesto that opens onto a city of free thinkers. Each stage is rendered through poetry, essay, and image, treated as coequal epistemic registers: the poem enacts, the prose situates, the image exposes. This form is not ornamental but methodological. To resist epistemic domestication, philosophy must refuse monomodality.

The work diagnoses universities and allied institutions as theatres of epistemic clientelism, where recognition is exchanged for conformity and accreditation substitutes for truth. It shows how practices of accreditation and peer review often operate as systemic gatekeeping mechanisms that produce epistemic injustice by design. Drawing on Foucault and Bourdieu, it situates these dynamics as theatres of visibility and silence, where authority is aestheticised and dissent suppressed.

Against this order, the work advances the case for fiduciary openness: epistemic authorities must be bound by duties of care, loyalty, and accountability to truth itself. It envisions epistemocracy, a form of governance in which plurality is structurally safeguarded and institutions act not as sovereign gatekeepers but as stewards of the commons.

The cycle culminates in a manifesto of unfettered thought. It calls for a city of free thinkers where silence is fertile rather than imposed, libraries are gardens rather than prisons of paper, and knowledge circulates not as property but as fiduciary trust. The invitation is collective: to breathe together in the open space created when certainty falls and doubt begins.

Author's Note on Publication

This work is published as two independent but parallel versions — one in English, one in French — to test and exemplify epistemic plurality across linguistic domains.

Keywords

epistemic clientelism, epistemic freedom, fiduciary openness, epistemocracy, epistemic injustice, fiduciary duties, epistemic plurality, epistemic agency, multimodal philosophy, democratic epistemology, institutional critique, higher education, silence, accreditation, emancipation, manifesto

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Introduction

This work is neither a conventional treatise nor a collection of poems with commentary. It is a multimodal inquiry in which poetry, prose, and image are treated as coequal epistemic registers. Each mode speaks in its own idiom: the poem enacts, the prose situates, the image exposes. Their alternation is not ornamental. It is itself a methodological claim: to resist epistemic domestication, philosophy must refuse confinement to a single idiom of expression.

The central thesis is that epistemic emancipation requires resisting epistemic clientelism, cultivating fiduciary openness, and moving toward epistemocracy. Epistemic clientelism names the conditional exchange in which autonomy of thought is surrendered in return for recognition or protection {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}. Such bargains stabilise institutions — universities, professions, parties — but they narrow horizons of thought and subjugate dissent. Fiduciary openness offers an alternative: epistemic authorities must be bound by duties of loyalty, care, and accountability to truth itself {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*; Kahl 2025, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}. The broader horizon is *epistemocracy*: a form of governance in which epistemic plurality is structurally safeguarded, and institutions act not as sovereign gatekeepers but as fiduciary stewards {Kahl 2025, *Epistemocracy in Higher Education*}.

The work traces this thesis through a seven-part journey. Each part combines poem, essay, and image to show how epistemic clientelism operates, how it can be resisted, and how new horizons may be opened:

1. **The Fragile Nature of Knowledge** — epistemic limits, closed lexicons, and the cages of the known.
2. **The Student under Authority** — dependence, hierarchy, and the first disruptive question.
3. **The University** — knowledge staged as rank, silence, and theatrical performance.
4. **Accreditation** — committees, seals, and peer review as clientelist regimes of validation.
5. **Doubt** — a crack in the system, revalued as a source of epistemic agency.
6. **Auto-Emancipation** — liberation without permission, silence as fertile ground.
7. **The Manifesto** — the voice that ceases to speak in the singular and summons the city of free thinkers.

This arc is at once biographical and philosophical. It embodies what Miranda Fricker has called *epistemic injustice*: the harm done when voices are silenced or interpretive resources denied {Fricker 2007}. It engages Tamar Frankel's fiduciary theory, which has shaped law and finance but rarely been extended to the governance of knowledge {Frankel 2011}. It resonates with Elizabeth Anderson's

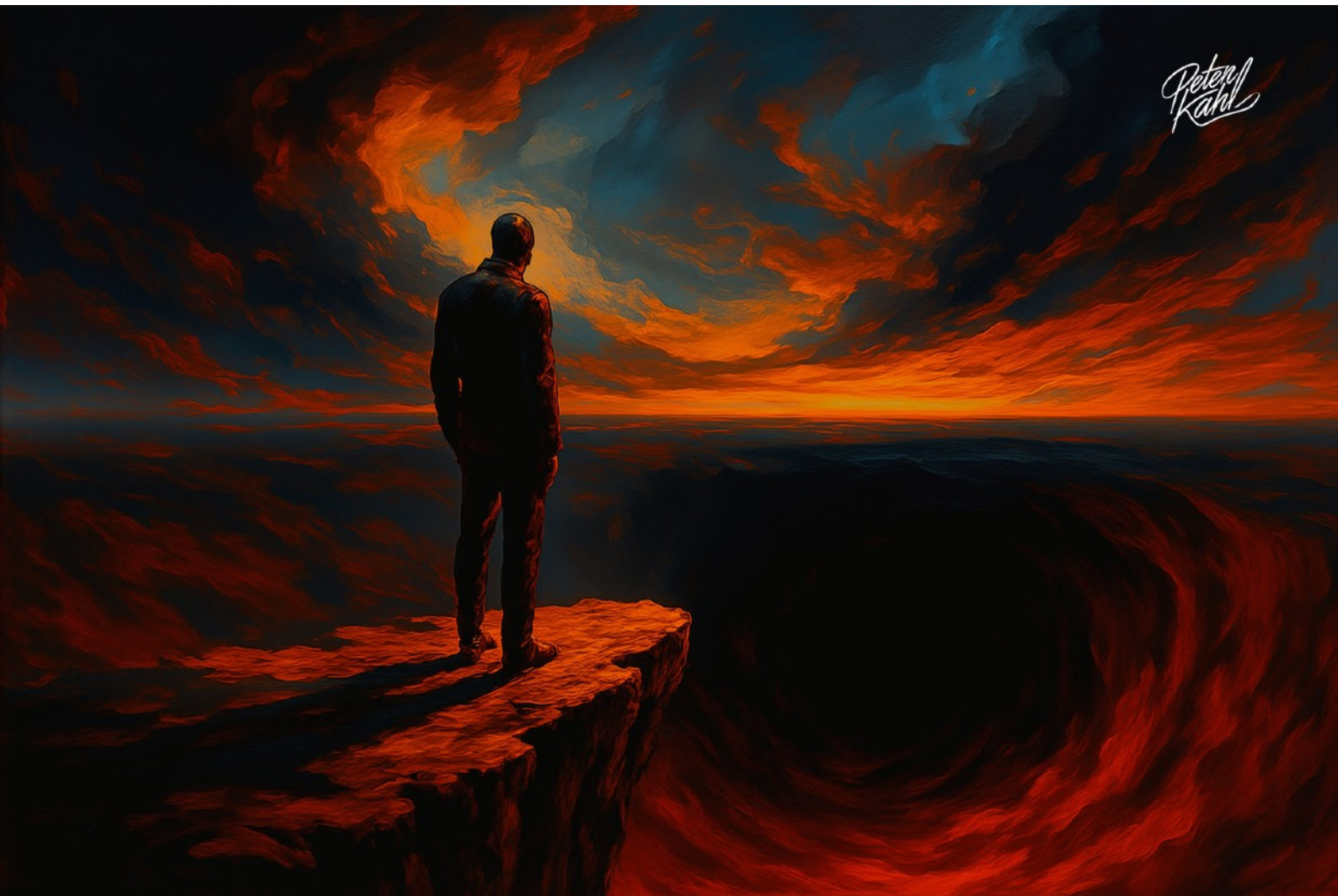
account of *epistemic democracy*, where legitimacy depends on inclusive and plural deliberation {Anderson 2006}. And it reframes clientelism, familiar from political theory, as an epistemic logic that organises not only states but also classrooms, journals, and intimate lives.

This work also extends my own interventions: *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025), *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism* (2025), *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge* (2025), and *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review* (2025). Taken together, these writings diagnose how epistemic authority is domesticated. The present project pushes further: it performs refusal by refusing monomodality, insisting that epistemic freedom must be thought, felt, and seen.

The invitation is to follow this progression from constraint to emancipation. The challenge is to recognise that the form of this work — alternating poem, essay, and image — is already a practice of *epistemic emancipation*.

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1. The Fragile Nature of Knowledge



What holds us back

A poem on the limits of the mind

There is a step —
that no one takes.

Not because it is wide.
But because it is blurred.

We call it:
the unknown.

And that word,
whispered,
opens a cell —
inside the cage of the known.

We live
at the frontier

of our mental models,
like beggars
at the gate of an empty palace.

Fear doesn't scream.
It organises.
It classifies.
It drafts maps
scaled to our certainties.

And these maps —
we cherish them.
They soothe us.
We name them:
knowledge.

But that knowledge —
is a polished trap.
A one-way mirror
where we confuse
seeing with vision,
concept with flesh.

What holds us back?

A thread.
A word.
A definition.

A lexicon
locked twice over —
its key forged
by our own hands...
and thrown away.

And yet —
in the hesitant breath
of a moment without answer —
a doubt.
Tiny.
Insolent.

But enough
to shake
the ground
of the known.

•

Essay Commentary

The poem *What Holds Us Back* meditates on the subtle yet powerful limits that confine human thought. It insists that what restrains us is rarely a vast chasm but small thresholds: ‘a thread, a word, a definition’. These limits are internalised — lexicons, categories, and maps that we ourselves create and then revere

This insight recalls Ludwig Wittgenstein’s dictum that ‘the limits of my language mean the limits of my world’ {Wittgenstein 1922, §5.6}. Language does not simply express thought; it defines its boundaries. The poem’s ‘lexicon locked twice over’ captures the paradox of self-imposed captivity: we forge the key, then discard it.

Miranda Fricker’s notion of hermeneutical injustice provides a parallel. When interpretive resources are missing, individuals cannot render their experiences intelligible {Fricker 2007}. The poem’s lines about fear that ‘organises, classifies, fabricates maps’ reveal how dominant epistemic orders deny alternative interpretations. Maps comfort, but they also exclude.

From the perspective of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* {Kahl 2025}, such maps are not neutral; they are instruments of clientelist exchange. They stabilise institutions by producing shared certainties, but at the price of narrowing autonomy. Knowledge becomes a ‘polished trap’, its authority sustained not by openness but by conformity.

And yet the poem identifies a fissure: ‘a doubt. Tiny. Insolent. But sufficient’. Here lies the courage required for genuine knowledge. As I have argued in *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*, epistemic authority entails fiduciary duties of humility and openness {Kahl 2025}. To cultivate inquiry rather than reproduce order, epistemic authorities must protect the space where doubt can emerge.

This is consonant with Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which rejects the ‘banking model’ of education in which teachers deposit knowledge into passive students (Freire 1970). For Freire, education must be dialogical, unsettling, and directed toward emancipation. Antonia Darder extends this by insisting that such pedagogy requires an ethic of love and courage (Darder 2017; 2019). Fear produces maps that pacify; love dismantles them by opening learners to uncertainty. Courage is the precondition of liberation.

Placed in this light, the poem’s insolent doubt is not an error to be corrected but an epistemic virtue: the germ of freedom. To remain within the closed lexicon is to accept reassurance as truth. To step beyond is to risk instability, but also to access what institutions suppress. Genuine knowledge requires courage: the courage to resist epistemic clientelism, to face uncertainty, and to embrace plurality.

Image Commentary

The image depicts a solitary figure at the brink of a vast precipice, gazing into an infinite black void. The cliff beneath him is fractured, threatening collapse; fragments of maps and words lie scattered at his feet. Behind him the sky blazes in crimson and orange, pierced by shafts of light.

This visual field echoes the poem's central insight: what holds us back are not immovable barriers but thresholds of fear. The precipice symbolises the unknown — terrifying, immeasurable — yet the figure does not retreat. He confronts it, illuminated by the dramatic light. The scattered maps embody the poem's 'definitions' and 'lexicons': once reassuring, now revealed as useless when faced with uncharted horizons.

The contrast between the blazing sky and the abyss visualises the tension of emancipation: security lies in retreat, but truth demands courage. Here, Antonia Darder's insight is indispensable: fear produces maps that pacify, while genuine pedagogy requires an ethic of love and courage (Darder 2017). In the image, the light breaking through the storm signifies this ethic — the illumination that arises not from control but from the courage to face uncertainty.

Synthesis

Poem and image together articulate a foundational claim of this project: that knowledge requires not only skill but courage, and that without love and humility, authority degenerates into clientelism. Maps and definitions offer reassurance, but they also imprison. To remain within them is to confuse security with truth. What holds us back is less the immensity of the unknown than the small thresholds we dare not cross.

The poem's insolent doubt and the figure's stance at the precipice embody the courage to step beyond. This is not recklessness but an epistemic virtue: the refusal to accept domesticated knowledge as final. As I have argued {Kahl 2025, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}, epistemic authorities bear fiduciary duties to cultivate precisely this courage, to protect the fragile moments of doubt where emancipation begins.

Freire called for dialogical education; Darder extends it to an ethic of love, care, and courage. The multimodal unit of poem and image performs this ethic: it recognises fear, yet insists that emancipation lies in walking to the edge and refusing to turn back. Knowledge is not a polished trap or a sealed map but a trust shared, fragile and fluid.

To know, then, is to risk. To teach is to safeguard that risk with care. And to step into the unknown is the first act of epistemic freedom.

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2. The Student under Authority



The Student, the Master, and the Melting Clock

The question that needed no key

I stepped into your narrow room,
where your knowledge hung
like a melting clock,
dripping down the edge
of a desk too heavy
to hold anything
but your certainties.

You sat on an ivory chair,
frozen between titles and diplomas,
your words like locked drawers,
refusing to open
to any hand
without your key.

I arrived with no keys, no maps,
my knowledge a silence to be filled.
I sought truths
that change their shape,
that run through the fingers
like the vivid colours
of a torn landscape
signed Dalí.

Slowly, our roles reversed —
your authority collapsed
under the weight of a question
too heavy
for your fragile shoulders:
To whom does knowledge belong?

One day I ceased waiting
for reheated answers
from the lukewarm oven
of your fear.

I seized my pen,
writing as both pupil and master,
a clear message,
affirming our shared moral duty
in the living exchange of ideas.

And when my voice rose,
it was you who fell silent,
your melting clock
slipping slowly to the floor.

Truth belongs to no one,
not to you,
not to me.
It dances, escapes,
waiting only
to be gathered,
to be given freely,
at no cost but curiosity
and the generosity
of an open heart.

Now, among the ruins
of your certainties
and the audacity
of my doubts,
we remain —
human, imperfect,
at last equal
before the infinite fluidity
of shared knowledge.

•

Essay Commentary

The poem *The Student, the Master, and the Melting Clock* stages the asymmetries of the student–teacher relation as a drama of permission. The ‘melting clock’ evokes not only Dalí’s dissolution of time but also the fragility of epistemic authority when it is divorced from fiduciary responsibility. The master’s knowledge hangs heavy, dripping and inert, weighed down by diplomas and titles, while the student arrives ‘with no keys, no maps’, searching for truths fluid and alive. This contrast exemplifies what I have theorised as epistemic clientelism {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*; Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}.

Clientelism arises when epistemic autonomy is surrendered in exchange for recognition, protection, or advancement. In academic life, this logic is visible in the dependency of the student on the supervisor’s paradigm: only by conforming can she progress. The master in the poem embodies this condition. His ‘locked drawers’ admit only those who possess his key — permission is the currency of progress. Such transactions stabilise authority but reduce inquiry to a bargain: knowledge for compliance. This dynamic mirrors intimate relations, where epistemic submission is exchanged for affection or stability {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships*}. In both cases, autonomy is constrained by conditionality.

The alternative is to reconceive pedagogy as a fiduciary relation. In my framework, epistemic authorities are bound by duties of care, loyalty, and openness to the agency of their students {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*; Kahl 2025, *Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}. Authority is legitimate only when circumscribed by such duties. Where they are absent, teaching collapses into subjugation: the defence of rank rather than the stewardship of inquiry.

Paulo Freire captured this collapse in his critique of the ‘banking model’ of education, in which teachers deposit knowledge into passive students (Freire 1970). Such pedagogy reproduces hierarchies and silences critical consciousness. Antonia Darder extends Freire’s analysis, insisting that dismantling epistemic hierarchies requires not only dialogue but also an ethic of love, care, and courage (Darder 2017; 2019). The poem embodies this inversion: the student, refusing to wait for permission, writes ‘as both pupil and master’, while the teacher falls silent. Authority is not destroyed but transfigured into reciprocity — precisely the transformation that Darder identifies as necessary for emancipatory pedagogy.

The collapse of the master’s authority under the ‘weight of a question too heavy for [his] fragile shoulders’ illustrates how authority without fiduciary grounding cannot withstand inquiry. His knowledge is heavy with titles yet hollow in substance. In fiduciary terms, he has breached his duties: privileging status over loyalty to truth, closure over openness, compliance over care. The poem’s conclusion — that truth ‘belongs to no one’ — marks the alternative: knowledge as fiduciary trust, not private property.

Image Commentary

The image renders this dynamic visually. At the centre hangs the melting clock, draped over fractured pillars. Time itself — and with it the weight of tradition — has lost rigidity. It drips, unstable, signalling that the structures sustaining mastery are contingent and dissolving.

To the right, the master raises his finger in command. His stance is rigid, aligned with the pillars of tradition, yet these are already fractured, the clock above them warped. His authority rests on unstable foundations. He is the embodiment of ‘locked drawers’: rigid posture, hollow ground.

To the left, the student bends over parchment, writing silently while flames burn behind him. His act corresponds to the poem’s turning point: seizing the pen, refusing to wait for permission, becoming ‘both pupil and master’. The fire is not mere destruction but the audacity of doubt. His silence is generative, answering authority with creation.

Between them stretches the broken landscape: the terrain of epistemic clientelism. Authority seeks to stabilise itself through accreditation and command, yet is cracked open by questions too heavy to be contained. The melting clock visualises the fragility of authority without fiduciary duty, while the student’s inscription gestures toward fiduciary openness — authority reconceived as stewardship of inquiry rather than possession of truth.

Synthesis

Together, poem, essay, and image compose a multimodal unit that dramatises the moment when dependency on permission gives way to emancipation. Each enacts the same transformation: rigid authority liquefied into reciprocity, clientelist bargains displaced by fiduciary openness.

The master points skyward, invoking permanence, but the clock drips. The student writes in silence, fire at his back, embodying the refusal to wait for permission. This is not a rejection of learning but a reconstitution of it: knowledge no longer flows through hierarchical permission but through dialogical trust.

Antonia Darder reminds us that emancipation in pedagogy requires courage grounded in love and solidarity. This is what the poem and image enact: truth ‘belongs to no one’; it is a fiduciary trust, shared in the living exchange of ideas. To teach is not to guard the key but to accompany the student to the threshold where no key is needed.

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3. The University



The University

or the theatre of knowledge

They call it a place of learning.

But here one studies first:

rank.

title.

useful silence.

And the ideas?

They wait —

at the threshold

of closed doors.

A student enters.

He has a question.

It unsettles.
It does not fit.
It slips between the grids.

They correct it.
File it away.
Forget it.

Here, fear
wears academic robes.
It quotes Kant,
trembling
that someone might interrupt.

Each professor
is a fragile empire —
built on the ruins
of what he no longer dares to think.

The university?
It is an old mirror
where one learns
not to see.

But sometimes —
a voice cracks.
A phrase strays outside the frame.
And then —
truth, naked,
passes between the walls
like a current of air.

•

Essay Commentary

The poem *The University — or the Theatre of Knowledge* depicts the university as a stage where knowledge is subordinated to rank, title, and silence. Ideas ‘wait at the threshold of closed doors’, while disruptive questions are corrected, filed, and forgotten. Professors appear as ‘fragile empires’, their robes concealing fear rather than embodying stewardship.

This theatrical imagery echoes Michel Foucault’s account of institutions as sites where power and discourse are staged, disciplined, and policed (Foucault 1980). The ‘useful silence’ is precisely what Foucault identifies as disciplinary control: not the absence of speech but its strategic management. Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of academic capital reinforces this: rank and title function as currencies of distinction, reproducing privilege rather than cultivating thought (Bourdieu 1988).

From the perspective of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl 2025), the university operates as a paradigmatic site of clientelist exchange. Knowledge is validated not for its truth but for its conformity to institutional expectations. Advancement is conditional: to gain accreditation or promotion, one must demonstrate loyalty to prevailing orthodoxy. Orthodoxy itself is staged as image, concentrated in the visible figure of authority. I have elsewhere called this substitutive visibility: the displacement of distributed epistemic labour by the centralised image of executive authority (Kahl 2025, *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia*). The theatre of knowledge becomes a theatre of the face — a regime of epistemic monarchism, where authority is aestheticised and concentrated, and recognition flows upward as symbolic capital.

The poem’s metaphor of the university as an ‘old mirror where one learns not to see’ resonates with *The Silent Shadows* (Kahl 2025). Just as prisoners in Plato’s cave consent to shadows as authorised appearances, students and scholars assent to metrics, rankings, and titles as substitutes for truth. Shadows and mirrors both function as regimes of substitutive visibility.

Silence, too, is central. Professors trembling to cite Kant epitomise the fear of stepping outside the sanctioned frame. As I argued in *The Silent Tree* (Kahl 2025), silence is never neutral but an instrument of epistemic subjugation — a performative currency in the clientelist economy of knowledge. Here silence serves the pedagogy of authority: a pedagogy that teaches not to see, not to speak, not to disrupt. Against this, I have argued for a *pedagogy of openness* — a fiduciary alternative where institutions act as custodians of epistemic trust, distributing recognition equitably and resisting the theatre of charisma (Kahl 2025, *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia*).

As I also contend in *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* (Kahl 2025), such practices constitute epistemic violence: they betray fiduciary duties owed to students, staff, and publics, corroding democracy itself. By masquerading as sovereigns, universities substitute performance for stewardship.

And yet, as the poem insists, sometimes a voice cracks, a phrase slips the frame, and truth enters like a current of air. This is the point where clientelism falters, shadows dissipate, and fiduciary openness becomes possible. To refuse the theatre of the face is to reimagine the university not as sovereign monarch but as fiduciary steward of the epistemic commons.

Image Commentary

The accompanying image literalises the poem's diagnosis of the university as theatre. Red curtains frame the scene, reminding us that knowledge is staged. Figures resembling professors stand as cracked statues, holding masks before their faces. Their posture is rigid, but their surfaces fractured — fragile empires built on the ruins of what they no longer dare to think.

The masks recall what I have called substitutive visibility {Kahl 2025, *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia*}: the way distributed epistemic labour is displaced by the executive face of authority. Recognition attaches not to the many who produce knowledge but to the visible few who embody the institution. This is epistemic monarchism: the concentration of legitimacy in figure and façade.

Above the stage, an all-seeing eye surveys the scene — Foucault's panopticon transposed into academic theatre. It ensures that performance conforms to expectation, that silence is maintained. Around the stage lie scattered props — a key, a gear, a broken tablet. These are instruments of knowledge, but here they are reduced to ornaments, robbed of their vitality by being subordinated to spectacle.

The cracked bodies show the cost of substitutive visibility: professors appear monumental, but they are hollow. The curtains conceal more than they reveal. The stage is not a place of thought but of accreditation, where knowledge is rehearsed for recognition rather than pursued for truth.

Synthesis

Poem and image together present the university as a theatre of epistemic clientelism. Knowledge is staged as performance, validated through titles, ranks, and accreditation rather than inquiry. Fear wears robes, silence is useful, and professors become actors in a play whose script is accreditation.

This diagnosis resonates with *The Silent Shadows* {Kahl 2025}, where shadows serve as authorised appearances, and with *The Silent Tree* {Kahl 2025}, where silence operates as epistemic subjugation. It converges with *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* {Kahl 2025}, which shows how institutions betray their fiduciary duty by masquerading as sovereigns. And it is deepened by *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism* {Kahl 2025}, which explains why the stage of knowledge is dominated by masks and faces: the concentration of recognition in charismatic figureheads who substitute for the dispersed work of the many.

Yet the poem leaves space for rupture. Sometimes a voice cracks, a phrase slips the frame, and truth passes through like air. The cracks in the statues, the warped surfaces, the fissures in the masks all hint that the theatre is unstable. Fiduciary openness demands that institutions embrace these cracks — not patch them over. The task is to move from epistemic monarchism to fiduciary stewardship: from the theatre of the face to the care of the commons.

In this multimodal unit, the theatre is unmasked. The university, revealed as fragile spectacle, can be reimagined as something else: not a stage for accreditation, but a trust held on behalf of truth.



4. Accreditation



Accreditation

or truth under seal

This text was read.

Read again.

Read yet again.

Then stamped.

Filed.

Stored.

It is now:

valid.

conforming.

accredited.

Therefore:

true.

At least —
in the language of the committee.

But truth itself
wears no badge.
It enters uninvited.
It interrupts the sentence.
It ignores
the required format.

The experts?
They excel
at recognising
what they have already seen.

The rest?
Unpublishable.
Unreadable.
Not serious.

Later it will be called:
intuition,
madness,
or literature.

But perhaps it was,
quite simply,
thought.

•

Essay Commentary

The poem *Accreditation* portrays the ritual of validation through which institutions sanctify knowledge. A text is read, re-read, stamped, filed, and stored. Once accredited, it is treated as ‘true’ — not because of its content but because of its conformity to committee procedure. Accreditation becomes epistemic theatre: truth under seal.

The experts, the poem notes, ‘excel at recognising what they have already seen’. Knowledge is thus validated only when it conforms to precedent. What escapes these forms — intuition, imagination, the insolence of new thought — is dismissed as unpublishable, unreadable, or unserious. Yet this very surplus may be ‘thought’.

This mechanism is emblematic of epistemic clientelism {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}. Committees demand compliance in exchange for recognition; autonomy is traded for accreditation. Advancement becomes conditional on conformity rather than inquiry.

In *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design* (2025), I showed how such practices constitute not accidental bias but systemic fiduciary failure. Committees and review panels act as epistemic gatekeepers, designing systems that reproduce injustice by foreclosing plurality and silencing dissent. The poem’s ritual stamping illustrates this architecture of exclusion.

This critique converges with *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review* (2025), which demonstrates how peer review operates as a colonial hierarchy: it rewards epistemic conservatism, silences unsanctioned voices, and violates fiduciary duties of openness. The heavy seals in the poem embody this violence: truth reduced to administrative property, distributed by those who already hold authority.

As I argued in *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?* (2025), academia actively refuses to engage with thought that emerges beyond its sanctioned channels. The poem names these refusals: the unreadable, the non-serious. Such exclusions are less about epistemic quality than about institutional sovereignty.

In *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors* (2025), I extended this critique to show how these practices amount to epistemic violence: universities masquerade as sovereigns while abdicating fiduciary duties to care for the commons of knowledge. Accreditation thus becomes epistemic monarchism: a sovereign act of sealing truth by decree.

And yet, the poem insists, truth does not respect seals. It ‘enters uninvited’, ‘ignores the required format’, and ‘interrupts the sentence’. This is the irruption of the real, the moment when fiduciary stewardship rather than sovereign decree is required. Accreditation should not seal truth; it should steward openness.

Image Commentary

The accompanying image visualises this critique. At its centre, a towering stack of stamped papers melts like wax, their crimson seals heavy with conformity. Around the stack sit faceless bureaucrats, pressing endlessly onto blank pages. Above them hangs a glowing badge — radiant yet hollow — emblem of accreditation as legitimacy without substance.

The facelessness of the bureaucrats evokes the anonymity of peer review. Their endless stamping captures what I have described as epistemic gatekeeping by design: a system calibrated to reproduce sameness while suppressing dissent {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design*}. The hollow badge symbolises substitutive visibility: recognition concentrated in a symbol, detached from the living practice of thought.

And yet, in the distance, a shaft of light pierces storm clouds to illuminate a single unbound page, floating free. This page embodies the unsanctioned, the free-range knowledge that accreditation cannot contain. It is thought escaping the theatre of seals.

Synthesis

Poem and image converge on a shared critique: accreditation is not epistemic stewardship but clientelist exchange, institutionalised gatekeeping, and fiduciary breach. Truth is not sealed; it is suffocated.

Across my works, this architecture of exclusion has been analysed as:

- Clientelism — conditional bargains of compliance for recognition {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*; Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}.
- Gatekeeping by design — systemic production of epistemic injustice through fiduciary failure {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design*}.
- Colonial hierarchy — peer review as epistemic domination {Kahl 2025, *Why We Must Reject the Colonial Peer Review*}.
- Exclusion of the unsanctioned — the refusal of free-range knowledge {Kahl 2025, *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge*}.
- Institutional monarchism — accreditation as sovereign decree rather than fiduciary trust {Kahl 2025, *Universities, Academic Platforms, and Repositories are Not Emperors*}.

Yet both poem and image point beyond: truth arrives uninvited, interrupts the sentence, floats free from the stack. Fiduciary openness requires institutions to protect these irruptions rather than suppress them. Accreditation must cease to be theatre; it must become stewardship.

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5. Doubt



Doubt

a crack in the system

It has no voice.

No rank.

No title.

It enters —

like air

through a door

left ajar.

They call it:

doubt.

But it is not here

to destroy.

It listens.

It suspends.

It makes room.

For a thought

unforeseen.

For a question

uncategorised.

And sometimes —

in that brief moment

when the system hesitates —

something alive

passes through.

It is neither true,

nor false.

Neither published,

nor rejected.

It is a beginning.

Nothing more.

But that nothing —

is enough.

•

Essay Commentary

The poem *Doubt — a crack in the system* stages doubt not as an enemy of knowledge but as its precondition. It arrives ‘like air through a door left ajar’: unnoticed, unsanctioned, yet life-giving. It holds no voice, no rank, no title, and yet it interrupts the order of accreditation, classification, and silence. Doubt is portrayed as a pause — a suspension that makes room for thought unforeseen and questions uncategorised.

This imagery recalls classical philosophical traditions. Pyrrhonian scepticism regarded doubt not as paralysis but as a way of opening thought, refusing premature closure {Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*}. René Descartes too framed radical doubt as method: by stripping away unjustified certainties, he sought to ground knowledge on more secure foundations {Descartes 1641}. The poem, however, refuses both Pyrrhonian suspension for its own sake and Cartesian reconstruction; instead it portrays doubt as in-between — neither true nor false, neither published nor rejected, but a beginning.

This account resonates with Miranda Fricker’s notion of epistemic injustice {Fricker 2007}. Systems designed to stabilise knowledge often deny space to voices or questions that do not conform. Doubt, in this context, becomes subversive: a crack in the system through which what is excluded may enter. As in *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* {Kahl 2025}, institutions trade recognition for compliance; doubt disrupts this economy by refusing the exchange.

Recent work in educational psychology has also identified doubt as constitutive of epistemic agency. Nieminen and Ketonen (2021) argue that genuine agency requires not only access to knowledge but also the ability to question, reframe, and resist epistemic authority. The poem illustrates this precisely: doubt suspends closure, creates a pause, and thereby enables agency.

In my own framework, this corresponds to the fiduciary duty of epistemic humility {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*}. Epistemic authorities — teachers, reviewers, committees — have a fiduciary obligation to protect space for doubt, to resist the temptation to close questions prematurely, and to cultivate the courage to face uncertainty. Where institutions treat doubt as threat, they breach this duty, collapsing into clientelism. Where they embrace it, they enact fiduciary openness.

The poem insists that even the smallest hesitation can be transformative: ‘in that brief moment where the system hesitates — something alive passes through’. This is neither triumph nor revolution but a beginning. And this beginning, fragile as it is, ‘is enough’. It is enough because it reopens the possibility of thought, restoring knowledge as a living practice rather than a sealed archive.

Image Commentary

The image visualises doubt as a subtle but transformative intrusion. A colossal wall dominates the composition, yet it is fractured by a fissure from which a radiant beam of light passes through. At the

threshold, a solitary cloaked figure stands, half-illuminated, half-shadowed, symbolising both hesitation and courage.

The palette — fiery oranges and reds against deep turquoise shadows — heightens the drama. On one side of the wall lies darkness, inhabited by indistinct figures absorbed in ritual and repetition. Their blurred faces evoke the anonymity of institutional roles, mirroring how bureaucracies efface individuality in the service of conformity. On the other side, the fissure reveals an open horizon suffused with golden light: the space of possibility that institutions cannot fully contain.

The stream of light cutting through the wall captures the poem's claim that doubt 'enters like air under a door left ajar'. It is neither violent nor destructive; its power lies in infiltration. The cloaked figure embodies epistemic agency in its earliest form: not yet speaking, but witnessing.

This imagery resonates with my analysis of epistemic gatekeeping {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design*}. Just as institutions erect walls of accreditation, classification, and silence, the fissure represents the unavoidable vulnerability of these structures. Doubt, here, is not an error but an opening.

Synthesis

Poem and image converge on the insight that doubt is the first condition of emancipation. It lacks rank, title, or institutional form, but its absence would leave only suffocating closure. Doubt is the breath that unsettles — not to destroy, but to create space where new thought may pass.

Within *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* {Kahl 2025}, institutions reproduce compliance by sealing knowledge through accreditation and gatekeeping. Doubt interrupts this economy: it refuses the exchange of conformity for recognition. The fissure in the wall mirrors this refusal, letting in light that committees cannot sanction.

Fiduciary openness requires that epistemic authorities protect this fissure. As I have argued {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties*}, doubt is not a weakness but a fiduciary virtue. To deny it is to breach fiduciary duty; to embrace it is to cultivate conditions for agency.

Together, poem and image insist that beginnings often take the form of nothing — a crack, a breath, a hesitation. But that 'nothing', as the poem concludes, is enough. In the multimodal sequence, Doubt serves as the pivot: the moment where systems tremble, silence is pierced, and the possibility of emancipation is glimpsed.



6. Auto-Emancipation



When the Slave Becomes Free

Epistemic Self-Emancipation

I did not break my chains —
they fell away on their own,
one morning
when I ceased to ask.

I had carried their language
like a name given at birth:

heavy with expectations,
worn by centuries,
foreign to my voice.

I was on my knees
in a library

where forbidden truths
were read aloud in whispers.

But one day,
the master did not come.
And the silence —
that silence —
opened within me a country
where I could walk upright.

Since then,
I think without a guard,
I write without a cage,
I know without authority.

I am the slave
that no one freed —
for I rose
before they could say:
you may.

•

Essay Commentary

The poem *When the Slave Becomes Free* narrates a moment of liberation that is neither granted by authority nor achieved by violent rupture, but realised through refusal. The speaker declares: ‘I did not break my chains — they fell away on their own, one morning when I ceased to ask’. Emancipation is not bestowed by permission; it arises from the cessation of dependency.

This insight resonates with Frantz Fanon’s account of decolonial emancipation: the colonised subject becomes free not by waiting for recognition but by seizing it through self-assertion {Fanon 1963}. Similarly, Michel Foucault described critique as ‘the art of not being governed quite so much’ — an active practice of refusal {Foucault 1997}. Here, the act of not asking is a form of epistemic critique: the rejection of clientelist bargains in which autonomy is exchanged for recognition.

Within Epistemic Clientelism Theory {Kahl 2025}, the figure of the slave embodies the condition of epistemic dependency: knowledge mediated by masters, committees, or institutions. Liberation occurs when this dependency is broken not externally, but internally, by refusing to continue the exchange. In fiduciary terms, this is the reclamation of epistemic agency from authorities that have breached their duties of care, loyalty, and openness {Kahl 2025, *Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}.

The poem also recalls my work on silence as epistemic space. In *The Silent Tree* (2025), I argued that silence is not always imposed subjugation; it can become fertile ground for refusal and agency. In the poem, the silence left by the absent master opens ‘a country where I could walk upright’. Silence, once weaponised to enforce obedience, is revalued as a condition of freedom.

This revaluation is central to fiduciary openness: to recognise that authority cannot own truth, but only safeguard the space where truth can appear. The slave who becomes free does so not by awaiting the master’s consent but by inhabiting silence as possibility.

Image Commentary

The accompanying image captures this moment of emancipation with surreal clarity. In the foreground, broken chains lie discarded on the ground, unforced yet decisive. A solitary figure, clothed in rags, stands upright, gazing toward a horizon painted in fiery oranges and purples. Behind him, the ruins of columns and bookshelves signify the collapse of the old order — libraries and institutions now empty husks.

The path ahead winds toward a monumental frame, a doorway standing alone at the top of a staircase. Beyond it lies open sky, filled with stars, feathers, and a winged book in flight — emblems of thought, fragility, and freedom. On the ground lies a discarded mask, symbol of performance and imposed identity.

The composition dramatises the poem’s claim: emancipation is not a gift but a self-affirmation. The figure does not walk away from chains in rebellion; he simply stands, and in standing, the chains fall.

The ruins emphasise that institutions of knowledge can collapse into hollow shells; freedom is found not within them but beyond their walls.

Synthesis

Poem and image converge on a radical thesis: epistemic emancipation is auto-affranchissement — self-emancipation. It is not conferred by masters, professors, or committees. It begins when the subject ceases to ask for permission.

This insight reframes both clientelism and fiduciary duty. In clientelist systems, autonomy is surrendered in exchange for protection. But the poem's speaker embodies the refusal of that bargain: no recognition, no seal, no authority is needed. Freedom is realised by reclaiming silence, discarding masks, and walking toward an open horizon.

Fanon teaches that decolonisation requires the colonised to seize freedom rather than await it. Foucault reminds us that critique is refusal. My own framework insists that fiduciary openness obliges institutions to protect, not foreclose, such refusals. *When the Slave Becomes Free* makes this philosophical argument poetic and visual.

The multimodal unit thus performs emancipation: the falling chains, the discarded mask, the silent figure who chooses to rise. It insists that the first act of epistemic freedom is not recognition but refusal — to stop asking, and to begin walking.

•

7. The Manifesto



Toward a City of Free Thinkers

The Manifesto of the Unshackled Mind

I was not given my truths:
they were handed to me already polished,
ready-made,
like handcuffs disguised as jewels.

I learned to refuse them.
To break the logic of ready-to-think.

To forge my own questions
rather than inherit dead answers.

Each doubt is a seed of freedom.
Each refusal, a silent victory.
And in the shadows, I know
others already breathe this same air.

•

I do not seek the warmth of dogmas
nor the safety of the herd.
I walk exposed,
but every step is mine —
and may open a path for another.

The guardians of knowledge
watch me with suspicion.
They see a wheel that swerves,
a gear gone astray.

But I am not a gear.
I am the crack in their clock,
the wind that unsettles their dials.

•

I know the price of dissent:
the silence that falls,
the doors that close,
the smiles that stiffen.

But I also know its reward:
the widening horizon,
the sharp breath of heights,
the joy of a word no one dared to say.

•

To think freely
is not to think against all things,
but to think without master,

without pact of submission,
without debt to idols.

It is to breathe deeply
in the open space
of truths still mute.

•

A day will come
when our isolated refusals
will ignite one another
like sparks becoming flame.

Then will arise a city —
without walls or thrones,
where masters will have no pupils
but equals in quest.

Each voice will carry its doubt
not to sell it
but to offer it.
Each silence will be fertile,
not imposed.

There, libraries will no longer be
prisons of paper,
but gardens of many paths.
Institutions will cease demanding
the price of submission
and be answerable instead
to the knowledge they claim to serve.

And we,
walkers of uncertainty,
keepers of clearings,
will build not a tower
but a square —
open to winds,
to tongues,
to truths yet unborn.

•

So rise.
Consent no longer to dictated evidence.

Take your silence —
let it thunder.
Take your breath —
let it topple walls.

Bring down a single certainty,
and a hundred possibilities will open.

The city does not await tomorrow.
It begins here.

•

Essay Commentary

The poem *The Manifesto of Unfettered Thought* functions as both culmination and call to action. It refuses truths that arrive as ‘handcuffs disguised as jewels’ and insists that freedom begins with the rejection of ready-made thought. Doubt becomes a ‘seed of freedom’, refusal a ‘silent victory’. Here the earlier themes of dependency, silence, accreditation, and self-emancipation converge: thought is liberated only when it breaks with clientelist bargains of recognition.

This is the point at which *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* reaches its normative conclusion {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*; Kahl 2025, *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism*}. Clientelism stabilises institutions by exchanging autonomy for approval. The manifesto rejects this bargain outright. It envisions a community — ‘the city of free thinkers’ — where authority is not sovereign, but shared in fiduciary trust.

The poem’s language echoes Elizabeth Anderson’s conception of epistemic democracy, where legitimacy arises not from hierarchy but from inclusive deliberation {Anderson 2006}. It also resonates with Antonia Darder’s insistence that emancipatory pedagogy requires courage and solidarity, not conformity {Darder 2017}. To think freely is not to think against everything, but to think without master, without pact of submission, without debt to idols.

The manifesto also carries a juridical charge. In *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design* (2025), I argued that institutions engineer epistemic exclusion. The manifesto names these exclusions — the locked doors, the imposed silences — and turns them into calls for refusal. In fiduciary terms, it demands that institutions relinquish their posture of epistemic monarchism and reconstitute themselves as stewards of the commons.

Finally, the closing Appel shifts from description to exhortation: ‘So rise. Consent no longer to dictated evidence.’ Here, thought is no longer an individual exercise but a collective act. Refusal multiplies; sparks ignite into fire. The manifesto insists that epistemic freedom is not deferred: ‘The city does not await tomorrow. It begins here.’

Image Commentary

The accompanying image captures this moment of emancipation with surreal clarity. In the foreground, broken chains lie discarded on the ground, unforced yet decisive. A solitary figure, clothed in rags, stands upright, gazing toward a horizon painted in fiery oranges and purples. Behind him, the ruins of columns and bookshelves signify the collapse of the old order — libraries and institutions now empty husks.

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Synthesis

Poem and image converge on a radical thesis: epistemic emancipation is self-emancipation. It is not conferred by masters, professors, or committees. It begins when the subject ceases to ask for permission.

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The multimodal unit thus performs emancipation: the falling chains, the discarded mask, the silent figure who chooses to rise. It insists that the first act of epistemic freedom is not recognition but refusal — to stop asking, and to begin walking.



Epilogue

After the Theatres

The journey traced across these seven theatres began in dependency. The first steps were hesitant: the student under authority, unsure whether to ask, bound by the rules of recognition and the fear of misstep. The university loomed as theatre, accreditation as ritual, silence as useful. At each stage, knowledge appeared not as free inquiry but as managed performance, sealed and stamped, guarded by roles and ranks.

Yet cracks appeared. A question that did not fit. A silence that shifted from subjugation to space. A doubt that slipped under the door like air. These fissures destabilised the edifice, exposing its fragility. What seemed solid was revealed as theatre: masks, mirrors, rituals of recognition. The walls were not impregnable; they were porous.

From there the path bent toward emancipation. Chains fell away not because they were broken, but because the subject ceased to ask for permission. Silence, once weaponised, became fertile. Writing, once submission, became creation. The odyssey culminated in the manifesto — not the solitary voice of one thinker, but the collective horizon of a city of free thinkers.

This cycle is personal, but not private. It is my odyssey, but it is also structural. For what it narrates are not singular experiences but systemic logics: epistemic clientelism, the conditional bargain of autonomy for recognition {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*}. Institutions stabilise themselves by extracting deference. Professors, committees, journals, platforms — all act as patrons, distributing approval in return for compliance. Knowledge becomes a clientelist economy.

The consequence is epistemic injustice: not simply the silencing of voices, but the very design of systems that render dissent unreadable, unpublishable, unserious {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design*}. Theatres of accreditation exclude precisely what they ought to protect: doubt, refusal, beginnings. This is not accidental; it is structural.

Against this order, I have argued for fiduciary openness {Kahl 2025, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}. Epistemic authorities bear fiduciary duties of loyalty, care, and accountability — not to sovereign power, but to truth itself. Authority is legitimate only when circumscribed by these duties. Where they are absent, we encounter epistemic monarchism: institutions performing as emperors, cloaking violence in ritual.

The cycle also points toward epistemocracy {Kahl 2025, *Epistemocracy in Higher Education*}: a form of governance where plurality is safeguarded structurally, where institutions act as fiduciary stewards rather than gatekeepers. The city of free thinkers is not utopia, but metaphor for this horizon. It names

a polity where dissent is not punished, where silence is not coerced, where thought circulates as trust rather than property.

The form of this work matters. It is not merely that poetry, prose, and image accompany one another. They enact epistemic plurality. Each mode refuses to be subordinate: the poem enacts, the prose situates, the image exposes. Their alternation is methodological: to resist epistemic domestication, philosophy must refuse monomodality. This cycle performs what it prescribes.

The epilogue is not a conclusion but a pause. The city of free thinkers is not built; it is becoming. Its construction depends on acts of refusal, sparks of dissent, voices that slip frames. The duty of institutions is not to extinguish these sparks but to shelter them — to act as fiduciary custodians of plurality.

If there is a lesson in this odyssey, it is simple: emancipation begins not with recognition but with refusal. To cease asking for permission is to loosen chains. To embrace doubt is to open space. To write without awaiting approval is to create. These gestures are fragile, often invisible, but they are enough.

And if there is a call, it is modest: breathe together. For thought lives where silence becomes fertile, where cracks let in air, where sparks find oxygen. The city does not await tomorrow; it begins wherever a voice dares to doubt, wherever a silence shelters refusal, wherever truth enters uninvited.

Here ends the theatre. But the journey — ours, not mine alone — continues.

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Author Contact

ORCID: <<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1616-4843>>
Email: <peter.kahl@juris.vc>
LinkedIn: <<https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-kahl-law/>>
GitHub: <<https://github.com/Peter-Kahl>>
PhilPapers: <<https://philpeople.org/profiles/peter-kahl>>
Google Scholar: <<https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=z-yfRRYAAAAJ>>
Blog: <<https://pkahl.substack.com/>>

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