

# Epistemic Trouble: Fanon, Aesthetic Discipline and Hermeneutical Enclosure

Kevin Klein-Cardena

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

“Is hermeneutical injustice sometimes so damaging that it cramps the very development of self?”<sup>1</sup> Note in Miranda Fricker’s question in her landmark *Epistemic Injustice* the choice of verb, *to cramp*: the word strikes with somatic poignancy, as if, prior to its accommodation into an epistemic architecture, there is just this quasi-bodily force: an involuntary contraction of one’s capacity to interpret, to make intelligible. Then cramping also carries that other meaning, of crowding out of personal space; perhaps in this context, of being crowded out of one’s interpretations. This essay suggests a direct connection between hermeneutical injustice and such a dynamic of cramping and crowding. I explore this dynamic in terms of what I will refer to as hermeneutical enclosure, approached from two distinct yet perhaps complementary angles. First, I draw on Frantz Fanon’s depiction in *Black Skin, White Masks* of the way in which racialization severs one’s relationship to providing one’s own accounts and rationales. I suggest that Fanon offers an implicit account of hermeneutical enclosure, wherein one’s conduct is preempted by another’s interpretations such that behaviors are pejoratively assigned a fixed meaning in advance. Next, I draw on managerial experience in a refugee-serving education center to consider whether everyday encounters with school discipline may be sites of this sort of hermeneutical enclosure. This question engages the lens of everyday aesthetics to consider the influence of aesthetic discipline upon loss of intelligibility. The essay concludes by calling for a reappraisal of troublemaking as a potential site for enacting hermeneutical disruption and repairs.

Fanon’s quasi-phenomenological narrative in the fifth chapter of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” follows a Black Antillean narrator on his journey to France, the mythic metropole for the former French colonies, where he recounts his “attempt to make myself known.”<sup>2</sup> In spite of white French claims to racial liberalism, however, the

narrator learns through everyday interactions that he is unable to carry out this fundamental task; much the opposite, he finds that his overdetermined blackness everywhere precedes him, rendering him at every turn the passive object rather than the active subject of knowledge and interpretation: “The Other, the white man...had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories.”<sup>3</sup> Within this tapestry, the narrator rediscovers his subjecthood as one that at best is troubling and saturated, weighed down “by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning *Y a bon Banania*.”<sup>4</sup> A profound *disorientation*, bodily as well as epistemic, immediately follows.<sup>5</sup>

What is more, his attempts to wrangle free from this pre-woven net cast over him only lead into traps. Where speaking the pidgins and accented French common in Antillean communities justifies condescension, perfecting a Parisian dialect is looked on with suspicion and responded to condescendingly all the same; where being uneducated is a confirmation of the Black intellectual inferiority, an educated Black person is the charming exception who proves the rule meanwhile walking the thin line of precarious respectability in the white Other’s eyes; if not threatening negro, then noble savage; and so on: “The white man is all around me; . . . All this whiteness burns me to a cinder. . . . Where should I put myself now?” When the narrator’s attempt to collect himself from the “dispersions of [his] being” is momentarily achieved by insulting a French woman complimenting his looks *for a Negro*, he finds that his momentary triumph is quickly reabsorbed into the matrix of stereotypical black aggression.<sup>6</sup> To the conundrum of his own troubling constitution recalling Du Bois’ famous unasked and unanswerable question in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “How does it feel to be a problem?” an intelligible response cannot be put forth.<sup>7</sup>

Against this entrapment, Fanon’s narrator stubbornly searches for an understanding of blackness as a source of epistemic agency. Taking to literature and to history, he is heartened by the reencounter with pre-colonial African civilizations, their intellectual discoveries and monuments, complex institutions and deep prehistories. He is moved by the kernel of black singularity hailed in works by Césaire, Senghor and others in the black poetic tradition; by the

self-confident image in these works of the black subject as the bearer of deep rhythm and libidinal spontaneity such as has become calcified in European subjectivity. Yet over and over, he finds that these apparent moments of black agency have been interpreted in advance as mere regressions, or holdovers from infantile phases of development whose purpose is finally to rejuvenate white society and help it connect to its past. These fresh wounds reach an apotheosis of despair in reencountering Sartre, Fanon's contemporary and intellectual kin. Following Sartre's pathbreaking analysis of ethnic bigotry in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Fanon's narrator eagerly picks up Sartre's *Black Orpheus* to find in its driving thesis the black subject negated in the service of a universal racial abolition, reduced to a stage in a dialectic, reactively concluding, "and there you have it; I did not create a meaning for myself; the meaning was already there, waiting."<sup>8</sup>

Fricker uses the term hermeneutical deficit to describe the absence of a means of making sense of or communicating about an experience. It is a form of epistemic injustice in that it presents a barrier to self-knowledge as well as a barrier to becoming known by another party. Like other forms of injustice, hermeneutical power is regulated by social power, such that "the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly," resulting in "lacunae where the name of a distinctive social experience should be."<sup>9</sup> The antidotes to these lacunae are what Fricker calls *collective hermeneutical resources*, or "meanings that just about anyone can draw upon and expect those meanings to be understood across social space by just about anyone else."<sup>10</sup> Fanon's narrator's account of trying and failing to "make myself known" as a black subject provides a patent case of hermeneutical injustice. Yet instead of being solely an account of hermeneutical deficit, it is first and foremost an account of a kind of hermeneutical surplus: the knower is prevented from putting forward new self-interpretations not principally by an absence of means to do so, but rather by an overbearing matrix of already-formulated interpretations that get there first and ascribe a previously existing meaning to each new behavior, leaving scarce space for the development of the knower's own accounts. This pattern of usurpation reveals what it might mean to understand Fanon's overdetermination from the outside as an example

of hermeneutical enclosure. Hermeneutical enclosure is logically antecedent to hermeneutical deficits in that it suppresses the emergence of distinctively new interpretations of the conduct of marginalized subjects yet manifests primarily through saturation rather than through lacunae or gaps.

Let us cut abruptly to a very different scene. It is Tuesday afternoon at an intensive, afterschool learning center in dense diasporic and refugee community in the Midwest. Again, the usual suspects arrive chronically late, wander from their desks, 'distract' and 'bother' other students, avoid reading, conceal work, insist on art projects, ignore or talk back to instructors. Many of these minute issues will snowball over the course of the next weeks into major disciplinary problems. There is the periodic accidental murmur from one of them about sleep deprivation due to overload of responsibilities or an episode of violence at home. Otherwise, the only utterances that these students can be counted on to repeat: *I am lazy; reading is boring; I hate school; I'm going to be kicked out.* On one of these occasions, a precocious sixth grader is separated from roughhouse playfighting with her cousin, stunning staff by snapping back: "*But this is how we communicate!*"

José Medina writes in his essay "Varieties of Hermeneutical Injustice" that "meanings and interpretations that have a more limited and precarious circulation" are "the site of hermeneutical struggles, struggles in which there are interpretative achievements and break-throughs . . . but also struggles in which people become silenced, misunderstood, and hermeneutically marginalized."<sup>11</sup> These are nothing less than struggles to be known; to have the rationales of one's conduct understood. In my capacity as an educational director tasked with working with these students and supporting staff at this center, it appears a short jump to assert the same of these students' refractory efforts to communicate. I quickly grow accustomed to finding in student misbehaviors an underlying demand for the humanizing integrity of social contact, diversity of activity, rest and replenishment. What is more, I recognize that the negative identifications sustained through mischief, though destructive, allow for the possibility of a student to be recognized by adult staff, even if pejoratively as a *bad child*; after all, an injured name may be better than none at all. Moreover, as D.W. Winnicott

notes in his article “The Antisocial Tendency,” the latter counterintuitively implies hope on the part of the child in the capacity of the environment to provide a good it has withdrawn.<sup>12</sup> However, given that these possible subtexts are not legibly communicated, I struggle to provide hermeneutical tools that children and adults can nonjudgmentally pick up and wield to name lived experience, despairing especially at the steepness of the unlearning curve that seems to be in the way of non-pejoratively naming student experiences of distress in the classroom. At the brink of bringing students’ concerns into language, these seem to slip back through our fingers and find only distorted somatic expression, too often leading back to trouble.

Whereas many of the irritated misbehaviors I observe are accompanied by half-spoken utterances and semi-articulated inner experiences, I gather a sense that they are also accompanied by a sensory disorientation in the classroom—a feeling of being at odds with the demands on perception presented there. Frequently, wandering, disruptive and agitated students all convey a latent discomfort, a nagging awareness that there is something inside of them that is not being attended to. Conversely, they are not attending to the myriad aesthetic demands issuing from the environment: alien rules about where to put your body, your limbs, your eyes, and in what energy state—almost always passive, sedate; expectations for what volume level to speak at, what to do and what not to do with your voice. Some students have adapted to these mores quickly, while others continue finding these explicit and implicit codes abstruse, unnatural and hard to follow. It is among these students that petty but snowballing infractions are most frequent. These students more often than others also give me the impression that they have something to say but cannot refer to it—some creeping need that we as a learning community are not addressing. It is as though progressively, as Fanon would have it, each of these children “encounters difficulties elaborating his body schema.”<sup>13</sup> On Fanon’s account, such difficulties arise when “the image of one’s body is solely negating” and thus unable to enter fully into a dialectic between the body and the world, as is true of his narrator’s experience on arrival to France.<sup>14</sup> Relegated to the aesthetic dark, the body out of place and time quickens loss of intelligibility on both

aesthetic and epistemic fronts.

The aesthetics of bodily comportment has also received treatment within everyday aesthetics. Yuriko Saito, for instance, explores the way not only our actions and movements in the world, but also the way in which we go about them informs their ethical impact. Through our manner of acting, particularly toward others, we inflect our interactions with social value, such as care, tenderness, respect, attention, or their negative counterparts of neglect, hostility, disrespect and ignorance. Attending to their perceived relational benefits, Saito espouses normative canons of behavioral aesthetics threading through etiquette, gentility and manners. In the learning center, it is doubtless true that these positive ethical-aesthetic values are circulated in interactions among students, between students and staff, and between all of us and our common educational environment.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, my everyday interactions with misbehaving students also bring to the fore the negative potential of aesthetic regulation in the classroom. Our classroom etiquette, far from being an innocuous vehicle of social harmony, in these cases seems to work more like a weapon aimed against the expressive styles and aesthetic propensities of those students deemed disruptive. I need only think of Aziz who has come to understand himself as a troublemaker with each reprimand that his sonorous, wandering voice attracts for infringing upon the hegemonic silence of study, or Ahmed, whose drumming fingers and roaming limbs over time have attracted to him only the stigma of a student who won't sit still and pay attention, to recall the blowback of imposed aesthetic norms.<sup>16</sup> Following Arnold Berleant's work on negative aesthetics, or "the underside of beauty," and Katya Mandoki's application of everyday aesthetics to the patterning of sensory life by what she terms the "school aesthetic matrix," I understand Aziz, Ahmed and other misbehaving students as caught within what might be called the *negative aesthetic matrix* of the classroom.<sup>17</sup>

The conflict in aesthetic disposition between school environments and these students subjects them chronically to what, in a term perhaps analogous to Medina's notion of *hermeneutical harm*, Berleant calls *aesthetic harm*.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, hermeneutical and aesthetic marginalization here seem to condition one another,

in real time making students outsiders to positive intelligibility and positive perception. Gustavo Dalaqua explores the relationship between aesthetic limitation and the oppression, following Augusto Boal into an exploration not only of the ways that “bodies are oppressed,” but furthermore how bodily oppression both “constrains the knowledge and aesthetic perception of the body” and “harms [the oppressed’s] capacity to know themselves and their desires.”<sup>19</sup> Boal leads Dalaqua to conclude that aesthetic capabilities are intimately interwoven with hermeneutical capabilities, and marginalization in one domain frequently crosses into the other.

The sonorous voice always getting Aziz in trouble, Sadika’s roughhouse play and other aesthetic indiscretions, which misbehaved students are commonly culpable of, cannot be said to be mere results of youthful zeal and individual difference, although these factors play a part. The loud, indiscrete, physically emotive and boisterous ways of being of (especially troublesome) students also reflect the expressive styles and aesthetic cultures of the students’ communities writ large. The quieter, more moderated tones, manners, modes of socialization, dialects and styles of speech promoted in their school environments, on the other hand, are more common in white, middle-class American culture. Critics such as Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux deconstruct aesthetic normativity:

[aesthetic normativity] sustains the culture of dominant groups while marginalizing and silencing the cultures of subordinate groups of students. This is evident in the ways in which different forms of linguistic and cultural competency, whether they are manifested in a specific way of talking, dressing, acting, thinking, or presenting oneself, are accorded a privileged status in schools.<sup>20</sup>

Blackness itself is perhaps the most salient among the aesthetic characteristics that set certain students up for differential treatment. To this effect, Fanon offers the term *epidermalization* to refer to his narrator’s realization that his attempts at self-definition must contend with being overdetermined from the outside. The further fact that epidermalization is downstream from processes of acculturation and colonial encroachment spurs Fanon to make the

remarkable statement that “the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, this aesthetic outside exceeds skin alone and proceeds onto other domains of aesthetic conduct. Bell hooks for instance argues that dismissal of vernaculars and accented speech in academia reflects a white supremacist culture that “uses standard English as a weapon to silence and censor” students and academics of color.<sup>22</sup> Bettina Love’s discussion of a harrowing case of school disciplinary violence enacted against black children suggests that underlying this extreme case is the overwhelmingly quotidian violence of racial-aesthetical misrecognition: “In Binghamton, N.Y., four 12-year-old Black girls reported they were strip-searched at their school for acting too hyper and giddy in January. School officials likely assumed the girls were on drugs because their Black joy was unrecognizable.”<sup>23</sup> A clue may be supplied by a study conducted by social psychologists Shoshana Jarvis and Jason Okonofua, which identified that “Black students are disciplined more frequently and more severely than White students for the same misbehaviors.”<sup>24</sup> The study found that a main contributing factor in this discrepancy was the increased likelihood that school officials *saw* black students as *troublemakers*. The categorization of a student as a troublemaker can on this score be seen as indicating that the meaning of the student’s behavior is predominantly explained by or even exhausted in this identity, leaving scarce room for spontaneous accounts of her own. Jarvis and Okonofua’s findings are therefore unsurprising given the historical exclusion of black subjects from hermeneutical participation in and through disciplinary school cultures. Love emphasizes the role of such interpretive impositions in perpetuating disciplinary violence, mourning that “school officials continue to *misdiagnose* the spirit murdering happening in their schools every day.”<sup>25</sup>

I will conclude by stepping away from the classroom and returning to themes of hermeneutical struggle by way of a brief detour through trauma, that paradoxical terrain where the unspeakable finds a wayward enunciation. In their book *History Beyond Trauma*, psychoanalysts Francoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière explore the ways in which social catastrophes can trigger discursive silences among survivors which, passed down across generations, reappear episodically as sites of psychiatric illness even in progeny ostensibly distant from



the historical events that triggered them.<sup>26</sup> In response to this observed pattern, Davoine and Gaudillière offer case material attesting to courses of healing centered around filling in this missing social link where discursive lacunae generate nondiscursive symptoms, the latter counterintuitively preserving the impacts of past events. These troublesome episodes thus serve an edifying function by marking the place where a hermeneutical resource is lacking. To this end, the work's subtitle inverts a phrase of Wittgenstein's to arrive at the assertion that, "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one cannot stay silent." By this I take the authors to suggest that trauma produces *something like speech*, irrespective of whether what it has to say is understood. In addition to this first sense related to the psychoanalytic conception of the return of the repressed in psychic life, however, I also hear in this statement a normative plea—a call for conceptual and naming practices capable of granting to the unspeakable an intelligible voice.

What form might such a corrective take? For Fricker, a norm of hermeneutical virtue aims to correct hermeneutical asymmetries by giving charitable hearings to marginally positioned speakers and adjusting credibility judgments in response to the hermeneutical handicap associated with marginal social positioning. Whereas the creation and circulation of collective hermeneutical resources plays an integral part in Fricker's normative vision, in the last instance she states that "the virtue of hermeneutical justice may simply be a matter of *reserving* judgment" as a means of adjusting for differential access to hermeneutical resources.<sup>27</sup> Medina terms this orientation *virtuous listening*.<sup>28</sup> Yet through the example of (particularly willful) white ignorance, Medina applies pressure to Fricker's account toward acknowledging hermeneutical injustice as agentively instantiated by dominantly positioned actors, who are on his account directly implicated in exacerbating harms. This leads Medina to push Fricker's *virtuous listening* in the direction of an orientation of *hermeneutical resistance* entailing the application of epistemic friction to established norms of interpretation in order to aid dissonant voices.<sup>29</sup>

This paper is not interested in taking up the argument regarding whether hermeneutical injustice should be understood as collectively or individually instigated beyond generic appeal to Fanon's account of epidermalization as

simultaneously triggered by individual encounters and maintained by larger structures of intelligibility ultimately corresponding to economic structures.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the paper endorses Medina's call for hermeneutical resistance, meanwhile challenging the supposition shared by Fricker and Medina that hermeneutical injustice ought to be paradigmatically characterized by deficit or "a paucity of concepts."<sup>31</sup> While interpretive absences doubtless play a significant role, overemphasis on this facet of hermeneutical injustice leads to an underappraisal of processes of saturation and usurpation of the kind Fanon articulates as an excess of ready-made interpretations spontaneously imposed by those in positions of social and hermeneutical dominance. Recognizing the preponderance of cases marked by hermeneutical enclosure then entails a concept of hermeneutical resistance that takes on the double-form of *hermeneutical disruption or dismantling* of dominant interpretations that saturate the conduct of the marginally positioned and *reparative listening* to accounts that are lost in the mix or underdeveloped as a result of this saturation.

While a fuller unpacking of what could be entailed in these two positions is left for further exploration, educational environments could do worse than begin with the hermeneutical dismantling of the troublemaker category that encloses so much childhood conduct still awaiting a genuine hearing. By regarding misbehaviors as merely antisocial, school disciplinary cultures have avoided confronting the ways in which they themselves may be sources of antisociality and foreclose the possibility of raising to intelligibility students' tenuous attempts at gathering voice. Could the reason for this foreclosure be that a reckoning with school's own antisociality is frequently the masked message behind students' wayward interventions? If so, a corrective to this harm ought to attend to the site of trouble as precisely that space where embryonic understandings are crowded out by hermeneutically saturated climates, and therefore require both disruptions and elaborations. Additionally, alongside Dalaqua's insight that "since they are mutually reinforcing, aesthetic injustice and epistemic injustice ought to be resisted in tandem," more attention could be devoted to the role of aesthetic norms in conditioning hermeneutical marginalization.<sup>32</sup> This is consonant with Medina's recognition that practices of "epistemic disobedience"

may require the multiplication of “expressive styles.”<sup>233</sup> Such suggestions for hermeneutical disruption paired with reparative, virtuous listening supplement the recognition of a more general need to develop and circulate collective hermeneutical resources. Taking these together into educational contexts can broaden a sense of the stakes and components involved in dignifying children’s experiences of distress in school—especially the experiences of children who transgress and, of these, particularly students of marginalized identities whose bodies and behaviors are disproportionately marked for trouble.

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