

# Breathing Through the Epistemic Violence of the Unthinkable Black Experience<sup>1</sup>

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Following up on recent debates on epistemic violence,<sup>2</sup> this paper is an attempt to sketch out how the black lived experience erupts from the epistemic realm and transforms into violently structured relations of racialized subjects. To be able to identify a plausible manner of how to use the term *epistemic violence* in this context, I begin by contrasting *violence* and *injustice* to ask what is gained by declaring certain unjust practices or relationships as violent – epistemic as well as non-epistemic. I then turn to Frantz Fanon's settlement of counter-violence as a *cleansing force* to explicate how the ability to breathe through the epistemic violence of the unthinkable black experience is crucial for the decolonization of the self.

## 1. Differentiating concepts of violence

The German term *Gewalt* (for violence) has many meanings. There are at least two ways to understand *Gewalt*.<sup>3</sup> First, derived from the Latin term *potestas*, since the 17th century it was understood as a necessary tool to constitute and uphold a political order, and to this day, it is the means of securing the established sovereignty of a state and its individuals with (liberal) rights. This application is still common in German when discussing state power (*Staatsgewalt*). But in general, *Gewalt* is used as a derivation from *violencia*, signifying the destructive understanding of violence as the type that destroys an existing order and counts as objectively wrong and corrosive. Today's generally negative usage of violence and its status as legitimate political power render the role of violence in establishing political orders invisible.

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- 1 This essay is a revised transcription of my contribution to the workshop "Epistemic Violence and Injustice in Philosophy" at the Munich School of Philosophy in early December 2022.
  - 2 I am especially referring to the German-speaking context: See Brunner, Claudia: *Epistemische Gewalt. Wissen und Herrschaft in der kolonialen Moderne*, Bielefeld 2020. For specific English-language excerpts, see Claudia Brunner: *Conceptualizing epistemic violence. An interdisciplinary assemblage for IR*, in: *International Politics Reviews* (2021) 1, 193–212.
  - 3 See Brunner: *Epistemische Gewalt*, 18.

Imperialism and colonialism, as well as their violent practices, are foundational for the *Westphalian commonsense* and the modern nation-state.<sup>4</sup> Still liberal societies are mostly described as inherently – or at least normatively – non-violent. Therefore, the destructive understanding of violence must be relinked to the understanding of violence as a constitutive force. A broad conceptual understanding of epistemic violence asks for the conditions under which such non-differentiations, as between the English words *power* and *violence*, or as constitutive vs. destructive, are established. The arbitrariness of such categorizations – as well as the vacancies they bring along – seems to be a keystone of the *Westernized* way of thinking. This is addressed by concepts of decolonization,<sup>5</sup> such as Claudia Brunner's conception of *epistemic violence*. To her, epistemic violence is broadly speaking “rooted in knowledge itself, in its genesis, formation, organization, and effectiveness.”<sup>6</sup> For further clarification on how we can understand epistemic violence, I want to contribute a specific and contextualized understanding concerning the racialized black subject.

For the sake of this argument, I will differentiate between, first, *acts of violence*, second, *structures of violence* (or *violently structured relations*), and third, *experienced violence*.

I aim at a structural understanding of violence which does not cover the common understanding of someone doing violence to somebody else: in such a conception of a *direct form* of violence,<sup>7</sup> a person or an object gets physically hurt or feels pain caused by someone else. My account of epistemic violence excludes violent acts and focuses on *structures of violence* or *violently structured relations* that result in the experience of violence. I think it is not feasible – neither very empowering – to award individuals with the power to hurt someone epistemically. People who use certain practices, such as silencing or other forms of epistemic oppression, may be able to do so because of their positionality, which enables them to speak or act in a certain way, but not because they can unleash violent attacks within the realm of the epistemic. Speech acts may fuel hatred against minoritized groups and lead to physical violence. Still, there is a difference between violence that, in a physical sense,<sup>8</sup> aims

4 See Grovogui, Siba N.: Regimes of Sovereignty. International Morality and the African Condition, in: *European Journal of International Relations* (2002) 3, 315–338, 316.

5 Brunner: *Epistemische Gewalt*, 19, 275. For an explanation of the term *Westernized* see Grosfoguel, Ramón: Epistemic Racism/Sexism, Westernized Universities and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long Sixteenth Century, in: Araújo, Marta/Rodríguez Maeso, Silvia (eds.): *Eurocentrism, Racism and Knowledge. Debates on History and Power in Europe and the Americas*, London 2015, 23–46.

6 Brunner: *Conceptualizing epistemic violence*, 204.

7 See Galtung, Johan: Violence, Peace, and Peace Research, in: *Journal of Peace Research* (1969) 3, 167–191, 170.

8 See Reemtsma, Jan Philipp: *Die Natur der Gewalt als Problem der Soziologie*, Frankfurt/M 2008.

at (re-)moving or destroying a subject's body and something that affects the status of affected persons, what epistemically means hurting them "specifically in their capacity as a knower."<sup>9</sup>

What does the term 'structural' in this context mean? The discourses on social contracts, imagined agreements on a society's moral and political rules, and especially Charles W. Mills' conception of a *racial contract*, offer us a hint. Mills' critique highlights how ideal-type approaches establish race relations since the signatories of the social/racial contract are the beneficiaries.<sup>10</sup> "A partitioned social ontology is therefore created, a universe divided between persons and racial subpersons [...] biologically destined never to penetrate the normative rights ceiling established for them below white persons."<sup>11</sup> Fanon calls this colonial *compartmentalization*,<sup>12</sup> or *Manichaeism*,<sup>13</sup> and W.E.B Du Bois *color-line* – a structural, pre-political setting that shapes the relations between a dominant and an inferior group.<sup>14</sup> The racial contract's meta-agreements apply not only on a political or moral level but also on an epistemological one. To Mills, the setting in which these groups seem incompatible, is constitutive to, as well as upheld by, white ignorance – a peculiar ideology of injustice.

## 2. Contrasting epistemic violence and injustice

It seems paradoxical that, as Vittorio Bufacchi points out, one reason for the equation between violence and injustice was to outsmart a specific theory of justice over others. The influential modern social contract discourse, which Mills reacts to, arose from an area where political violence was omnipresent due to anti-war protests and the civil rights movements in the United States from the 1960s onward. So, liberal theorists linked injustice and violence to valorize their approaches and, against the backdrop of the ethical philosophy of Utilitarianism, helped shape theoretical meanings of violence – mainly as a moral violation of rights.<sup>15</sup> Unjust social contracts result in "a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)."<sup>16</sup>

9 Fricker, Miranda: *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford/New York 2007, 1.

10 See Mills, Charles W.: *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca, NY 1997, 11.

11 *Ibid.*, 16–17.

12 See Fanon, Frantz: *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, NY 2004, 3.

13 *Ibid.*, 51.

14 See Du Bois, W.E.B.: *The Souls of Black folk*, Oxford 2007, 3.

15 See Bufacchi, Vittorio: *Violence and Social Justice*, London 2007, 128–131.

16 Mills: *The Racial Contract*, 18.

Early standpoint theories in the Marxist tradition and later ones in feminist approaches emphasize the positioning of the cognitive agent. Belonging to a social group or living in a particular space or time undermines the claim of universal cognitive standards.<sup>17</sup> Assuming such standards and neglecting social practices and, above all, prevailing power relations evokes epistemic injustice. This phenomenon occurs when the field of knowledge is not equally distributed. The exclusion of certain individuals or groups is “social-structural rather than physico-biological”<sup>18</sup> and results in the presence of partial knowers – individuals or groups who cannot participate equally in acquiring knowledge due to e.g. the abilities or the status (as humans) society attributes them. This affects the way in which we identify certain (violent) acts against marginalized knowers as appropriate or inappropriate.<sup>19</sup> Even more, it explains the widespread ignorance about the lived experience of racialized people.

Let me add one last differentiation before I proceed with alleged structures of violence. My argument is that actions labeled as epistemic violence do not have to be inevitably intentional since epistemic violence operates indirectly and primarily through structures. Rob Nixon distinguishes between *fast* and *slow violence*.<sup>20</sup> *Fast violence* is understood as a local event in space and time, loud and ordinarily spectacular. In contrast, the violence in structures of reality is *slow*. Slow violence is procedural and seemingly passive. Throughout time, it penetrates the structures of reality, becoming banal. For this, I take the basic assumption of postcolonial studies literally and do not understand ‘the’ postcolonial ‘present’ as different from ‘the’ colonial ‘past’.<sup>21</sup> Historical lines connect colonial domination in human relationships structured by slow violence back to racialized hierarchies.

One argument against any understanding of structural violence is that it merely seeks to legitimize the revolt of the disenfranchised,<sup>22</sup> but also that violence cannot be thought of without perpetrators. It is claimed that it is our perception of reality that there is a gap between what is and what should be,<sup>23</sup> in other words the *actual* and the *potential*.<sup>24</sup> The increasing critique of violence aims at disclosing the

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17 See Mills, Charles W.: *White Ignorance*, in: Sullivan, Shannon/Nancy, Tuana (eds.): *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, New York, NY 2007, 13–37, 14–17.

18 *Ibid.*, 20.

19 *Ibid.*, 22.

20 See Nixon, Rob: *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA 2011, 2.

21 See Hall, Stuart: *When Was “the Post-colonial”?* Thinking at the Limit [1996], in: McLennan, Gregor (ed.): *Selected Writings on Marxism*, Durham, NC 2021, 293–315.

22 See Baberowski, Jörg: *Räume der Gewalt*, Frankfurt/M 2015, 114.

23 See *ibid.*, 117.

24 See Galtung: *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, 168.

violence that is rendered invisible in this way. Injustice here means violating somebody's body *and* dignity,<sup>25</sup> which Newton Garver formulates as an essential part of a scholastic understanding of a person's natural rights as well as within the liberal paradigm. This reflects today's day-to-day understanding, in which violence and injustice are highly interconnected. We speak about violence as morally deficient. It "is tempting to rename acts of injustice as acts of violence; indeed, this polemical move is popular amongst those who want to emphasize the brutality and immorality of injustice."<sup>26</sup> Thus, equating structural forms of violence with an individual approach to social justice is a slippery slope that one needs to be aware of when formulating arguments about structural dynamics.<sup>27</sup> An example: The individual approach to injustice is also present in the privilege discourses, which have led us to believe that specific discriminatory actions can be avoided by reflecting on one's privileges within society. By replacing the term privilege with *license* or *right*, the picture changes because unjust social structures must be questioned,<sup>28</sup> mainly how these structures are constituted for them to allow specific individuals or groups to act in a way that violates others. Talking about rights instead of privilege sheds light on the efforts of social movements such as the "political actions of women [...] committed to equality that shifted mechanisms of power sufficiently for women to access institutions that historically had excluded them."<sup>29</sup> Individually giving up a privilege in a liberal gesture of goodwill or claiming *color blindness* is not the same as aiming to change a system or its structures, which are currently allowing specific individuals or groups to act in bad faith.<sup>30</sup> Racialized slavery, European colonialism, and segregation of blacks are interwoven examples of the systematic proliferation of hierarchies that perpetrate the insincere violation of humans' basic rights.<sup>31</sup> The conditions of possibility of these violations are structural.

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25 See Garver, Newton: What Violence is, in: Bierman, Arthur K./Gould, James A. (eds.): *Philosophy for a New Generation*, New York, NY 1970, 359–370, 361.

26 Bufacchi: *Violence and Social Justice*, 145.

27 See Galtung: *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, 171.

28 Gordon, Lewis R.: *Fear of Black Consciousness*, London 2022, 103.

29 *Ibid.*, 111.

30 Bad faith means allowing them to lie to themselves, or: to make yourself believe you have the unquestionable license to act in violation of the integrity of others, see Lewis R. Gordon: *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, Amherst, NY 1995.

31 See Mbembe, Achille: *Critique of Black Reason*, Durham, NC 2017, 35.

### 3. The unthinkable black experience

Kristie Dotson frames epistemic injustices within three orders of exclusion.<sup>32</sup> Oppression of the first order concerns what Miranda Fricker calls testimonial injustice,<sup>33</sup> it is when “prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word.”<sup>34</sup> Oppression of the second order are problems of insufficient epistemic resources.<sup>35</sup> Fricker calls this hermeneutical injustice caused by structural bias. She addresses collective forms of social understanding,<sup>36</sup> i.e., the prevailing understandings and available resources for communicating the experiences of social groups. Even affected groups cannot understand their experiences to a certain extent. For example, societies in which words to describe sexual abuse are still to be found for affected persons to be able to communicate their experiences. Second-order oppression, such as Fricker’s hermeneutical injustice or Mills’ concept of *white ignorance*,<sup>37</sup> are non-structural and structural. For Fricker,<sup>38</sup> the predominant understandings and available resources result from social power relations. José Medina suggests that Fricker’s context-sensitive conceptualization of hermeneutic injustice must be expanded to avoid a diffusion of responsibility.<sup>39</sup> Medina does not want to leave individuals and groups out of their hermeneutic responsibility and argues that due to the heterogeneity of social groups and polyphonic public spheres, experiences are always somehow communicable.<sup>40</sup> Unlike Fricker, it is not the available hermeneutic resources due to social power relations that are crucial but the struggles for hermeneutic hegemonies in which knowledge of the abstract experiences of marginalized individuals and groups is displaced. Even though Charles Mills also

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32 See Dotson, Kristie: Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression, in: *Social Epistemology* (2014) 2, 115–138.

33 *Ibid.*, 123.

34 Fricker. *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.

35 See Dotson: *Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression*, 126.

36 See Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice*, 148.

37 See Mills, Charles W.: *White Ignorance and Hermeneutical Injustice. A Comment on Medina and Fricker*, in: *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3 (2013) 1, 38–43.

38 See Fricker, Miranda: *How is hermeneutical injustice related to ‘white ignorance’? Reply to José Medina’s “Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities”*, in: *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (2013) 2, 49–53.

39 See Medina, José: *Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism. Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities*, in: *Social Epistemology* (2012) 2, 201–220.

40 See Medina, José: *Varieties of hermeneutical injustice*, in: Kidd, Ian James/Medina, José/Pohlhaus, Gaile Jr. (eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, London 2019, 41–53, 42 f.

stresses that structures matter, to him, this wishful ignorance plays a critical role in upholding hermeneutical injustice.<sup>41</sup>

Most importantly for now, Kristie Dotson identifies a third order of exclusion,<sup>42</sup> which, unlike the first- and second-order problems, cannot be solved within the existing epistemic system. They cannot be described using the resources of the hegemonic epistemic system. Unlike issues of testimony and problems of shared resources, these exclusions root in the deficits of the epistemic system itself. Third-order oppression is impossible to manage because it cannot be recognized as problematic by the knowers of the system.

I will solely speak of epistemic violence when dealing with irreducible oppressions of the third order.<sup>43</sup> This approach stresses that “the biggest obstacle to epistemic liberation [...] is that our shared epistemic resources are themselves *inadequate* for understanding their inadequacy.”<sup>44</sup> Fanon’s writings on the black experience embrace on this, as Lewis R. Gordon reminds us:

Black experience should not exist since blacks should not have a point of view. Nonetheless, black experience is all that should exist since a black’s subjective life should not be able to transcend itself to the level of the intersubjective or the social.<sup>45</sup>

Race is arbitrary and artificial, yet it has tangible consequences. Being black is a product of dehumanization and the epistemological ramifications are a double challenge. The initial challenge resides in rendering the racialized subject relatable – a task not intended to fulfill. Confronting the unjust attribution of cognitive capabilities and the alleged absence of epistemic resources, as existentialist, Fanon reinforces the first-person perspective of the black subject, which is in the act of encountering an epistemic system wherein intersubjectivity for it is deemed beyond reach.

The second challenge is on the meta level. It is not just the inability of the system to acknowledge the black experience but the inability to explain the failure that constitutes this exclusion in an epistemic system that proposes to be universally valid. This inability is the embodiment of a third-order exclusion. It is embedded into the

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41 See Bain, Zara: Mills’s account of white ignorance: Structural or non-structural?, in: *Theory and Research in Education* (2023) 1, 18–32, 21 f.

42 See Dotson: *Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression*, 148.

43 *Ibid.*, 132.

44 See Bailey, Alison: *The Unlevel Knowing Field. An Engagement with Dotson’s Third-Order Epistemic Oppression*, in: *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collectiv* (2014) 10, 62–68, 66.

45 Gordon, Lewis R.: *What Fanon Said. A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, New York, NY 2015, 148.

system itself and constitutive to the system. Afro-pessimism makes this point predominantly clear. “Blacks are not Human subjects but are instead structurally inert props”<sup>46</sup> of European political thought and action. This makes the excluded black experience, in a sense, eternal within European thought because the figure of the black as the other or the subaltern is a necessary backdrop, a meta-aporia, for its existence. Only a demarcation from it makes the description of what it means to be a human being possible. The black experience is locked within itself and is not relatable. This logic of enclosure, the words of Achille Mbembe,<sup>47</sup> affects the social status and the relationships of the racialized. This is because the subjects of the black experience are, within the given epistemic system, not recognizable as equal knowers and as persons.

To summarize, epistemic violence can, therefore, be further narrowed down to the violation of the integrity of a person and their capacities as a person through unjust structural premises. These shape human relationships between the dominant and the inferior based on historically grown epistemic injustices constituting the (given) epistemic system. The structural (dys-)functions materialize as the lived experience of the marginalized subject. Lived experience means the process in which the subject gains consciousness about themselves and their alienated reality.<sup>48</sup> The inferior subject lives in structured relations – constituted by violence – with human beings who are structurally granted a higher value within the shared epistemic system, which also legitimizes the unjust evaluation of specific actions against the inferior.

#### 4. Fanon’s self-violence: Bringing back the person

Epistemic violence is about dehumanization as well as it is about decolonization.<sup>49</sup> Against third-order oppression, Dotson articulates epistemic resilience that “concerns the scope of the domain for stability and the magnitude of disturbance required to motivate significant change.”<sup>50</sup> Fanon reflects on this and gives us a reason to focus on a narrow term of epistemic violence.

Fanon’s broad understanding of violence is fueled by the understanding that colonization sparks a specific type of violence with “a physical and a psychological component.”<sup>51</sup> To Fanon, the colonial, and therefore the post-colonial regime, is a regime

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46 Wilderson III., Frank B.: *Afropessimism*, New York, NY 2020, 15.

47 See Mbembe: *Critique of Black Reason*, 35.

48 Gordon: *What Fanon Said*, 47.

49 See Garver: *What Violence is*, 361.

50 Dotson: *Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression*, 132.

51 Bufacchi: *Violence and Social Justice*, 169.

instituted by violence. As we already learned, the constitution of an order, as well as its duration, occurs through violence. This violence is (in-)visible “in everyday behavior, violence against the past that is emptied of all substance, violence against the future, for the colonial regime presents itself as necessarily eternal.”<sup>52</sup> The notion of violence against the future lets us translate this to the postcolonial present. The violent effects of colonization continue “undermining the sense of identity and self-respect”<sup>53</sup> of those who today continue to count as inferior through racialization. Elsa Dorlin’s inquiry of counter-violence sheds light on the significance of such defensive violence in colonial contexts.<sup>54</sup> The assumption is that violence plays a significant role to the inferior trying to “re-establish his or her own identity as a person of equal moral value, deserving the respect of others.”<sup>55</sup> Or, as Fanon puts it, at “the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex.”<sup>56</sup>

Fanon, therefore, recognizes at least two forms of counter-violence. First, the physical violence of African anti-colonial liberation movements. That is not part of my argument. Second, self-violence, meaning violence an individual directs toward oneself, aims at countering the black subject’s – oneself – inferiority complex rooted in psychological violence. In epistemic terms, this counter-violence is a necessary result of an unjust epistemic system with its tenable third-order exclusions, which evoke epistemic violence.

## 5. By way of conclusion: Facilitating epistemic breathing

The systematic circumstances obstruct racialized people’s abilities to gain awareness about their situatedness because of the structure of the epistemic system and the allocation of its resources. It affects their capabilities of what I call *epistemic breathing*. Self-violence, for Fanon, means agency that can be described as breaking out or creating meaning, even surviving. Self-violence is about detoxifying and healing a pathogenic subjectivity.<sup>57</sup> Decolonization to Fanon means, intellectually speaking, taking back control. Fanon aims at self-ownership, at existence. His understanding of colonial violence teaches us that for racialized subjects, epistemic decolonization is not a non-violent process because those who are named black are still faced with

52 Fanon, Frantz: Why we use violence, in: Khalfa, Jean/Young, Robert J. C. (eds.): Alienation and Freedom, New York, NY 2018, 653–659, 654.

53 Bufacchi: Violence and Social Justice, 169.

54 See Dorlin, Elsa: Self Defense. A Philosophy of Violence, London/Brooklyn, NY 2022.

55 Bufacchi: Violence and Social Justice, 169.

56 Fanon: The Wretched, 51.

57 See Dorlin, Elsa: To Be Beside of Oneself. Fanon and the Phenomenology of Our Own Violence, in: South as a State of Mind (2016) 7, 41–46.

the lived experience of violence. Not only because they are part of the epistemic system, which cannot grant them equity but also because of the lack of epistemic resources to raise or sometimes even gain awareness of their situation. Reflecting on self-violence, Fanon speaks of *combat breathing* in the face of colonial domination.<sup>58</sup> He uses this term to refer to occupied breathing or breathing under observation. An organism needs to be able to breathe independently and still expresses the struggle for air – a collective good. Combat breathing is the reaction to a restriction or fixation affecting a vital function of existence.

Facilitating epistemic breathing begins with the critical inquiry on how these circumstances can be dealt with. As embodied subjects of academia, we participate in seminars and study knowledge that determines the possibilities of our existence. We breathe and share air amongst ourselves, and with thinkers and the ideas that are the foundation of our social and political life. It makes a difference if the air I breathe is only filled with thoughts of people and concepts that do not relate to my lived experience. For me, conceding the minimal function of epistemic breathing represents an attempt, in the face of hegemonic and Eurocentric orders of knowledge, to enable offerings not covered by the established canon. Fighting epistemic authorities means crossing boundaries. Disciplines must be transgressed, and methodologies, epistemologies, and normativity must be questioned. Epistemic breathing can be facilitated by taking this seriously. It is a crucial part of decolonization concerning our daily interactions and human relationships. Giving room to absent philosophies of critical resistance means bearing the possibility of more equal human relations. The quality of our human relations in turn defines our possibilities to a sincere reflection of human realities what in return is the way to deal with epistemic injustice and even more with epistemic violence.

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58 See Fanon, Frantz: *A Dying Colonialism*. New York, NY 1965, 65.