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Hermeneutical Backlash: Trans Youth Panics as Epistemic Injustice

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Hermeneutical Backlash: Trans Youth Panics as Epistemic Injustice

B. R. George and Stacey Goguen

Abstract

In this paper we use the contemporary example of trans youth panics to introduce the notion of hermeneutical backlash, in which defenders of an established, unjust hermeneutical regime actively work to undermine and discredit hermeneutical liberation. We argue that the strategies and tropes of trans youth panics illustrate a general propaganda vulnerability of epistemic liberation movements (including familiar examples from recent history), and so are troubling for reasons that go beyond their application to trans youth. This exploration of a few specific cases of hermeneutical liberation and hermeneutical backlash calls attention to the need for further theoretical work on the dynamics of struggles for (and against) hermeneutical justice.

Keywords: epistemic injustice, hermeneutical injustice, liberation movements, trans youth, propaganda, ignorance

1. Introduction¹

An epistemic injustice is an unjust harm done to someone's epistemic status, capacities, or agencies. Hermeneutical injustice is a type of epistemic injustice that Miranda Fricker (2007, 1) describes as occurring when "a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience." For Fricker, such gaps are unjust when they stem from persistent "hermeneutical marginalization"—exclusion from positions of influence in shaping a community's shared concepts, narratives, and other hermeneutical resources (Fricker 2007, 154–55). A paradigmatic case of hermeneutical injustice occurs when, due to such marginalization, a person does not have adequate concepts or language to understand their own experience or to communicate that experience to others.

¹ We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers, the Society for Analytical Feminism, and the audience members of the Central APA Meeting session "Epistemic Injustices, Epistemic Solutions" for their feedback and encouragement.

Interpretive resources are not just a potential locus of justice or injustice: they are often a locus of struggle. We may pursue hermeneutical liberation by acquiring, developing, or disseminating new interpretive resources, or engage in hermeneutical backlash by seeking to eliminate these resources and discredit their advocates. Such struggles remain undertheorized, and hermeneutical backlash remains largely unexplored. In this paper, after exploring the workings of hermeneutical liberation, we use the case study of current trans youth panics to develop a picture of the workings and dangers of hermeneutical backlash.

1.1. A Lacuna in the Epistemic Injustice Literature

Struggles of hermeneutical liberation are an important undercurrent of the epistemic justice literature. Fricker (2007, 148–50) illustrates hermeneutical injustice with examples from the struggles of liberation movements (such as the recognition and naming of “postpartum depression” and “sexual harassment”), and she gestures at intense contestation of hermeneutical resources: gaslighting, consciousness raising, public protests, backlashes, and so forth. Fricker’s account entails that such struggles play an important role in maintaining or dismantling hermeneutical injustice, even though she does not systematically explore the process.

Others have fleshed out some of the dynamics of these struggles. For instance, work on ignorance (Dotson 2011, 2012, 2014; Mason 2011; Medina 2016; Mills 1997, 2007; Pohlhaus 2012; Sullivan and Tuana 2007) and gaslighting (McKinnon 2019; Abramson 2014) analyzes how members of dominant groups resist accountability, undermine the epistemic agency of marginalized groups, and construct the desire for hermeneutical liberation as irrational. Movements of hermeneutical liberation (such as gay liberation movements and the women’s health movement of the 1970s) and hermeneutical backlash (such as trans youth panics) have received less attention, although José Medina’s (2012, 2013) “polyphonic contextualism” provides a framework for analyzing the influence of such movements and their struggles. Medina begins by recognizing that

a social field is always fractured and composed of many groups and subgroups (which are dynamic constructions that keep changing), there are always multiple and diverse social perspectives available, and social actors always have a wide and heterogeneous range of options available to them. (Medina 2013, 240)

Regarding liberation movements, Medina (2013, 241) focuses his analyses on how they can help make individual acts of resistance more recognizable, intelligible, and imitable to others. In this paper, we explore how liberation movements function for individuals who need certain experiences to be more intelligible for themselves, as

well. How can collective action and the creation of new epistemic communities lead to new understandings and possibilities for individuals? And what happens when people supporting the status quo try to restrict those new possibilities and actively maintain a community's ignorance about them?

1.2. Trans Youth Panics as Hermeneutical Backlash

Current trans youth panics,² discussed at length by Julia Serano (2018b, 2019), attempt to cast suspicion on the testimony of trans youth about their gender. This is exemplified by a variety of propaganda in backlash-focused online communities (for example, gdworkinggroup.org, parentsofrogdkids.com, 4thwavenow.com, and transgendertrend.com), the popular press (e.g., Shrier 2019, 2020; Veissière 2018; Manning 2018; Rouse 2019; Adams 2020), established partisan interest groups and hate groups like the American College of Pediatricians (e.g., Cretella 2018)³, statements from lawyers involved in cases related to the medical care of trans youth (e.g., Doward 2020), and the academic literature (e.g., Marchiano 2017; Bailey and Blanchard 2017; Littman 2018; Hutchinson, Midgen, and Spiliadis 2020).

This backlash paints an “ominous” (Kenny 2019) picture, something like the following, taken from a representative piece of propaganda:

In the last decade, diagnosis of “gender dysphoria”—severe discomfort in one’s biological sex—has exploded. . . .

. . . In the UK, the rates of gender dysphoria for teenage girls [sic] are up 4,400 percent over the previous decade. . . .

. . . Anxiety-ridden, middle-class girls [sic] who once engaged in cutting or anorexia [are] now wearing “binders” (breast-compressing undergarments), taking testosterone and undergoing voluntary double mastectomies.

. . . [The] stories follow a pattern: A girl [sic] never expresses any discomfort with her [sic] biological sex until puberty, when anxiety and depression descend. . . . She [sic] immerses in social media and discovers transgender gurus. Or her [sic] school holds an assembly celebrating gender journeys, or hosts a Gay-Straight Alliance club pushing gender ideology. At first, she [sic] tries out a new name and pronouns. Her [sic] school encourages her [sic], keeping all this a secret from her parents. Then, she [sic] wants more. (Shrier 2020)

² For background work on “sex panics,” a subset of “moral panics,” see Irvine (2006, 2008).

³ See Southern Poverty Law Center’s (n.d.) “American College of Pediatricians” for an analysis of ACPeds as an anti-LGBTQ hate group.

Other trans-youth-panic material similarly “raises concerns” about trans youth in more or less alarmist way. Articles in *The Daily Mail* sport headlines such as “School Has SEVENTEEN Children Changing Gender as Teacher Says Vulnerable Pupils Are Being ‘Tricked’ into Believing They Are the Wrong Sex” (Manning 2018) and “Ex-Top Private School Head Claims Some Pupils Identify as Transgender Just to Be Cool and ‘Cause Turbulence’” (Rouse 2019). The periodical speaks of trans students “grooming” younger peers to transition (Manning 2018), and children being “brainwashed” (Adams 2020). Others worry that “clusters of gender dysphoria outbreaks occurring in pre-existing friend groups” raise concerns of “social contagion” (Littman 2018, 2),⁴ or speak of trans youth “‘binge-watching’ YouTube transition videos and excessive use of Tumblr” (4thWaveNow 2015a, Littman 2018, 2), and of seeming (to their parents) to be “using language that they found online” (Littman 2018, 14). Further concerns about the legitimacy of reported trans identities focus on the role of “self-diagnosis” (Littman 2018, 34), on a failure to “consult the mental health professionals” (27), and on alleged adverse effects after coming out, including an apparent “narrowed range of interests and hobbies” (21) and a “worsened parent child relationship” (21). Concerned parents and researchers offer a new name for this ostensibly alarming phenomenon: “Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria” (ROGD).⁵

Trans youth panics provide a timely case study in hermeneutical backlash. They represent a general propaganda strategy for pathologizing hermeneutical liberation as such: if we set aside the specifics of the trans subject matter and the internet age, the features being used to paint this alarming picture are all features familiar from other cases of hermeneutical liberation. Trans youth panics thus reveal a general template for attempts to undermine or suppress hermeneutical liberation.

1.3. Plan of the Paper

Section 2 reviews examples of hermeneutical liberation from the women’s health movement and narratives of gay self-discovery. The hope is that these examples will be familiar to many readers, but different enough in content from trans youth panics to highlight how rhetorically and functionally similar hermeneutical backlashes can be, even when they target different movements. To make this case, section 3 explores some of the characteristics of hermeneutical liberation found in the women’s health movement and narratives of gay self-discovery. Section 4 then

⁴ All quotes and references from Littman (2018) are from the paper as originally published, and not as subsequently corrected. See Littman (2019) and accompanying materials for information on the revision history.

⁵ We do not have the space in this paper to discuss all the flaws in the ROGD hypothesis; see footnote 10 for citations to critiques of the studies proposing the ROGD hypothesis.

illustrates the phenomenon of hermeneutical backlash through trans youth panics, which attempt to undermine hermeneutical liberation by targeting the features discussed in section 3. Section 5 then connects this discussion back to the epistemic injustice and propaganda literatures, suggesting avenues for further research, while section 6 offers some very brief concluding remarks.

2. Examples of Hermeneutical Liberation

One type of hermeneutical liberation involves the alleviation of the hermeneutical lacunae that rendered an important part of one's social experience unintelligible, even to oneself.⁶ On a personal level, this often feels like a revelation: it “can come as a life-changing flash of enlightenment” (Fricker 2007, sec. 7.2)—as “one of those *click aha!* moments” (Karen Sauvigne, quoted in Brownmiller 1999, 280–81; and in Fricker 2007, 150). There are two entangled phenomena to consider here. At the personal scale, we have the revelatory moments that Fricker (2007, 149) calls *hermeneutical breakthroughs*. Stepping back to look at a community or society, we see that such breakthroughs are made possible by—and are an important component of—*epistemic liberation movements*.

We will explore hermeneutical liberation using examples from the women's health movement and gay self-discovery. Both cases were chosen for their familiarity to our presumed audience, as both are featured among the examples in Fricker's discussion of hermeneutical injustice. Our example of the former is taken from the history of a landmark text of twentieth-century US feminism, and our example of the latter is drawn mainly from a short autobiographical narrative by Alison Bechdel (of “Bechdel test” fame), describing events that were subsequently portrayed or alluded to in a bestselling memoir (Bechdel 2007) and a hit Broadway musical adapted from it. These examples were also chosen in hopes of establishing that the picture of hermeneutical liberation that we are developing is not specific to the trans case. Analogous trans narratives are readily available,⁷ and some of their recurring features are hinted at in our discussion of trans youth backlash.

⁶ Theorists have fleshed out some of the different sorts of cases of hermeneutical injustice, which Medina (2017, 45–46) sorts into different types. Not all forms of hermeneutical injustice involve individuals struggling to articulate something to themselves or revolve around the lack of specific labels or vocabulary.

⁷ Salient examples of such materials are provided by two trans YouTube users that Manning (2018) specifically references as corrupting influences: Ash Hardell (2018, 2019) and Alex Bertie (2012, 2016, 2021). Other writings relevant to hermeneutical injustice and liberation in the trans context include Reed (2012), Jones (2012), and Finch (2015).

2.1. Wendy Sanford and the Women's Health Movement

Fricker (2007) illustrates hermeneutical liberation with an example from the history of the women's health movement: Wendy Sanford's account (as reported in Brownmiller 1999) of the revelation that would lead her to become a founding member of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. After being dragged to a movement meeting by a friend, Sanford has her first experience with consciousness-raising, leading to a life-changing breakthrough:

Then we broke down into small groups. I had never "broken down into a small group" in my life. In my group, people started talking about postpartum depression. In that forty-five-minute period I realized that what I'd been blaming myself for, and what my husband had blamed me for, wasn't my personal deficiency. It was a combination of physiological things and a real societal thing, isolation. That realization was one of those moments that makes you a feminist forever. (Brownmiller 1999, 182)

This example highlights a number of important themes. Sanford's prior state was characterized by the *psychological harms* of a hermeneutical lacuna, including her depression remaining unaddressed and the burden of her *misinterpreting* her situation and so blaming herself. Her hermeneutical breakthrough is *abrupt* and involves the *reinterpretation* of a whole area of experience. This breakthrough is made possible by *community* connections, in the form of the friend who drags her to the event, and the *liberation movement* that made the event possible. This community enables the *sharing* of hermeneutical resources like the concept of postpartum depression. This leads to a *priority shift* for Sanford, as she becomes invested in the movement and goes on to become a contributor to *Women and Their Bodies* (later retitled *Our Bodies, Ourselves*).

2.2. Alison Bechdel's "Coming Out Story"

Alison Bechdel's "Coming Out Story" describes her experiences at Oberlin College in 1979 and 1980, wherein deep confusion and discontentment give way to a revelation: "Jeez, this explains everything. I'm a lesbian" (Bechdel 1993).

Bechdel (1993, 1) opens with a cliché—"Since earliest childhood, I knew I was different"—but immediately undermines it: "For a long time, I thought it was just because I was *smarter*." Life under hermeneutical injustice often involves the misinterpretation of our problems, needs, or identities. If we can tell that *something* is going on, we may feel pressure to find an interpretation within the bounds of the available social imaginary, even if that interpretation is ill-fitted, incomplete, or counterproductive.

Bechdel next describes her mental state and desperate, largely ineffective coping mechanisms immediately prior to her breakthrough, illustrating the psychological harms of hermeneutical injustice:

When I wasn't in class or at the bookstore, I was getting high or going to movies. My cinematic education would have been excellent if I could remember any of it. The drugs. The endless moviegoing. The hours of browsing through books. . . . I was trying desperately to distract myself from a truth that was slowly but surely struggling to the surface of my solitary, sex-starved soul. (Bechdel 1993, 2–3)

By chance, Bechdel's aimless browsing eventually pays off: she happens upon a copy of *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (Adair and Adair 1978), which sparks her own revelation. *Word Is Out* contains transcripts of the interviews from a 1977 documentary of the same title, which features twenty-six gay Americans talking "about how they had come to realize they were gay, and what their lives were like" (Bechdel 1993, 3). It is Bechdel's first explicit contact with a community of people whose hermeneutical needs mirror her own, illustrating the importance of sharing hermeneutical resources.

Bechdel's revelation arrives on the walk home from the bookstore:

It was as if I'd crossed some invisible boundary. On the other side, things would never be the same.

I'm reminded of the myth of Athena's birth. You know the story. She springs, fully grown and in complete armor, from Zeus's head.

My own festering brain, after years of ignorance and denial, had finally *erupted!*

By the time I emerged from the park, my entire confusing life had passed before my eyes and reconfigured itself around a startling new realization.

Jeez, this explains everything.

I'm a Lesbian. (Bechdel 1993, 4)

Bechdel's revelation, like Sanford's, is abrupt. Although the acquisition, development, and refinement of new hermeneutical resources is often a drawn-out process, the first step of this "long, hard journey" (Bechdel 1993, 4) can be a "click!" moment in the course of a radical reinterpretation of one's experiences that all plays out in a matter of minutes.

Bechdel's revelation initiates a series of major *life disruptions*, starting with her being so caught up in her revelation that she steps into the street without looking, forcing a motorist to screech to a halt. Bechdel then experiences a priority shift, refocusing her attention on "the quest for my *people*" (Bechdel 1993, 7) and on a follow-up question to her revelation: "Now what? How do I get *laid*?" (5).

These new priorities disrupt the established flow of Bechdel's life, as she *obsessively* pursues further resources. She is portrayed (Bechdel 1993, 6–7) nervously purchasing a copy of *Lesbian/Woman* (Martin and Lyon 1972); devouring *Desert of the Heart* (Rule 1964), *Rubyfruit Jungle* (Brown 1973), *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall 1928), *Our Right to Love: A Lesbian Resource Book* (Vida 1978), *Sappho Was A Right-On Woman: A Liberated View Of Lesbianism* (Abbot and Love 1972), *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (Johnston 1973), and *The Gay Report: Lesbians and Gay Men Speak Out about Sexual Experiences and Lifestyles* (Jay and Young 1979); and masturbating to her roommate's copy of *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study on Female Sexuality* (Hite 1976).⁸ In her account of these events in her memoir *Fun Home*, Bechdel emphasizes the disruptive effects of this priority shift: she neglects her studies, falling "further and further behind" (Bechdel 2007, 208) on reading for a course into which she was "begging admission" only a short time before (203).

Not long after, Bechdel takes it upon herself to seek out a community and works up the courage to attend a meeting of the campus gay union. At first, she struggles to connect with the students she meets there, but she eventually finds points of commonality, works up the courage to come out to her roommate, finally gets laid, and takes other steps to explore her lesbian identity and build a life within the queer community.

3. Recurring Features of Hermeneutical Liberation

With these examples in mind, let's consider some themes typical of this sort of hermeneutical liberation.

3.1. Hermeneutical Injustice as a Mental Health Issue

Hermeneutical injustice is a mental health issue in that (1) hermeneutical injustice can "knock your faith in your ability to make sense of the world" (Fricker 2007, 163) and even be "so damaging that it cramps the very development of the self" (163); (2) there are direct and indirect *psychological harms* of being unable to make one's experiences intelligible to others, and of the associated quality-of-life costs of being unable to articulate and address one's needs; and (3) the unintelligible

⁸ This list is largely inferred from the text on the spines and covers of books shown in Bechdel's illustrations. In a few cases, this involved some conjecture and, perhaps, introduced some errors.

experiences may themselves be mental health problems or have distinctive adverse mental health effects that go unrecognized or unaddressed.

We see psychological harms of types 1 and 2 in Bechdel's story, where she is, by various ineffective coping mechanisms, "trying desperately to distract myself from a truth that was slowly but surely struggling to the surface of my solitary, sex-starved soul" (Bechdel 1993, 3). Sanford's story also illustrates type 3 harms: She lacks the proper hermeneutical resources to interpret and address a serious mental health problem—her postpartum depression. Furthermore, her self-blame from lack of a better explanation may have both been a cause of, and further fed into, her depression.

A related theme is the *misinterpretation* of the nature and etiology of these harms, and, more broadly, of one's needs, experiences, or identity. At the heart of Sanford's revelation is a new understanding that "what I'd been blaming myself for, and what my husband had blamed me for, wasn't my personal deficiency" (quoted in Brownmiller 1999, 182; and in Fricker 2007, 149). In this moment, an old misinterpretation of Sanford's situation, associated with the harms of self-doubt and an unjustified sense of guilt and inadequacy, is discarded in favor of an appreciation of the complexities of postpartum depression.

We see similar misinterpretations in Bechdel's story: she identifies her intelligence as differentiating her from her peers and so proceeds to attribute any other feelings of difference or alienation to that source. She also fails to recognize her loneliness and sexual frustration as such, although she doesn't report what misinterpretation of these experiences she latches onto.

3.2. The Moment It Clicks

Hermeneutical breakthroughs like Bechdel's and Sanford's are often *abrupt*, sometimes to the point of featuring a single "moment it clicks"—recall that Bechdel compares her revelation to Athena springing fully formed from Zeus's head. Sanford's exposure to new resources and subsequent revelation happen in the course of a forty-five-minute small group discussion. Bechdel's revelation takes less time than her walk home from the bookstore. Once one obtains access to the needed hermeneutical resources to make sense of one's life, pieces quickly begin to fall into place, as it becomes possible to rapidly *reinterpret* huge swaths of one's prior experience. This is how Sanford and Bechdel both describe their breakthroughs. As the latter puts it: "My entire confusing life had passed before my eyes and reconfigured itself around a startling new realization" (Bechdel 1993, 4). Since hermeneutical injustice can undermine "the very construction . . . of selfhood" (Fricker 2007, 168), it is natural that hermeneutical liberation will often spur sudden growth and development in one's self-identity, often in unforeseen directions.

3.3. Shaking Things Up

Hermeneutical breakthroughs can produce profound *priority shifts* and *life disruptions*. When unrecognized and unmet needs finally come into focus, addressing them becomes a priority, and the project of acquiring related hermeneutical resources and fleshing out one's new self-understanding may take on a sense of urgency. This may take the form of efforts to network with existing communities ("the quest for my *people*" [Bechdel 1993, 7]), or of binge reading (or viewing) of available materials ("That first volume led quickly to others" [Bechdel 2007, 75]). The realization that one has experienced such an injustice may also cause other changes in priorities, if, for example, it leads to a political awakening, or if the hermeneutical breakthrough calls attention to previously unnoticed or underappreciated applications of one's time and energy (as with Bechdel's "How do I get laid?" moment). Some old priorities will be discarded as the products of a defective self-understanding, and, especially in the short term, others will have new competition for one's time, energy, and attention. These changes can be disruptive to the prior equilibrium or order of one's life.

This sense of urgency may lead new projects to take on an *obsessive* character, especially in the short term. Bechdel (2007) describes her readings as "calling" her "seductively" and compares her absorption in her new interest in gay experience and culture, and loss of concern for other personal and academic projects and obligations, to the experience of "Odysseus's men who had fallen in with the lotus-eaters" (2007, 209).

Sanford's experience shows a similar shift in priorities: Sanford initially has to be "dragged" (Brownmiller 1999, 182) to a meeting, but she subsequently becomes an active member of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. Brownmiller (1999) reports that the women of the collective threw themselves into their research and writing in the following months. The introduction of *Women and Their Bodies* describes the energy of this period:

For the first time, we were doing research and writing papers that were about us and for us. We were excited and our excitement was powerful. We wanted to share both the excitement and the material we were learning with our sisters. We saw ourselves differently and our lives began to change. (BWHBC 1970, 3)

For outside observers like friends and family, abrupt priority shifts, obsessive pursuit of new projects, and associated life disruptions may seem like cause for concern. But sometimes major disruptions to our lives are called for, and ultimately, necessary for our flourishing.

3.4. We Recruit

Bechdel's and Sanford's revelations are both made possible by the *sharing* of hermeneutical resources—by someone else giving them the tools they need to develop new, better interpretations of their experiences. In both cases, this resource-sharing occurs within the context of a *community* and with the support of a wider *liberation movement*.

In Bechdel's experience with the campus gay union and Sanford's experience breaking down into groups, we see a relatively interactive form of community engagement. Historically, this has typically involved in-person interactions, but the internet has expanded possibilities for long-distance community interactions. Preexisting personal connections may be important here (Sanford is dragged to her first meeting by her friend Esther Rome), but the community in question may also be part of a liberation movement, as in the case of the Oberlin gay union or of the meeting Sanford attends.

These sorts of epistemic liberation movements do not only operate by this kind of small group exchange: they may also propagate via texts or other media designed to facilitate hermeneutical revelations. In the case of the women's health movement, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is a conspicuous example of such a text, and Kline discusses its role in facilitating revelations much like Sanford's or Bechdel's:

With *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, . . . reading was often described as a revelatory experience—as a “click” that drew a woman out of isolation and into a widespread dialogue about feminism and health. “When I realize how similar my feelings are to some of the letters in your book, it is indeed reassuring,” one reader confided. . . . Establishing connections by reading personal accounts enabled readers to experience consciousness-raising at their own kitchen tables. (Kline 2005, 90)

This community-building, resource-sharing, and facilitation of hermeneutical breakthroughs is not accidental—it is the point of the exercise. The introduction of *Women and Their Bodies* puts it thus:

These papers . . . are meant to be used by our sisters to increase consciousness about ourselves as women, to build our movement, to begin to struggle collectively for adequate health care, and in many other ways. . . . They should be viewed as a tool which stimulates discussion and action, which allows for new ideas and for change. (BWHBC 1970, 4)

Meanwhile, Bechdel's revelation is triggered by the interviews in *Word Is Out* (Adair and Adair 1978). Nancy Adair discusses how her brother Peter conceived of *Word is Out* as a hermeneutical liberation project, intended to change the society's collective hermeneutical resources, allowing the next generation to discover themselves faster and less painfully:

When Peter first had gay feelings, he knew no one like himself. He felt something was wrong with him. He went to a psychiatrist; he tried to have "normal" relationships with women. He thought being gay . . . meant that he couldn't be a "person" and that he would always be relegated by his secret to the fringes of society. . . . He decided to make a movie that would help all of us gays believe more in ourselves, come out of our closets, and affirm each other. He wanted the film to recognize and acknowledge the oppression of homosexuals. As a youth with gay feelings . . . [h]e knew no homosexuals so he felt he was the "only one." Peter learned by talking to other gay people that their experiences had been similar to his: they too had felt that they were the "only one." Many wished they had known someone to whom they could talk about their feelings. Many felt alone and maladjusted because they felt different from their peers. All had to go through years of adjustment before they could embrace homosexuality as a positive part of their lives. They found themselves only in themselves. They found no reflection of who they were in society. (Adair and Adair 1978, 269–70)

The sharing processes made possible by communities and liberation movements have a role not only in disseminating hermeneutical resources, but also in creating and refining them. As Fricker notes, the sharing of personal experiences is—even with "scantly understood, barely articulate" (Fricker 2007, 148) ones—crucial for *consciousness-raising*. This aspect of hermeneutical liberation can be obscured if we only focus on the individual level. Personal revelations are often catalyzed by a particular social context and by exposure to a particular community.

A related feature of both *Word Is Out* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is that their creators lacked institutionally recognized markers of epistemic authority. That such *nonexperts* should play a central role in hermeneutical liberation is unsurprising, since, as Fricker (2007, 160) notes, exclusion from recognized epistemic authority and credibility is at the heart of the hermeneutical marginalization that gives rise to this kind of injustice in the first place. This lack of epistemic authority is explicitly recognized in the introduction of *Women and Their Bodies*: "Excited and nervous (we

were just women; what authority did we have in matters of medicine and health?), we offered a course to sisters in women’s liberation” (BWHBC 1970, 3).

The introduction goes on to emphasize the central value of lived experience and sharing of personal stories, rather than technical expertise, in the process of hermeneutical liberation:

It was more important that we talked about our experiences, were challenged by others’ experiences, (often we came from very different situations), raised our questions, expressed our feelings, were challenged to act, than that we learned any specific body of material.

It was exciting to learn new facts about our bodies, but it was even more exciting to talk about how we felt about our bodies, how we felt about ourselves, how we could become more autonomous human beings, how we could act together to change the health care system for women and for all people. We hope this will be true for you too. (BWHBC 1970, 4)

In the chapter on “Women, Medicine and Capitalism”, meanwhile, Lucy Candib complains that “[women] become passive objects who submit to [the doctor’s] control and supposed expertise” (BWHBC 1970, 7) and calls out the limitations of the dominant conceptions of competence and authority:

We as women are redefining competence: a doctor who behaves in a male chauvinist way is not competent, even if he has medical skills. We have decided that health can no longer be defined by an elite group of white, upper middle class men. It must be defined by us, the women who need the most health care, in a way that meets the needs of all our sisters and brothers—poor, black, brown, red, yellow, and pink. (BWHBC 1970, 6)

Bechdel’s *Story* provides another striking example. Neither the students at the gay union nor the people interviewed in *Word Is Out* speak from positions of recognized, credentialed expertise in the medical, psychological, or social aspects of human sexuality. What is important about *Word Is Out* is that it contains personal stories, offered on the authority of lived experience, in which people like Bechdel can catch glimpses of something in themselves that they do not yet know how to name. In its capacity as a collection of filmed personal accounts of what it’s like to be gay, the film version of *Word Is Out* is very much the late 1970s equivalent of a curated YouTube playlist.

3.5. Spreading like Wildfire

The examples of *Word Is Out* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves* draw attention to another important recurring theme: these sorts of liberation movements have their moment or *tipping point*. When the hard work of a liberation movement starts to pay off, the result is that new ideas are “in the air” like never before. As the hermeneutical landscape of the society changes, the conditions for revelations like Bechdel’s or Sanford’s suddenly exist for many people, potentially leading to a large number of such breakthroughs over a relatively short time. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was, as discussed by Brownmiller (1999) and Kline (2005), a phenomenon. In the 1970s, it attained a degree of cultural ubiquity in the United States, facilitating numerous revelations and bringing many women into contact with the women’s health movement. Those revelations were made possible by widespread access to a text that had not previously existed, just as Sanford’s revelation was made possible by access to a kind of event that would have been much rarer a decade prior.

Meanwhile, Bechdel’s story (which happens in 1979–1980), begins with a book published in 1978. Bechdel’s reading list is full of titles published in the 1970s, and campus gay organizations were much rarer even a decade prior.⁹ Even a few years earlier, Bechdel’s revelation could not have played out in the same way. Bechdel would plausibly have *eventually* come to understand herself as a lesbian without these kinds of resources and connections, but circumstances in the United States made this sort of revelation more accessible to people of Bechdel’s age and background in 1979 than in prior decades. Social trends in accessibility of hermeneutical resources can create trends in the frequency of personal revelations and in the number of people who view their lives through the newly accessible interpretive lens. This is a major, legitimate goal of liberation movements.

We have illustrated these features with two widely recognized cases of hermeneutical liberation: gay self-discovery and the women’s health movement. Next, we turn to trans youth panics and explore how these features are targeted by hermeneutical backlash.

4. Hermeneutical Backlash in Trans Youth Panics

We are now prepared to apply our picture of hermeneutical liberation to trans youth panics, which provide a rich and timely example of hermeneutical backlash. The strategies that these panics employ are of interest because of their generality: they target hermeneutical liberation as such, presenting the hermeneutical liberation of

⁹ We are not aware of the full history of gay community organizing at Oberlin College, but Oberlin Lgbt’s (2017) blog reproduces a news story dated 1971 titled “Gay Lib Approved as Club,” suggesting there was no such official campus organization before that time.

trans youth as illegitimate in virtue of characteristics it shares with other liberation movements.

Our goal here is not to persuade skeptical readers that the case of trans youth is an example of legitimate hermeneutical liberation; it's beyond the scope of this paper to do so, and others have already refuted the various claims of trans youth panics.¹⁰ The features of hermeneutical liberation we highlight in this paper are not intended as a diagnostic protocol to distinguish genuine liberation from something more troubling. Our focus is on the structure and function of the rhetorical "toolkit" of the backlash. If we value hermeneutical liberation in general, we should be troubled by the broad applicability of these tools and by the norms that they presuppose and reinforce. To any reader who is agnostic about (or sympathetic to) some of the claims of what we call a "trans youth panic": you should still be wary of the methods and assumptions of this hermeneutical backlash, because they can equally well be deployed against whatever hermeneutical liberation movements you hold dear.

4.1. Hermeneutical Injustice as a Mental Health Issue

We've seen that hermeneutical injustice is a mental health issue, associated with diverse *psychological harms*. Backlash propaganda exploits this: it uses personal history with these harms to delegitimize or cast suspicion on hermeneutical breakthroughs. This may trade crudely on general bias against giving adequate weight to the testimony of the mentally ill—"You're crazy, so why should we take anything you say seriously?"—but it may also be more sophisticated. The backlash insists that, when a history of mental health issues, and perhaps accompanying diagnoses, predates an ostensible hermeneutical awakening, the prudent thing is to adequately treat these "other" mental health conditions, or at least to make sure that they have been adequately "ruled out" as confounding factors, before proceeding with the strange and radical step of acting on one's new self-understanding.

Littman, for instance, reports that "parents described evaluations that were too limited or too superficial to explore mental health, trauma or alternative causes of gender dysphoria" (2018, 26). This is the equivalent of telling Sanford that she can't know whether she needs feminism until she sorts out her depression, or telling

¹⁰ See, for example, such activist community and popular press responses as Serano (2016, 2017, 2018a–2018e, 2019), Jones (2017, 2018a–2018f), Ashley (2018a, 2018b), Ashley and Baril (2018), Urquhart (2017, 2020, 2021), Duck-Chong (2018), Barasch (2018), Ford (2018), AWN (2020), and ASAN, NCTE, and National LGBTQ Task Force (2016), and such academic and otherwise "expert" responses as WPATH (2018), Ashley (2019a, 2019b), Temple Newhook, Pyne, et al. (2018), Temple Newhook, Winters, et al. (2018), Costa (2019), Restar (2020), and Slothouber (2020).

Bechdel that it's a mistake to start dating women until she's explored conventional psychiatric explanations for her emotional issues and attendant drug use and obsessive-but-foggy moviegoing and bookstore browsing. Under the guise of caution, this backlash narrative suggests that "prior" mental health issues are causing a mistaken self-understanding and ignores the possibility that the lack of an appropriate self-understanding may have produced these issues in the first place (or that they are largely independent).

4.2. The Moment It Clicks

Hermeneutical revelations are often *abrupt*, sometimes to the point of featuring a "moment it clicks," and may be associated with rapid *reinterpretation* of huge swaths of one's prior experience.

All of these characteristics are targets for backlash. Conspicuously, the label "rapid-onset gender dysphoria" (Littman 2018) is used both to pathologize such abrupt breakthroughs and to cast them as a distinct phenomenon (Bailey and Blanchard 2017) from "organic" (GD Working Group 2019) instances of trans self-discovery, which are presumed to involve either clear signs starting in "early childhood" (Shrier 2020), or some more visibly gradual, deliberative, and exploratory process. If, from parents' (or others') perspectives, self-reports or other signs of trans identity arise abruptly, that is taken to justify discounting them as evidence: if this was real all along, the reasoning goes, then why are we only hearing about it now? Within this framing, the abrupt reinterpretation of past experiences is dismissed as revisionism: the prior interpretations are taken as canonical, so if new interpretations are now being offered, surely this is evidence of so much self-deception in the service of a new misunderstanding of one's experiences.

Every formal feature of this line of reasoning would be equally applicable to Bechdel's or Sanford's case: this is a script for dismissing hermeneutical breakthroughs precisely *because* they look like hermeneutical breakthroughs.

4.3. Shaking Things Up

As we saw, hermeneutical breakthroughs can produce *life disruptions* and *priority shifts*, as we seek to network with existing communities or liberation movements or to expand our hermeneutical resources with binge consumption of available reading (or viewing) materials. These changes may seem distressing or even pathological to outside observers with a high opinion of that prior order, and the backlash encourages and exploits this distress.

Within the hermeneutical-backlash script, these disruptions and priority shifts become something sinister: an ostensible unhealthy *obsession* with trans topics and trans communities, described as "'binge-watching' Youtube transition videos and excessive use of Tumblr" (Littman 2018, 2). Granted, some new behaviors from

people experiencing profound life disruptions, such as particularly reckless drug use or other risky activities, can indeed be harmful. But it's noteworthy that proponents of ROGD do not primarily focus on such harms. Instead, the evidence of harm from "social contagion" (Littman 2018, 3) that they reference involves such things as a "narrowed range of interests" and a "worsening" of their relationship with their parents (21).

Bechdel's deciding to exhaust the lesbian readings available to her instead of preparing for her *Ulysses* seminar does not show that her new self-understanding as a lesbian was illegitimate or pernicious, and her becoming the cartoonist behind *Dykes to Watch Out For* (instead of, say, a Joyce scholar) is not a harm. Sanford's prioritizing her involvement in the feminist movement over her marriage likewise neither constitutes nor suggests a harm from the consciousness-raising meeting she attended, nor does it delegitimize her feminist awakening. But the hermeneutical-backlash script would have us read them as such, when in the case of trans youth it uncritically accepts parents' reports of a worsening of their relationship with their child, or their child changing who they spend their time socializing with, as a harm.

4.4. We Recruit

Community, as we saw, is a vital ingredient in hermeneutical liberation: *liberation movements* both take advantage of existing social links and create a new sense of community. Through these communities, we engage in *resource-sharing*. Members of such communities and movements may be experienced and well informed, but they are typically *nonexperts* (or more precisely, they lack recognized expert credentials), because the epistemic marginalization underlying hermeneutical injustice will involve limited and incomplete access to positions of recognized epistemic authority.

Virtually every aspect of the social structure of a hermeneutical liberation movement is targeted by backlash rhetoric. The community becomes the "trans cult."¹¹ The value of interpersonal connections in getting access to the needed resources (and to the community) becomes "social contagion." Young trans people

¹¹ This "cult" language is ubiquitous in the online discourse of trans youth panics, as can be seen in the "#TransCult" hashtag on Twitter and the comments on sites like *transgendertrend.com*. There is nothing remarkable about people who share a stigmatized identity seeking solidarity with each other, venting, and discussing the ignorance or insufferability of people who are not so stigmatized. But under the panic script, this becomes a cult-like mentality where all outsiders are "ridiculed and maligned," derided, disparaged, and shown "animosity" (Littman 2018, 16–18)—with no acknowledgement of how power and privilege are in play when group members support one another for "punching up."

working through the self-discovery process together are alarming “cluster outbreaks” (Littman 2018, 31–32).¹² One-on-one sharing of hermeneutical resources and personal experiences becomes “grooming” (Manning 2018), “brainwash[ing]” (Adams 2020), or “peer pressure” (Kenny 2019). Those who seize upon newly developed vocabulary and explanations are viewed as “sounding scripted” (Littman 2018, 14), with the insinuation that this is evidence of brainwashing or deception. Those who achieve breakthroughs with hermeneutical resources found online or at school have been “snag[ged]” by social media (skepticaltherapist 2016) or “los[t]” to a negligent or corrupt education system (POSTS 2017). Supportive institutions and resources are “indoctrinat[ing]” (4thWaveNow 2015b) and “grooming” (Van Mol 2019). Relying on community epistemic resources, rather than authoritative expertise or “mainstream sources of information” (Littman 2018, 23), is at best “particularly concerning” (23), and at worst irresponsible “self-diagnosis” (Littman 2018, 34) by young people who have been getting ideas off the internet (Cretella 2018). (Note that the “self-diagnosis” framing suggests illegitimacy and a need for expert corroboration in a way that a “self-discovery” or “self-authorship” does not.) We are, further, told that this sharing of resources needs to be stopped or curtailed—that “there is a need for safeguarding guidance on protecting children from information that will encourage them” (Paul Conrathe, quoted in Doward 2020). The community infrastructure and shared knowledge of a hermeneutical liberation movement are thus recast as vectors by which a pathology is spread.

It should come as no surprise that social epistemology is social, but the backlash trades on an assumption that legitimate self-discovery occurs in the absence of social forces, which are seen as a biasing or corrupting influence. This disregard for the ways that background social imaginaries inform (or frustrate) all self-discovery and self-authorship allows the backlash to frame the spread of new hermeneutical resources as a predatory or disease-like force that manipulates and ultimately steals young people away from their parents and the “normal” lives their parents had envisioned for them.

¹² Littman makes much of parents’ reports that multiple members of “pre-existing friend groups” (Littman 2018, 4) came out to their parents as trans after the group formed, dismissing the possibility that trans people might be able to discern some affinity for each other before their hermeneutical breakthroughs, or at least before they come out to their parents. Given that one of Littman’s chosen examples involves a “friend group that spends much of their time talking about gender and sexuality” (Littman 2018, 15), we are unconvinced by this assumption that not-yet-out trans youth might be self-selecting into such groups.

4.5. Spreading like Wildfire

As we saw above, when a liberation movement succeeds in calling attention to or partially addressing a hermeneutical lacuna, the resulting state of affairs is one in which new ideas are “in the air.” Certain kinds of hermeneutical liberation have their moment or *tipping point*: as new hermeneutical resources spread, their increasing availability leads to a rapid increase (an “epidemic” in the backlash’s pathologizing language) in the number of personal hermeneutical breakthroughs (or a shift in who is experiencing these breakthroughs), which is the expected and desired result. Greater access to the tools of trans self-understanding and to models of trans experience, facilitated both by organized political action and by the natural “finding one’s people” potential of trans communities, ought to lead to more people recognizing themselves as trans and to such moments of self-recognition happening earlier in life. Further, this should be most extreme for those whose trans identities were rendered invisible or unimaginable by prior dominant narratives of trans experience, such as trans men and nonbinary trans people.

For the backlash, this rapid increase becomes a troubling “burgeoning incidence” (Kenny 2019) or “huge explosion” (Rowling 2020) in the number of young people identifying as trans. Some straightforwardly paint it as a “psychic epidemic that has spread its tendrils into all corners of society” (Kenny 2019), or merely raise the question of whether it shares some features with “mass hysteria” (GD Working Group 2019). Any real or apparent shift in the demographics of those experiencing such awakenings (such as ostensible shifts in the age or assigned sex of young people coming out as trans) is also seen as worrisome and as demanding an explanation. Any such demographic changes are also presumptively delegitimizing: the prior state is taken to reflect the true, natural baseline incidence of different sorts of trans identity in different populations, and on the natural timetable of trans self-discovery in a person’s life, so any increase in the total number of people coming out, in the number of people coming out at an early age, or in the number of trans men and nonbinary trans people coming out, is evidence that the “extra” awakenings are in some way illegitimate. After all, if this is a real thing, where were all the people like that before?

This last line of reasoning is used to give support both to the “epidemic” framing of trans awakening as a pathology spreading through the population, and to framings that try to situate these awakenings as a passing fad: young people, we are told, are coming out as trans not because of something about who they are or what they sincerely and robustly want or need out of life but because they hope that doing the “trendy” thing will win them some measure of social acceptance; and it is to anticipate that, as is the case with any fad, most of them will look back on this in a few years with embarrassment (at best) and profound regret (at worst).

Again, this kind of reasoning could just as well be used to trivialize or pathologize the transformative effects of the gay liberation and women’s health

movements, or any other liberation movement that succeeds in facilitating a relatively fast, major shift in available hermeneutical resources.

5. Hermeneutical Backlash in Context

In this paper we've described some features of a specific hermeneutical backlash: trans youth panics. Below, we situate these features in the wider context of social justice and social epistemology.

5.1. Other Hermeneutical Backlashes

Because trans youth backlashes target general features of hermeneutical liberation, it suggests a general propaganda vulnerability of hermeneutical liberation movements. Thus, we might expect to see similar backlashes against other such movements, and indeed we do.

For example, the narrative of a "social contagion" has featured heavily in "gay recruitment" backlashes, as exemplified by a statement from the Traditional Values Coalition, which warns of "an amazingly effective brainwashing and recruitment machine" by which "children are to be lured into the movement and indoctrinated until they view their own parents as a 'constant source of exasperation and amusement.'" The Traditional Values Coalition sees these forces at work in sex education initiatives in which "Gay/Straight Alliance Clubs," we are told, "are simply homosexual indoctrination/recruitment programs" (Traditional Values Coalition, n.d.).

Similar backlashes have targeted feminist efforts to make sexual harassment and acquaintance rape intelligible. As feminists have made advances against the old hermeneutical regime, many survivors have come to retrospectively recognize past experiences as serious—often criminal—violations, often months or years after the fact. Hermeneutical backlash frames these delays as evidence that the perception of harm is the illegitimate result of pernicious outside influences. Cathy Young (2015), for example, complains that "we are encouraged to reinterpret . . . experiences as sexual violations" and that "advocacy creates a world where virtually any regretted sexual encounter can be reconstructed as assault . . . and retroactive perceptions of coercion must always be credited over contemporaneous perceptions of consent—even though we know that memory often 'edits' the past to fit present biases."¹³

We expect similar themes to arise in other liberation movements, such as the disability rights movement, the fat acceptance movement, and the #BlackLivesMatter

¹³ See Jonathan Ichikawa (2017a, 2017b, 2017c) for criticism of other instances of this hermeneutical backlash.

movement and other past and present racial justice movements.¹⁴ Because different liberation movements are called to confront different sorts of hermeneutical injustices and face different sorts of backlash, audiences equipped to recognize one hermeneutical backlash may be taken in by another.¹⁵ Further research is needed to better understand how the different features and contexts of different movements influence the backlashes they encounter and the sort of uptake this backlash receives. The following are some themes and distinctions that we think should inform such explorations.

5.2. Think of the Children

The anti-trans hermeneutical backlash that we've discussed is, tellingly, a trans *youth* backlash.¹⁶ Trans people experience the same sorts of hermeneutical breakthroughs at all ages,¹⁷ but centering "children" is a common and unnervingly effective strategy in such backlashes. The perceived vulnerability of children has been exploited by countless moral and epistemic panics through the ages, and children's limited legal and social autonomy makes them easy targets for those wishing to limit access to certain controversial epistemic resources. Such limitations can be as simple as parents limiting their children's access to particular reading materials or social spaces, or they may involve coordinated policy initiatives. Examples of the latter include a 2010 Arizona law banning ethnic studies courses (Tang 2017), ongoing legislative efforts in multiple states to restrict the teaching of critical race theory (Schwartz 2021), the Republican Party of Texas's 2012 opposition to teaching "critical thinking skills and similar programs" that "have the purpose of challenging the student's fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority" (Republican Party of Texas 2012, 12), a 2013 Russian law banning "the promotion of homosexuality" under the guise of "defending children's morality and health" (Chan 2017), and provision of the UK's infamous Section 28 which prohibited "the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."¹⁸

Backlashes built around "think of the children" panic can also target adults, either by representing members of liberation movements as predatory corruptors of

¹⁴ Credit for these suggestions goes to the audience of the 2020 Central APA Meeting session "Epistemic Injustices, Epistemic Solutions," hosted by the Society for Analytical Feminism.

¹⁵ Consider, e.g., the way that some who recognize the "gay recruitment" backlash as homophobic propaganda, and who accept stories like Bechdel's at face value, will nevertheless insist on the importance of hearing out concerns like Littman's.

¹⁶ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for urging us to explore this issue.

¹⁷ The first author's "moment it clicks" happened in their thirties.

¹⁸ Local Government Act 1988, Section 28, UK Public General Acts 1988 c. 9.

the youth or by infantilizing adults to undermine their epistemic standing. Consider the mismatch between the framing of the public “ROGD” controversy in terms of children and adolescents and the reality that the “ROGD” label is often applied to people who are unambiguously adults. The oldest of the “adolescents and young adults” discussed in Littman’s study was 27 years old, and Elliot Page, who came out as trans at age 34, has been called “the model for rapid-onset gender dysphoria” (Urquhart 2021). Looking beyond the above narrowly epistemic concerns, the wider trans youth backlash involves a push for legislative infantilization of people generally regarded as adults: a recently proposed law in North Carolina banning medical transition for minors defines a minor as “any individual who is below 21 years of age,”¹⁹ and one trans youth panic organization has expressed a desire to “see the upper age limit for adolescent care raised to 25” and insists that “puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones and sex imitation surgeries should not be available to under 25s” (Our Duty 2020). We are not prepared to comment on whether all hermeneutical backlashes involve some measure of infantilization, but it seems likely that “think of the children” rhetoric and policies specifically targeting young people are a more salient feature of some hermeneutical backlashes than others, if only because some hermeneutical liberation movements have focused on adult audiences.

5.3. Interpreting Our Oppression, Interpreting Ourselves

In some cases of hermeneutical injustice, such as Fricker’s example of sexual harassment, the hermeneutical lacuna works to keep some other injustice in place by denying us the tools to name the problem. But in other cases, the interpretive lacuna prevents us from interpreting something that is not itself a form of oppression. The harm is not an inability to name another harm but an inability to fully make sense of or communicate oneself and one’s needs, with adverse implications for self-discovery, self-authorship, or personal flourishing, as in the cases of gay or trans people unable to recognize themselves as such because they have been presented with a narrow, stereotyped vision of gay or trans life.

Another foundational difficulty is being prevented from recognizing that the affected class even exists. As an example, consider the reaction of “Wait, that’s a thing? I’m not just broken? There’s a *community* of us?” associated with personal hermeneutical breakthroughs for some nonbinary people and asexual people.

Most epistemic liberation movements will need to confront problems of unintelligible oppression (e.g., the lack of a term for sexual harassment), but some have more cause to center injustices of identity unintelligibility than others do. Such

¹⁹ Youth Health Protection Act. 2021. SB 514. North Carolina General Assembly, 2021–2022 Session.

injustices are especially salient in trans experience—perhaps especially in the experience of nonbinary people and trans men.²⁰

5.4. Looking Within and Speaking Out

Some instances of hermeneutical injustice have significant *introspective* aspects: a hermeneutical lacuna can be an impediment to self-discovery, self-authorship, or the interpretation of one's own needs and experiences. This is exemplified by many of the hermeneutical injustices surrounding gay and trans self-discovery.

However, not all hermeneutical injustices disable the interpretive capacities of the marginalized in this way. Often, we understand ourselves and our experiences quite well, but the hermeneutical resources needed to *communicate* this understanding to others are not in wide circulation. Furthermore, what stymies communications in these latter cases is often more an issue of the dominantly situated audience failing to do their epistemic due diligence, and less an issue of the marginalized not having a good enough communicative tool box—a point highlighted by Dotson (2011, 2014), Medina (2013), Pohlhaus (2012), and others. We expect these distinctions will be relevant to both the shape of hermeneutical liberation movements and the kinds of backlash to which they are vulnerable.

Active ignorance often plays an important role in backlashes supporting both sorts of injustice, including trans youth panics. Active ignorance is something that actively contributes to a misrepresentation of the world, as opposed to passive ignorance, which is something like a simple information gap that does not resist being filled. One form active ignorance may take is willful hermeneutical ignorance, which is “the propensity to dismiss whole aspects of the experienced world by refusing to become proficient in the epistemic resources required for attending to those parts of the world well” (Pohlhaus 2017). Other related phenomena may include Kristie Dotson's concept of “contributory injustice,” which is an epistemic agent's “maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm to the epistemic agency of a knower,” which she identifies as a form of willful hermeneutical injustice (Dotson 2012, 31). Dotson also develops a broader notion of “epistemic violence,” which is, “the failure, owing to pernicious ignorance, of hearers to meet the vulnerabilities of speakers in linguistic exchanges” (Dotson 2011, 236). The literature on active ignorance is a vital resource for further work on hermeneutical backlash.

²⁰ In the North American and British contexts, at least, media and research attention have historically focused heavily on trans women, rendering transmasculine and nonbinary identities especially unintelligible or unimaginable.

5.5. Speaking among Ourselves and Speaking for Ourselves

For some liberation movements, like the feminist consciousness-raising movements from which Fricker draws her core examples, the hermeneutical lacuna that needs to be addressed is ubiquitous: before the liberation movement, the needed hermeneutical resource is absent not just from the *dominant* social imaginary but from the social imaginary of *every* epistemic community. In other cases, like many of the racial justice movements that provide important examples for Medina and Dotson, the marginalized may have an established community with adequate hermeneutical resources for self-understanding and community-internal communication, but the *dominant* social imaginary does not share these resources, limiting the ability of the marginalized to express their needs and grievances to those in power, and the ability of those at the dominant center to make sense of discourse at/from the margins.

There is a related distinction among hermeneutical liberation projects: is the main goal to build or enrich epistemic communities *at* the margins, or to advocate as a community *from* the margins? The process of recruiting women into feminist discursive spaces, encouraging them to become fluent in the hermeneutical resources of the movement, and developing new resources within movement spaces would be an example of the former, as would the sorts of queer and trans hermeneutical liberation that we've focused on here. On the other hand, an effort to push men to become more aware of women's experiences and grievances, and more fluent in the hermeneutical resources developed by feminists, would be an example of the latter. As with other distinctions we've introduced, these differences may correspond to different backlash vulnerabilities.

5.6. Liberatory and Propagandistic Friction

Both hermeneutical liberation and hermeneutical backlash involve a resistance against certain ideas, beliefs, and hermeneutical resources. Medina calls this resistance "epistemic friction." He argues that epistemic friction can be a good or bad thing (Medina 2013, 48), depending (in part) on its effects. For example, a healthy dose of skepticism is a kind of epistemic friction, and it is good for vetting information. However, excessive skepticism, or biased standards in one's application of skepticism, inhibits the accurate vetting of information. Epistemic friction can also differ in its function. Some uses of epistemic friction, such as in many liberation movements, provide protection and resistance against epistemic objectification—the treatment of some people as solely objects to be known about rather than fellow epistemic agents to be listened to. But other forms of epistemic friction, such as that used within

backlash movements, create and maintain epistemic objectification by seeking to prevent the marginalized from claiming their place in the epistemic community.²¹

This friction may become what Jason Stanley calls “undermining propaganda” and even “demagoguery” when it frames hermeneutical liberation as pathological or otherwise deserving of suspicion and fear. Under the guise of “reasonable concern” and caution for the sake of others’ well-being, it uses fear to short-circuit more reasoned discourse and discredit others’ testimony about their well-being (Stanley 2015, 47–48). There is much more to explore in the relationship between Hermeneutical Backlash, propaganda, and uses of epistemic friction.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have used the case study of trans youth panics to highlight some common backlash vulnerabilities of hermeneutical liberation movements. In doing so, we have highlighted the dynamic and contested nature of epistemic oppression and resistance to it. We hope that this has called attention both to the dangers of this panic and the need for the further study of hermeneutical backlash and related phenomena.


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²¹ See Medina (2013, 91) and Fricker (2007, 133) for further discussion of epistemic objectification.

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