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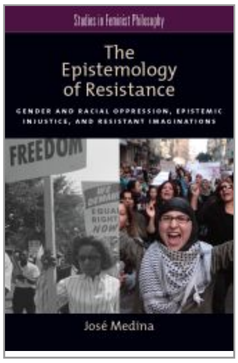

The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination
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Imposed Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter develops a contextualist approach to hermeneutical injustice that is pluralistic, interactive, and dynamic. First, I offer an expansion of Miranda Fricker's analysis of *silencing*, arguing that we need to pay attention to the performative and pragmatic aspects of communicative dynamics to fully appreciate the patterns of silence that are part of epistemic injustice in general and of hermeneutical injustice in particular. In the second place, I argue that a more deeply pluralistic account of hermeneutical justice is needed, one that takes into account the communicative dynamics of a plurality of publics that are internally heterogeneous and contain multiple voices and perspectives. Finally, I use my polyphonic contextualism to expand Fricker's view of what counts as *virtuous interpretative responsiveness* and to offer a more robust notion of epistemic responsibility with respect to hermeneutical justice.

Keywords: silence, hermeneutical injustice, epistemic responsibility, hermeneutical responsibility, pragmatics, communication, publics, interpretation, uptake, responsiveness

In a preliminary way, we can roughly define *hermeneutical injustice* as the kind of epistemic injustice that occurs when a subject is unfairly disadvantaged in her capacities to make sense of an experience. Although I am in agreement with Miranda Fricker's context-sensitive approach to hermeneutical injustice in her ground-breaking book *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), in this chapter I will argue that this contextualist approach has to be pluralized and rendered relational in more complex ways. In the first place, I argue that the normative assessment of social silences and the epistemic harms they generate cannot be properly carried out without a pluralistic analysis of the different interpretative communities and interpretative practices that coexist in the social context in question. Social silences and hermeneutical gaps are incorrectly described if they are uniformly predicated on an entire social context, instead of being predicated on particular ways of inhabiting that context by particular people in relation to particular others. I contend that a more nuanced—*polyphonic*—contextualization offers a more adequate picture of what it means to break social silences and to repair the hermeneutical injustices associated with them. In the second place, I argue that the particular obligations with respect to hermeneutical justice that differently situated subjects and groups have are *interactive* and need to be determined *relationally*. That is, whether individuals and groups live up to their hermeneutical responsibilities has to be assessed by taking into account the forms of mutual positionality, relationality, and responsiveness (or lack thereof) that these subjects and groups display with respect to one another. I will develop the core of my argument through an examination of what in contemporary epistemologies of ignorance has been termed "white ignorance," that is, the kind of hermeneutical inability of privileged white subjects to recognize and make sense of their racial identities, experiences, and positionality in a racialized world.

This is how I plan to make Fricker's social contextualism more deeply pluralistic, interactive, and dynamic. In section 3.1 I will offer an expansion of Fricker's analysis of *silencing*, arguing that we need to pay attention to the performative and pragmatic aspects of communicative dynamics to fully **(p.91)** appreciate the patterns of silence that are part of epistemic injustice in general and of hermeneutical injustice in particular. In section 3.2 I will try to show that a more deeply pluralistic account of hermeneutical justice is needed, one that takes into account the communicative dynamics of a plurality of publics that are internally heterogeneous and contain multiple voices and perspectives. Finally, in section 3.3, I will use my polyphonic contextualism to expand Fricker's view of what counts as *virtuous interpretative responsiveness* and to offer a more robust notion of epistemic responsibility with respect to hermeneutical justice.

3.1. Silences and the Communicative Approach to Epistemic Injustice

In the communicative approach I will be developing in this chapter, hermeneutical injustice will be treated, roughly, as the kind of injustice that appears when there are wrongful interpretative obstacles that affect people differently in how they are *silenced*, that is, in their inability to express themselves and to be understood. Understanding the communicative dynamics in and through which people are differentially silenced, and the plurality of ways in which this can happen in sociohistorical contexts of communication, is the key to understanding hermeneutical injustices. Fricker distinguishes two different kinds of socially produced silences based on identity prejudices. In the first place, there are *preemptive silences*: people can be *preemptively* silenced by being excluded in advance from participating in communicative exchanges. As Fricker puts it, there is "*pre-emptive* testimonial injustice" when there is "a tendency for some groups simply not to be asked for information in the first place" (p. 130). Fricker emphasizes that preemptive silencing is "highly context-dependent." It is unlikely that we could find subjects "whose knowledge or opinions were *never* solicited on *any* subject matter" (pp. 130–131). Instead, our contextualist analyses of preemptive silencing should look for specific contexts of communicative interaction in which the participation of particular groups of people become constrained in particular respects. But within a particular context and with respect to a particular topic or set of issues, the communicative dynamics may not exclude any group from participation, and nonetheless the members of different groups may enjoy quite different voices in that context, and they may be heard differently. In other words, even when people are not entirely excluded from participation, their communicative agency may be constrained or compromised in important ways; and the appreciation of their contributions may not be on a par with that of others. This is addressed (at least in part) in the second kind of silencing that Fricker analyzes: what she calls "*epistemic objectification*" (p. 133).

In this second kind of silencing, people's participation in communicative exchanges is allowed, their contributions are in fact used for knowledge-production and knowledge-transmission purposes, but nonetheless, they are **(p. 92)** not treated as informants—that is, as subjects of knowledge or "epistemic agents who convey information"—but only as sources of information—that is, as objects or "states of affairs from which the inquirer may be in a position to glean information" (p. 132). Here too Fricker emphasizes that "context is all" when it comes to determine whether an epistemic objectification amounts to an epistemic injustice (p. 133). Regarding others as objects in epistemic interactions is not intrinsically wrong and, in fact, it is unproblematic when the speakers so regarded are *also*, at other moments, treated *as subjects* of knowledge and *not as mere objects*. It follows from this contextualist insight that we need to follow communicative exchanges long enough in order to detect their patterns of epistemic interaction and the communicative dynamics that unfolds in them over time. I could not agree more with this contextualist perspective. As I argued in the previous chapter, epistemic injustices can be detected only in temporally and socially extended contexts where patterns of communicative interaction unfold. However, while in agreement with Fricker's contextualist approach, I submit that her notions of silencing and "epistemic objectification" need to be expanded.

According to Fricker, a speaker is epistemically objectified when she is undermined “in her capacity as a *giver* of knowledge” (p. 133; my emphasis). But a speaker can also be undermined in her capacity as a *producer* of knowledge, that is, not as an *informant* who reports to an inquirer, but as an *inquirer* herself, as an investigative subject who asks questions and issues interpretations and evaluations of knowledge and opinions. Assuming that all silencing and all objectifying are avoided when speakers are treated as *informants* is wrong, for their voices can still be constrained and minimized, and their capacities as knowers can still be undermined. The epistemic agency of an informant *qua informant* is limited and subordinated to that of the inquirer’s. Qua informant, the epistemic agency of a speaker (her capacity to convey information and act as a giver of knowledge) is at the service of the inquirer’s epistemic agency (her questions, her assessments, and her interpretations). There is of course nothing wrong in treating someone as an informant. But there could be problems of epistemic justice in treating someone *only* as an informant, for there is *no full and equal epistemic cooperation* when that is the case. When one is allowed to be an informant *without* being allowed to be an inquirer, one is allowed to enter into one set of communicative activities—those relating to passing knowledge and opinions—but not others, precisely those others that are more sophisticated, happen at a higher level of abstraction, and require more epistemic authority: formulating hypotheses, probing and questioning, assessing and interpreting knowledge and opinions, and so on. Giving people “epistemic subjectivity” instead of treating them as mere objects does not guarantee that “their general status as a subject of knowledge” may not be constrained or minimized in specific respects in particular communicative dynamics. The treatment of **(p. 93)** women as hysterics, of queer people as pathologically deviant, and of people of color as perennially immature was consistent with treating them as informants with epistemic subjectivity and agency (though limited and defective). Even on the topics and in the contexts in which these subjects have been given a differential voice and differential epistemic agency, they could nonetheless be treated as subjects of knowledge, but without the full range of epistemic capacities that other subjects enjoy as inquirers and evaluators of knowledge.

Identifying deficits in attributions of epistemic agency requires that we pay attention to subtle aspects of the communicative dynamics among participants in epistemic exchanges. Communicative contexts are typically populated by differently situated voices with differential epistemic agency; and participants in communicative exchanges have to make special efforts to promote their equality and to work against biases that affect their interaction. As fair communicators who treat each other as equals, participants in these exchanges have communicative obligations with respect to epistemic justice that go beyond allowing others to speak and to enjoy the generic status of an epistemic subject. In particular, they have an obligation to remain open to the (in principle) *reversibility* of roles in communication, inquiry, and interpretation. The communicative relations that are established in epistemic interaction have to be in principle *reciprocal*, with their roles—of inquirer and informant, for example—being potentially reversible. Nothing short of this reversibility and reciprocity can guarantee the equality in communicative participation required by fair epistemic practices. This has been emphasized by those theorists who have drawn normative epistemic implications from speech act theory. It was done by Jürgen Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), and more recently by Jennifer Hornsby and Rae Langton in “Free Speech and Illocution” (1998).

Fricker discusses the work of Hornsby and Langton and their notion of *reciprocity*: “a primitive relational stance that fellow communicators have towards one another *as* communicators” (p. 140). Hornsby and Langton establish a close link between reciprocity and uptake, arguing that relations of reciprocity foster communicative climates that facilitate uptake. This emphasis on uptake underscores the *interactive* dimension of epistemic exchanges. In the communicative dynamics of a communicative exchange it is crucial to pay attention not only to how the speaker’s utterances are semantically assessed by the hearers, but also how the hearers performatively address the speaker and how they respond or fail to respond to the illocutionary aspects of the speaker’s speech acts: for example, responding to “Look out!” as a warning, or to “No!” as an act of refusal or withholding consent. Hearers are not mere spectators who analyze and assess utterances from a distance; they are engaged participants who have the capacity to respond and engage with the speaker’s communicative actions. A continued lack of reciprocity and a **(p.94)** systematic failure of uptake silence speakers and produce *communicative dysfunctions*, which call for special efforts at interpretation. The paradigmatic case of dysfunctional communicative dynamics that Hornsby and Langton analyze is that of women’s attempts at rejecting sexual advances when they receive no proper uptake. They argue that in cases such as these we should construe the lack of uptake as a form of silencing. Fricker agrees with Hornsby and Langton’s treatment of these communicative dysfunctions:

> It may be legally important, for instance, that a less than fully successful illocution of ‘No’ can be sufficient for withholding sexual consent, lest failure of uptake on the part of an attacker be construed as exculpating him from a charge of sexual assault. (p. 141)

But Fricker takes issue with the *communicative* account of silencing that Hornsby and Langton offer, failing to integrate in her view an interactive approach to epistemic exchanges in which uptake and performative negotiations figure prominently.

Fricker contends that Hornsby and Langton provide “a purely communicative conception of silencing” which is non-epistemic (p. 141). She argues that, on this account, what is at issue is not the hearer’s appraisal of the speaker’s credibility, but rather, the performative dynamics between them and the illocutionary possibilities available to the speaker:

> The silenced woman’s problem is not that her interlocutor regards her word as so worthless that when she says “No” he doesn’t hear her; rather, his stance towards her in the context is such that she is prevented from (fully successfully) performing the illocutionary act of refusal in the first place. (Ibid.)

By contrast, Fricker argues that her “epistemic model … requires less erosion of women’s human status” (p. 142), explaining the silencing of women’s voices only in terms of their lack of credibility. But Fricker’s epistemic analysis, I want to suggest, is perfectly compatible with the performative analysis; in fact, they nicely complement each other. Women’s credibility is indeed at issue, but so is the broader issue of whether women can mean what they say and are in a position to assess their communicative intentions vis-à-vis others. And the latter concerns basic communicative capacities that subjects must enjoy if they are to be considered epistemic agents in a full sense. Fricker goes on to argue, persuasively, that “when someone is excluded from the relations of epistemic trust that are at work in a co-operative practice of pooling information, they are wrongfully excluded from participation in the practice that defines the core of the concept of knowledge” (p. 145). Indeed they are attributed a deficient and inferior epistemic subjectivity and a precarious epistemic agency. I could not agree more. But these epistemic exclusions and deficient attributions can be properly detected *only* if uptake and communicative **(p.95)** dynamics are taken into account. The interactive and performative approach enables us to recognize whether subjects can talk back and have agency and negotiating power in the interpretation and evaluation of their experiences, and whether they have full status as inquirers and interpreters. Asking us to choose between the communicative and the epistemic analysis of the phenomena of silencing creates a false dichotomy that we should not be confronted with, for silencing raises both an epistemic and a communicative problem. As I will discuss in the next section, silencing is typically accompanied by processes of *struggling to make sense*, in which issues of credibility and issues of intelligibility are intertwined. Silencing is one of the areas in which we cannot separate out communicative and epistemic agency: it is because of impoverished communicative dynamics without reciprocity and uptake that epistemic trust cannot be established and credibility is undermined; and when epistemic subjectivity and agency are seriously compromised, the subject’s communicative capacities cannot be recovered and she will enjoy, at best, an inferior voice in the interaction. When communicative negotiations are impaired, epistemic negotiations become limited and defective, and vice versa.

The communicative and performative approach to epistemic interactions offers us an *enlarged conception of epistemic agency* that has at its core the communicative reversibility of epistemic roles. Epistemic agency crucially involves the capacity to engage in epistemic negotiations, and it is not properly understood if its interactive dimension is disregarded and subjects of knowledge are simply conceived as adopting one epistemic role at a time—now informant, now inquirer, now conveyer of information, now assessor and evaluator—without looking into the communicative dynamics in which these roles are entangled, become alive, grow, shrink, and develop interrelated trajectories. It is crucial to develop a dynamic and interactive view of epistemic activities that pays attention to (and traces the trajectory of) people's responsiveness to each other's contributions, so that we can assess the degree of cooperation and joint participation in all the aspects of epistemic interaction. Epistemic interaction involves more than the mere pooling of information; it also involves negotiating processes of mutual interrogation and the collaborative generation of meanings and interpretative possibilities.

Drawing on the interactive communicative approach defended here, in the next section I will argue that Fricker pays insufficient attention to the communicative and performative dimension of hermeneutical injustice, which is treated mainly as a *semantic* phenomenon concerning the intelligibility of experiential contents. In the second place, although Fricker offers a powerful contextualist approach that I endorse, I will argue that this approach is insufficiently pluralized, making it difficult to account for some cognitive dysfunctions and hermeneutical harms that recent epistemologies of ignorance have analyzed.

(p.96) 3.2. Communicative Pluralism and Hermeneutical Injustice

As suggested in the previous chapter, hermeneutical and testimonial injustices are often interrelated so intimately that we cannot understand one without the other. Fricker talks about their convergence as if it were an occasional occurrence, a special case in which “a double epistemic injustice” is committed and “the speaker is doubly wronged: once by the structural prejudice in the shared hermeneutical resource, and once by the hearer in making an identity-prejudiced credibility judgment” (2007, p. 159). This “grim possibility,” Fricker observes, appears when we find a “speaker struggling to make herself intelligible in a testimonial exchange”; in such a case, “hermeneutical injustice might often be compounded by testimonial injustices” (Ibid.). Indeed the hermeneutically disadvantaged speaker is likely to find unsympathetic listeners who find her insufficiently credible. But my communicative interactionism suggests an even deeper connection in which these two types of injustice become intertwined, feeding each other and deepening the effects of each other. On the one hand, hermeneutical injustices are maintained and passed on through testimonial dynamics that exhibit systematic failures of communicative and performative responsiveness: interpretative gaps among partners in communication are formed, maintained, and passed on, because those who are struggling to make sense are persistently not heard and their inchoate attempts at generating new meanings are blocked or unanswered. In other words, these gaps emerge from and are supported by *testimonial insensitivities*. And, on the other hand, testimonial injustices become not simply likely but almost inescapable when the persistence of hermeneutical gaps renders certain voices less intelligible (and hence less credible) than others on certain matters, and their attempts to articulate certain meanings are systematically regarded as nonsensical (and hence incredible). Because of difficulties in expressing and interpreting certain things—because of *hermeneutical insensitivities*—people’s credibility can get undermined; but also their lack of credibility can call into question the intelligibility of their formulations and interpretations, especially when they are advancing new meanings and struggling to make sense in the face of widespread hermeneutical limitations. Testimonial insensitivities and hermeneutical insensitivities feed each other.[1]

(p.97) The central suggestion of my communicative interactionism is that hermeneutical gaps have to be understood in terms of failures in communicative and interpretative responsiveness, that is, as deficits in hermeneutical sensibility. Hermeneutical insensitivities involve the inability to respond to attempts (however inarticulate) to express certain aspects of our experience or the experience of others. It is because of socially cultivated hermeneutical insensitivities that communicative attempts to articulate certain meanings can remain systematically unattended and hermeneutical gaps can be formed and kept in place. The agential aspect of hermeneutical gaps is obscured by Fricker's analogy with ozone holes, which can be misleading: "Hermeneutical lacunas are like holes in the ozone—it's people who live under them that get burned" (p. 161).

But hermeneutical gaps are nothing like ozone holes if these are conceived as fixed spots whose existence and power over our lives are independent of our agency. On the other hand, they are a lot like ozone holes if these are conceived as intimately and interactively related to our agency: as the result of our ways of moving about and inhabiting the world, as an accumulation of negative effects of our actions, these "holes" are formed and, once formed, they have a negative impact on our lives. It is—at least in part—because of the cumulative effects of our environmentally insensitive behavior that ozone holes are formed, and, once in place, they handicap our environmental lives and are hard to eradicate. Similarly, it is—at least in part—because of the cumulative effects of our hermeneutically insensitive behavior that hermeneutical gaps are formed, and, once in place, they handicap our communicative lives and are hard to eradicate. In order to identify and properly diagnose hermeneutical insensitivities, communicative dynamics matter deeply: it is of the utmost importance *who* is communicating (or trying to communicate) *what* to *whom*. But specific communicative processes are not explicitly considered in Fricker's analysis of hermeneutical injustice, which focuses on the lack of intelligibility of the experience of certain groups, without specifying for whom experience is being rendered unintelligible, in what kind of communicative interaction and according to which dynamic.

Communicative dynamics are not at the forefront of Fricker’s analysis of hermeneutical injustice, which is not initially couched in explicit communicative terms, but in semantic terms, that is, in terms of the *intelligibility* of experience. Initially, in chapter 7, Fricker describes hermeneutical injustice as resulting in the “occluded experiences” of hermeneutically marginalized subjects, contending that what characterizes hermeneutically disadvantaged groups is their inability “to understand their own experiences” (pp. 147–8). Later, however, the focus shifts to the communication of these experiences, and Fricker then describes being hermeneutically marginalized as enjoying unequal participation in communicative practices in which meanings are generated and expressed. The problem resides with the ambiguity in the expression “the **(p. 98)** *intelligibility* of experience,” which can refer to people’s abilities to understand their own experiences or to their abilities to communicate about them with diverse others. The multifaceted aspects of the *struggles to make sense* of one’s experiences to oneself, to those who undergo similar experiences, and to other groups are obscured by simply talking about the intelligibility or unintelligibility of experience without specifying to whom, in what communicative context, and with what dynamic—because quite different possibilities are opened up (or can be opened up) depending on those variables: whether one is talking to oneself, to sympathetic subjects, or to unsympathetic subjects; whether the communicative context—or the speakers claiming agency in it—allows for semantic innovations, flexibility, and playfulness; whether the speaker finds receptivity and responsiveness when deviating from standard semantic expectations; and, in general, how the communicative interaction unfolds.

Fricker remarks that hermeneutical injustices take place when and because "a collective hermeneutical gap prevents members of a group from making sense of an experience that is in their interest to render intelligible" (p. 7). What is meant by this hermeneutical activity of "making sense of an experience" that is undermined? Making sense to whom? To oneself? To others? And which others? There are different communicative processes by which we try to make sense of our experiences. It is not the same to try to make sense of one's experience to oneself, to others within one's group or in the same predicament, or to others who do not share the experience in question.[2] And when it comes to hermeneutical gaps, it is crucial to pay attention to the communicative processes in which subjects *struggle to make sense to themselves* of what they cannot yet communicate to others, especially to those others who do not share their predicament. Through these communicative attempts, subjects start to work on the melioration of hermeneutical sensibilities, starting with their own and with the sensibilities of those in communicative contact with them. Through repeated attempts to communicate with ourselves and with those around us about experiences that have been obscured and hermeneutically marginalized, we can expand our hermeneutical sensibilities and eventually add to the hermeneutical resources of our group through contributions that could also spread to other groups, with new interpretative tools acquiring progressively wider circulation. According to this dynamic view of hermeneutical resources and agency, it is misleading to assume that only what has been antecedently recognized and included in the "shared hermeneutical resource" can be rendered intelligible, whether to oneself or to others. In this sense, it is dangerous to establish too close a link between intelligibility and linguistic labels. **(p.99)** Fricker is certainly right that sometimes we find "a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be" (pp. 150–151). But multiple struggles to make sense have to be sustained over time for a group of subjects to develop this definite sense of the contours of a social experience that still lacks a name. This is, roughly, the story of new interpretative tools created by movements of resistance such as the women's movement, the civil rights movement, or the sexual liberation movement. As Fricker points out, "speak-outs" were organized in the women's movement to address experiences of sexual intimidation even before labels such as "sexual harassment" were available. And, as Fricker remarks, women activists found themselves in the peculiar situation that "the 'this' they were going to break the silence about had no name" (p. 150).

We should be careful not to tie too closely people's hermeneutical capacities to the repertoire of readily available terms and coined concepts, as if oppressed subjects did not have ways of expressing their suffering well before such articulations were available. For example, non-heterosexual subjects had ways of signaling to themselves and to others like them that they were being sexually oppressed long before terms such as "homophobia" and "heterosexism" were in circulation. And women suffering abuse from their partners were struggling to make sense of their experiences and to give expression to their predicament, even if in fragmentary and precarious ways, long before labels such as "marital rape" and "domestic violence" were available.[3] It is crucial to develop *a hermeneutical sensibility with respect to embryonic and inchoate attempts at communicating* about experiences that do not yet have standard formulations. Nascent meanings may be in an embryonic process of formation, and their tentative expressions may not yet be accepted by the mainstream public (or even by most publics) within a culture. And this goes not only for negative experiences of suffering that are silenced, but also for positive experiences and life-affirming situations that new emerging publics may be struggling to make sense of, or simply struggling to convey to others. For example, the intelligibility of same-sex relations should not be directly tied to the emergence of labels such as "same-sex marriage" or "civil unions," or to a woman's capacity to refer to her lesbian lover as "girlfriend," "wife," "spouse," or "partner," and a man's capacity to refer to his gay lover as "boyfriend," "husband," "spouse," or "partner." I am not suggesting, of course, that these labels have not helped in gay people's struggle to make sense of their relationships. Rather, I am suggesting that they are a late chapter in that struggle, and we lose sight of the more **(p.100)** dynamic, interactive, and complicated processes of communication through which gay people made sense of their sexual and affective attachments and commitments in the absence of those labels.

There may be such hidden communicative processes and embryonic formulations of meaning even in the most adverse hermeneutical contexts. As Charles Mills (2007), for one, has suggested, even during slavery there were multiple ways in which black voices found ways to express their suffering and to speak out against racial oppression. And it would be to indulge in a dangerous fiction to postulate a dark time in which *everybody* was blind to the wrongs of slavery and *nobody* knew how to communicate about them.[4] As I have argued elsewhere (2006a), communicative contexts are always polyphonic, and the plurality of experiential and hermeneutical perspectives in any given context is such that we can always find voices that depart from the available communicative practices and dynamics, and their eccentric agency exceeds standard meanings and interpretative resources. There is a point in Fricker's discussion where she formulates this pluralistic phenomenon of there being perspectives that go beyond what the dominant interpretative framework and its hermeneutical resources allow. This is where she describes the experience of *dissonance* between one's experience and the interpretative horizon one has inherited. She describes this experience as the source of an important form of "resistance"—*hermeneutical resistance*, we can call it—which originates in the following way:

> Authoritative constructions in the shared hermeneutical resource … impinge on us collectively but not uniformly, and the non-uniformity of their hold over us can create a sense of dissonance between an experience and the various constructions that are ganging up to overpower its nascent proper meaning. (p. 166)

Hermeneutical resistance shows vividly that conflicts can appear in communicative dynamics. Fricker pays some attention to communicative dynamics in her discussion of hermeneutical injustice when she shifts from semantic contents to voices and expressive styles: "a hermeneutical gap might equally concern not (or not only) the content but rather the form of what can be said" (p. 160). At this point Fricker's discussion turns to the development of a voice under adverse hermeneutical climates, shifting the focus from the semantics of experiential contents to the pragmatics of meaning-making and meaning-sharing activities. However, Fricker's discussion quickly goes back **(p. 101)** to the semantic level as she goes on to analyze "the wrong of hermeneutical injustice" in terms of the intelligibility or unintelligibility of experience. Given the heterogeneity and fluidity of discursive possibilities in communicative interactions, I find it problematic that Fricker operates with the working assumption that when there is a hermeneutical gap, a range of experiences will be rendered unintelligible *for everybody* independently of particular communicative dynamics. To begin with, the unintelligibility of an experience in the speaker's terms is quite different when the speaker's attempts to communicate the experience encounter inattention, hermeneutical neglect, or hermeneutical incapacity—that is, when the interlocutors are unmoved or unable to identify what is being talked about—and, on the other hand, when speakers encounter *counter-interpretations* that systematically distort their communicative attempts—for example, when a woman's attempts to convey that she feels sexually harassed are interpreted as an overreaction to "harmless flirting." Systematic distortions of this sort typically limit some subjects' capacity to understand under some conditions, but not of the whole social body. As epistemologies of ignorance have emphasized, it is not always the case that hermeneutical gaps render experiences unintelligible for everybody equally and in every communicative dynamic. As epistemologists (such as standpoint theorists) writing on interracial, intergender, and intersexual (mis)communication and (mis)understanding have emphasized, when we encounter hermeneutical problems in situations of oppression, it is of the utmost importance to keep in mind that a complex society often contains diverse publics with heterogeneous interpretative resources and practices.

Public silences, even when they do involve unfair hermeneutical disadvantages, should not be equated with a complete expressive and interpretative incapacity. Sometimes oppressed or marginalized publics do not communicate about certain things with other publics not because they are hermeneutically incapable of doing so, but because, given the special vulnerabilities they have accrued, it is not in their interest to do so. In my view, this amounts to a hermeneutical injustice because these publics—unlike hermeneutically privileged ones—are forced to inhabit communicative contexts in which they cannot exercise their hermeneutical capacities to make sense of their experiences, or they can only exercise them at high costs that others do not have to pay. A perfect illustration of this kind of hermeneutical injustice is provided by Patricia Hill Collins's analysis of black women's silence about sexuality. According to Collins's analysis, there are three different factors "shaping patterns of silence" here (1990/2000, p. 125). The first one is the suppression of black women's voices by dominant groups: "Those who control the schools, news media, churches, and government suppress Black women's collective voice" (p. 123). But Collins observes that since in the twentieth century black women have become quite outspoken about other topics despite the institutional suppression of their voices **(p.102)** in mainstream contexts, this suppression cannot fully explain their persistent silence about sexuality. A second factor behind the patterns of silence that Collins analyzes is what she calls "Black women's struggles to work within the confines of norms of racial solidarity" (p. 125). In the United States, Collins shows, black women have been discouraged to speak about sexual topics that put black men at risk. Following norms of racial solidarity, black women have prioritized the vulnerabilities of black men over their own vulnerabilities, and they have often chosen not to speak about rape, incest, and sexual violence in the black community, not because they did not have a language or a context to do it, but because of distrust of non-black publics and because of fear of deepening the sexual stigmatizations of black men. In the third place, another factor that has shaped black women's sexual silence, according to Collins, is self-protection. The "potential benefits of remaining silent" (p. 124) have counseled black women to retreat to the safety of intimate spaces and communities to talk about sexuality. Secrecy about sexual matters has been crucial for black women's safety, given their sexual stigmatization:

> This secrecy was especially important within a US culture that routinely accused Black women of being sexually immoral, promiscuous jezebels. In a climate where one's sexuality is on public display, holding fast to privacy and trying to shut the closet door becomes paramount. (p. 125)

Finding safe spaces of interaction and developing agency and resources to resist required that black women keep silent about certain topics that could compromise their struggles and deepen their vulnerabilities. In the eloquent words of Darlene Hine, “Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle” (quoted by Collins, p. 125).

So black women’s long-standing sexual silence has been due not only to the lack of opportunities and resources to talk about sexual matters, but also and more importantly to the need to protect others and to protect themselves. Traditionally black women reserved their discussions of sexuality to the confines of their own community, refusing to engage communicatively with other publics on sexual matters. As a result, they have appeared to be *silent on the outside*,[5] while being talkative in the inside and among themselves. But it would be a distortion to describe this silence on the outside as a merely *chosen* or *self-imposed* public silence, as if there were no problem of justice here, for black women’s voices have been unfairly coerced to remain silent where others could speak freely and at no (or little) cost, and, therefore, this constitutes a **(p.103)** hermeneutical injustice even though the victims do not lack the expressive resources and capacities to communicate. In order to analyze properly the different public silences that different groups may experience, we need to take into account the plurality of publics that interact communicatively in different contexts, for it may very well be that the pattern of silence has definite contours and subjects may appear silent in the interaction with some publics and not with others (or among themselves). There are different expressive resources available to different publics, and there are different costs in breaking a silence that diverse publics can face. This heterogeneous plurality of hermeneutical predicaments has to be captured in an analysis of hermeneutical injustice. Since the obstacles and stakes in breaking a silence can be quite different for different groups, the proper analysis of unjust silences and hermeneutical lacunae requires a thoroughgoing pluralistic approach.

There is a significant degree of pluralism in Fricker’s perspective, which derives from her contextual approach: she does emphasize that differently situated subjects are affected differently by pervasive hermeneutical gaps. But, nonetheless, she does assume that all subjects will be affected by these gaps, as if they were inescapable and all-encompassing lacunas that cover the entire social fabric. This is dangerous to assume, because it is important to keep always open the possibility that we may find more hermeneutical resources than we expected in remote and obscure corners of the social fabric. Fricker’s contextual approach has to be further pluralized, and the assumptions she makes about the pervasiveness of hermeneutical lacunas and their influence on entire collectivities have to be interrogated. These assumptions are expressed in her very definition of hermeneutical injustice:

> Hermeneutical injustice is: the injustice of having some significant area of one's experience *obscured from collective understanding* owing to a structural identity prejudice in *the collective hermeneutical resource*. (p. 155; my emphasis)

But *whose* "collective understanding"? And *whose* "collective hermeneutical resource"? If the collectivity in question has multiple publics, which in turn contain heterogeneous subgroups, it is not clear that we can (or should) talk about the "collective understanding" of an experience without qualification. And, more importantly, Fricker's expression "the collective hermeneutical resource" strongly suggests that we can pool all the hermeneutical resources available to all groups and create some kind of exhaustive inventory. But no matter how unified and well communicated the social body happens to be, such inventory should be suspect, for it is likely to be an artificial unification invoked from a theoretical standpoint, which always runs the risk of disregarding some marginalized and hard-to-find interpretative resources—those that are still in the making and remain fragmentary and inarticulate. Even highly monolithic and homogeneous societies are likely to contain interpretative **(p.104)** diversity, and they could at least contain the *possibility* of hermeneutical dissidence and of the embryonic formation of counter-publics. Moreover, a heterogeneous social fabric contains multiple publics with different ways of talking and of making sense of their experiences; and it is not at all clear that there is always some unified hermeneutical realm where the interpretative resources of all can be pooled; and even within distinctive publics with their peculiar resources, there will be differences, deviations, and idiosyncratic supplemental interpretative tools. It is crucial to pay attention to this diversity and not to assume what a collective social body, *as a whole*, is or is not in a position to understand. Of course there are quite extended social blind spots and hermeneutical insensitivities, but it is also frequent to find in those scenarios some groups or collection of individuals struggling to make sense of experiences that fall into those blind spots and have been so far ill understood (if recognized at all) by most people. So, we need to ask: what about those hermeneutical resources that are *not widely shared*, especially those that are buried in the interstices and obscure corners of the social fabric? It is not helpful to talk about "the collective hermeneutical resource" without introducing heterogeneity of perspectives, interpretative forms of dissidence, and embryonic possibilities of emerging meanings.

A complex social body always contains heterogeneous hermeneutical publics with diverse resources, but this heterogeneity is accentuated and radicalized in a society that is fractured, for the social division typically results in groups developing their own communicative and interpretative practices and dynamics. This is what happens under conditions of *oppression*. For example, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1994), W. E. B. Du Bois famously talked about the two Americas divided along racial lines, black and white, and he gave us powerful descriptions of the hermeneutical predicaments of: (a) those who lived exclusively in the white world—unequipped to understand what took place not only in the other world, but even in their own world; and (b) those who were forced to live in two worlds—the one that was forced on them and the one that they created, the one they served and the alternative one they could call home. For Du Bois, while white Americans exhibited a special kind of blindness and deafness in the obscure world they had created, black Americans developed a "double vision" and a "double consciousness" that was attentive to dual meanings and had special insights into the two worlds. Following Du Bois, I would add that racially privileged subjects tend to develop a *special kind of hermeneutical insensitivity with respect to racial meanings*, whereas racially oppressed subjects tend to become attentive and sensitive to them. Interestingly, the subjects who become *most epistemically harmed and hermeneutically disadvantaged in their ability to make sense of their social experiences of racialization* were in fact those who benefit the most from the hermeneutical obstacles, those who receive the non-epistemic benefits that these obstacles helped to produce or maintain. The Du Boisian analysis of the racial blindness of racially privileged subjects has been elaborated further under the rubric of "white ignorance" in **(p.105)** the recent literature. In his now-classic *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills (1997) put white ignorance on the agenda of critical race theory. There Mills argues that privileged white subjects have become unable to understand the world that they themselves have created; and he calls attention to the cognitive dysfunctions and pathologies inscribed in the white world and constitutive of its epistemic economy, which revolves not only around the epistemic exclusion and stigmatization of people of color, but also around a carefully cultivated racial blindness of the white gaze. As Mills suggests, white ignorance is a form of self-ignorance: the inability to recognize one's own racial identity and the presuppositions and consequences of one's racial positionality.

In *Revealing Whiteness*, Shannon Sullivan (2006) has offered a detailed analysis of how privileged white subjects have maintained the ignorance of their own racialization through well-entrenched racial habits that hide themselves: whiteness has been rendered invisible for white subjects and needs to be revealed. Not having developed their own expressive practices and interpretative devices to understand their experiences of racialization, white subjects have been lost in a racialized world. A lot has been written on the invisibility of whiteness and the hypervisibility of blackness in the racialized world of American culture. But of course whiteness has been invisible only for the white gaze but not for racially oppressed subjects, who—as Mills emphasizes—have formed a powerful counter-public, with their alternative experiences and interpretations, and their counter-memory. The variously silenced black experiences and counter-memories that Mills describes as getting systematically disqualified and whited out contained scattered hermeneutical resources, which, in fact, gave interpretative advantages to the oppressed and otherwise hermeneutically marginalized subjects.

As the analyses of white ignorance in race theory show, until recently, privileged white subjects have lacked the motivation and the opportunity to develop expressive activities and interpretative tools to make sense of their own social experiences of racialization and to understand how their lives have been affected by racism and its legacy. And of course this self-ignorance, this inability to interpret their social experiences on racial matters, certainly undermined their hermeneutical sensibilities in their communicative interaction with others. The phenomenon of the active ignorance and interpretative impoverishment of the privileged has also been analyzed by epistemologists of ignorance with respect to gender and sexuality.[6] Feminist and queer theorists have argued that gender and sexual experiences are particularly opaque to gender and sexual conformists who, not having interrogated their own trajectories in these areas of social life, become especially ill-equipped to understand their **(p.106)** own gender and sexuality, lacking interpretative tools and strategies specifically designed to apply to their own case.[7] This is why what passes for obviousness or transparency in relation to masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality typically hides a lack of awareness and sensitivity to nuanced and plural gender and sexual meanings. As epistemologists of ignorance have shown, the hermeneutical gaps that emerge from structures of oppression and identity prejudices create bodies of active ignorance for those subjects whose privileged positions are protected by the hermeneutical blind spots and insensitivities in question. Not only are the privileged subjects not exempted from the hermeneutical harms, but they are in fact *more negatively affected* in some areas of their experience. This constitutes an *anomaly* in Fricker's view; and it runs contrary to her pronouncements when she considers the "idea that relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources":

> *The powerful tend to have appropriate understandings* of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas *the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly*, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible. (p. 148; my emphasis)

But what if it is the powerful who tend to have “some social experiences through a glass darkly,” enjoying precarious interpretative resources (if any at all), as seems to be the case in the phenomenon of white ignorance? There are two important considerations in Fricker’s discussions that can be used to address this kind of case, but I will argue that they do not explain, fully and adequately, the hermeneutical harms of the privileged and their contributions to hermeneutical injustice, and, therefore, white ignorance remains a recalcitrant case.

In the first place, Fricker offers some considerations that are directly relevant to the phenomenon of privileged subjects becoming hermeneutical disadvantaged. She discusses explicitly one case in which “the proverbial white, educated, straight man” (p. 157) finds himself unable to understand certain things and to be understood when he talks about them. This is the predicament of the protagonist of Ian McEwan’s novel *Enduring Love*, which Fricker analyzes (pp. 156–158). This character is being stalked by another male character, and he has a hard time rendering his experience of harassment intelligible when he talks to his wife and to the police about it. Fricker argues that the hermeneutical disadvantage encountered here is “a one-off moment of hermeneutical marginalization” (p. 157), thus assimilating it to those cases of hermeneutical injustice that “are not systematic but *incidental*” (p. 156). This is because, Fricker reasons, the character’s hermeneutical disadvantage “has **(p.107)** nothing to do with any general social powerlessness or any general subordination as a generator of social meaning” (p. 157). I am not sure this is true,[8] but clearly, in the case of white subjects who find themselves unable to understand their racialized identities and experiences and to talk about them meaningfully, their hermeneutical inabilities are part of a widespread pattern of social powerlessness and subordination. Clearly, in privileged white ignorance we have something quite systematic and not merely *one-off and incidental*, something that supports patterns of inequality. White ignorance is a prime example of *active ignorance*—a recalcitrant, self-protecting ignorance that builds around itself an entire system of resistances. This ignorance has deep roots in systematic distortions and in hard-to-eradicate forms of insensitivity. Active ignorance involves being hermeneutically numbed to certain meanings and voices, and the systematic kind of hermeneutical insensitivities involved here cannot be brushed off as merely incidental.

In the second place, Fricker recognizes that “different groups can be hermeneutically disadvantaged for all sorts of reasons, as the changing social world frequently generates new sorts of experience of which our understanding may dawn only gradually” (p. 151). And she is right to emphasize that hermeneutical disadvantages only amount to hermeneutical injustices if they are not only “harmful but also wrongful” (Ibid.). Fricker provides a persuasive example in which subjects who suffer from a yet unknown medical condition find themselves unable to render intelligible what is going on with them, given the lack of relevant medical knowledge. Here we have indeed a hermeneutical disadvantage that is not part of an injustice. As Fricker puts it, the “non-comprehension of their condition … is a poignant case of circumstantial epistemic bad luck” (p. 152). However, privileged white ignorance is not simply a matter of mere *epistemic bad luck*, but rather, an integral part of a pattern of epistemic injustice. Unlike the example of an unknown medical condition, in the case of white ignorance we can link the hermeneutical disadvantages directly to an unfair and discriminatory treatment. The hermeneutical disadvantages inscribed in white ignorance are not only harmful, but wrongful, although the wrong is committed against someone else: interestingly and crucially, the hermeneutical harms are *wrongful for others*, not for those upon whom the epistemic harms are directly inflicted.[9] Here we can make use of Fricker’s **(p. 108)** distinction between *primary* and *secondary harms* in her discussion of situated hermeneutical inequality (p. 162). Roughly, the primary harm of a hermeneutical inequality is the inability to render something intelligible, whereas the secondary harms include all the further practical harms that result from such inability, such as psychological, economic, or political consequences. In white ignorance, however, we have an epistemic asymmetry in which the hermeneutically disadvantaged (i.e., those without resources to understand their racial identities and experiences) are not those who suffer the practical consequences (i.e., those victimized by racial ignorance); that is, the recipients of the primary harms are not the recipients of the secondary harms in this situated hermeneutical inequality. In fact, in white ignorance the primary and secondary harms diverge so radically that those who are unable to make sense of part of their identity and experience—the white subjects—at the same time enjoy practical benefits and ways to hold on to their privilege thanks to their hermeneutical disadvantage, whereas others who are comparatively more hermeneutically advantaged with respect to racial meanings suffer the practical and political consequences of the hermeneutical gap. The white subjects’ inability to understand their own racialized identities and experiences is part of a pattern of injustice not against them, but against those whose subordination supports their privileged identities and social positions without their knowing it. This interesting phenomenon of racial hermeneutical injustice runs contrary to Fricker’s contention that subjects can only be hermeneutically harmed with respect to those areas of their experience that relate to exclusion and subordination (e.g., as “black,” as “woman,” or as “lesbian”), but not with respect to those that relate to privilege (e.g., as “white,” as “man,” or as “straight”).

White ignorance does not quite fit in Fricker’s definition of hermeneutical injustice, which includes being prevented from understanding experiences that are *in your interest* to render intelligible. While in one sense it may be in the epistemic interest of privileged white subjects to overcome their racial ignorance (so that they can better navigate their social world and improve their self-understanding), it is not in their interest in another sense (insofar as it makes them vulnerable, undermines their authority, and requires them to pay attention to things that can be uncomfortable and disempowering). And, at any rate, it is undoubtedly *in the interest of others* that such ignorance be overcome, for its overcoming will meliorate the communicative and epistemic agency of underprivileged subjects, allowing them to interrogate privileges, to make unequal dynamics and their consequences visible and intelligible, and to communicate their experiences. The interests that render white ignorance an injustice are both epistemic and non-epistemic (e.g., economic, legal, political) interests. So the first point to notice is that, in an important sense, in white ignorance, the experiences that are obscured are not *primarily* in the interest of the hermeneutically disadvantaged subjects to understand and know. But it is clearly and primarily in the interest of those who suffer the practical consequences of white ignorance that **(p.109)** those experiences be understood and known. And if “interest” is considered in socioeconomic terms and not in epistemic or ethical terms, it can even be argued that it is in the interest of the hermeneutically disadvantaged white subjects *not* to understand and know the obscured experiences.

In “On Needing Not to Know and Forgetting What One Never Knew” (2007) Robert Bernasconi has suggested that the active ignorance that protects privilege and hides complicity with oppression is motivated by the *need not to know*, which in turn is directly related to the *need to know* of those negatively affected by the injustice or of those genuinely interested in fighting it. Maintaining privilege can indeed be a powerful source of resistance against expanding one’s hermeneutical sensibilities, resulting in a stubborn refusal to understand certain things that can destabilize one’s life and identity. Maintaining the secondary (practical) harms of white ignorance can provide a powerful motivation for the self-inflicted harms that happen at the epistemic level, that is, for white subjects to bring the primary (hermeneutical) harms upon themselves. I am not suggesting, of course, that anybody does this consciously and deliberately, but there have been obvious incentives for white culture to foster ignorance and hermeneutical insensitivity among its most privileged subjects. But whatever its sociogenesis, white ignorance remains a case that Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice, as stated, does not cover: privileged subjects are also hermeneutically marginalized subjects, for they are conceptually ill-equipped to make sense of certain things; but the things that they are ill-equipped to understand are precisely the things they may not want to understand, the things that could be in their advantage to remain opaque—perhaps the things that they *need not to know* if they are to keep enjoying their privileges without having to face uncomfortable questions.

Whether conscious or unconscious, socioeconomically motivated or otherwise generated, white ignorance clearly involves a *failure in hermeneutical responsibility* if one is obligated to be responsive to the meanings and expressive concerns that circulate in one’s milieu. In the next section I will offer some reflections and suggestions about our responsibilities with respect to hermeneutical justice. These concluding remarks will lend support to Fricker’s own conclusions, although I will arrive at them through a very different route.

3.3. Our Hermeneutical Responsibilities with Respect to Multiple Publics

How do we responsibly respond to hermeneutical inequalities and work toward the equal participation of all in the generation and expression of meanings? Communities share a collective responsibility to do everything they can to facilitate everyone’s ability to participate in meaning-making and meaning-expressing practices. Institutions and people in a position of power **(p.110)** bear special hermeneutical burdens, but we all share the collective responsibility to facilitate the hermeneutical agency of all communicators, especially if they have been marginalized. As a rule of thumb, our hermeneutical efforts and interpretative charity should be proportional to the degree of hermeneutical marginalization experienced by the subject in question.[10] But besides these general aspects of our hermeneutical duty, we also have specific hermeneutical responsibilities with respect to the interpretative gaps that appear in the communicative dynamics in which we participate, and we have an obligation to actively find out what those gaps might be. In order to become hermeneutically responsible interlocutors, in our communicative interactions, we are obligated to interrogate the limits of our interpretative horizons and to expose ourselves to interpretative challenges that may require extending or transforming the interpretative resources available to us. Fricker’s account of hermeneutical virtue at the end of her chapter 7 (2007) teaches us a great lesson about hermeneutical responsibility, which includes the hermeneutical obligation to confront our interpretative limitations and vulnerabilities and to cultivate hermeneutical openness. However, although I am in agreement with the normative conclusions of Fricker’s account, I disagree with her disavowal of any direct responsibility on the part of interlocutors with respect to hermeneutical injustices (see especially p. 159, quoted below). A more agential and interactive approach to hermeneutical injustice is needed in order to develop a more robust notion of hermeneutical responsibility.

Differently situated subjects’ and groups’ responsibility with respect to hermeneutical justice needs to be determined *relationally* in particular contexts of interaction. That is, whether individuals and groups live up to their hermeneutical responsibilities has to be assessed by taking into account the forms of mutual positionality, relationality, and responsiveness (or lack thereof) that these subjects and groups display with respect to one another. Our communicative interactions (with their illocutionary speech acts and their uptake or lack thereof) can work to accentuate or to alleviate the hermeneutical gaps and silences that our cultures have created over time. Hermeneutical gaps are performatively invoked and recirculated—*reenacted*, we could say—in the speech acts of daily life. And we have to take responsibility for how our communicative agency relates to the blind spots of our social practices (reinscribing them, **(p.111)** challenging them, etc.). We have to evaluate whether our communicative actions and interactions are contributing to interrogate and expand hermeneutical sensibilities or not. However, since Fricker’s primary focus on the semantic dimension of hermeneutical gaps eclipses the importance of their pragmatic and performative dimension, her view makes it hard to appreciate any direct link between hermeneutical injustices and people’s communicative and interpretative agency. In fact, she denies such a link:

> No agent *perpetrates* hermeneutical injustice—it is a purely structural notion. The background condition for hermeneutical injustice is the subject’s hermeneutical marginalization. But the moment of hermeneutical injustice comes only when the background condition is realized in a *more or less doomed attempt on the part of the subject to render an experience intelligible*. (p. 159; emphasis preserved and added)

But why is the attempt to make sense of a hermeneutically marginalized experience “more or less doomed”? When we have the sense that a speaker has next to no chance of getting herself understood when she is struggling to make sense of something, it is because her interlocutors have been trained not to hear or to hear only deficiently and through a lens that filters out the speaker’s perspective. And indeed, under those conditions, most interlocutors would display little interpretative charity and hermeneutical responsiveness; and the habitual ways in which interlocutors fail to respond to the speaker’s communicative attempts, or respond only in a negative way, will keep stacking the hermeneutical odds against the speaker, whose future attempts will be in the same, or even worse, situation. But speakers and hearers should keep trying; new communicative dynamics may succeed in bringing about more hermeneutical openness. It may appear that we will need *hermeneutical heroes* to do that—that is, that we will need extremely courageous speakers and listeners who defy well-entrenched communicative expectations and dominant hermeneutical perspectives, and against all odds are lucky enough to change (or at least disrupt) hermeneutical trends so as to make room for new meanings and interpretative perspectives. But typically hermeneutical melioration is not due to the agency of exceptional communicators and interpreters; it is the result of the sheer accumulation of partially failed and partially successful communicative attempts on the part of wholly ordinary speakers who have received the attention of ordinary but hermeneutically sensitive hearers. However, for as long as we remain entrenched in dynamics that block new forms of understanding and foster communicative dysfunctions, we are contributing to hermeneutical marginalization and, if that marginalization is based on identity prejudices and correlated with disparities in identity power, we are *perpetrating* a hermeneutical injustice.

It is important that we take responsibility for impoverished communicative and interpretative habits, no matter how well-entrenched, unconscious, **(p.112)** and inescapably socially produced those habits may be. And it is also important to keep in mind that there is always at least some minimal wiggle-room to start modifying those habits. Even if hearers cannot be expected to be able to suddenly develop a *complete* openness with respect to something they have been trained not to hear or to hear only deficiently, they can be blamed for not even trying in the least to interrogate their interpretative habits and to make an effort to put themselves in the shoes of the speaker and consider what she could possibly be trying to convey. And this shift of the communicative and interpretative burdens from the speaker to the hearer applies especially to hermeneutically marginalized speakers, who have the odds of being understood stacked against them. In the spirit of making special arrangements for antecedently marginalized subjects, Louise Antony (1995) has suggested a policy of *epistemic affirmative action*, which recommends that interpreters operate with the "*working hypothesis* that when a woman, or any member of a stereotyped group, says something anomalous, they should assume that it's *they* who don't understand, not that it is the woman who is nuts" (p. 89). Fricker sees some merits in this proposal, but she argues, persuasively, that "the hearer needs to be *indefinitely context sensitive* in how he applies the hypothesis," and that "a policy of affirmative action across all subject matters would not be justified" (p. 171; my emphasis). Indeed, hermeneutically marginalized speakers have the odds of being understood stacked against them only in certain areas of experience and only in certain communicative contexts and dynamics. To address the highly situated forms of hermeneutical marginalization that interlocutors can encounter, what we need is not a set of fixed principles of interpretation, but rather, as Fricker argues, something like a communicative and interpretative *virtue*: an indefinitely context-sensitive hermeneutical sensibility that displays an attentiveness and responsiveness to those struggling to make sense given adverse hermeneutical climates. This is exactly what Fricker's account of the corrective nature of the virtue of hermeneutical justice captures.[11]

The special interpretative efforts required to respond adequately to attempts to communicate hermeneutically marginalized experiences and to articulate nascent meanings are best approached from the perspective of a virtuous sensibility, and not from the point of view of a policy that regulates communicative interactions. I find Fricker's position here the most promising because of its plasticity, dynamicity, and context-sensitivity. In fact, Fricker's account of the virtue of hermeneutical justice invokes precisely the kind of communicative pluralism and polyphonic contextualism I **(p.113)** defend. She grounds the open and corrective nature of virtuous hermeneutical sensibility precisely in the responsiveness to the plurality of interpretative perspectives that one can find in communicative contexts: in the "reflexive awareness" that a speaker may appear "to be making no sense to one hearer … while to another hearer … she may seem to be making a manifestly reasonable point" (p. 169).

As I announced earlier, I am in full agreement with the normative conclusions of Fricker's account. And yet I find problematic the lack of attention that Fricker pays to the agential aspects of hermeneutical injustice. Although her account can accommodate the interactive hermeneutical responsibilities I have called attention to, she nonetheless introduces an *unnecessary gap* between hermeneutical injustice and the communicative and interpretative agency of participants in epistemic exchanges. This introduces an *unnecessary tension* in Fricker's view. Why not accept that where there is a virtue—a way of *excelling* in and with your agency, there is also a vice—a way of *failing* in and with your agency? In our daily communicative interactions, there are all kinds of specific ways in which we can fulfill or fail to fulfill our hermeneutical responsibilities with respect to multiple publics. And in the same way that hermeneutically sensitive and alert interlocutors can contribute to bring about hermeneutical justice, hermeneutically insensitive and numbed interlocutors can also be the *co-perpetrators* of hermeneutical injustices. One can exhibit a more or less virtuous hermeneutical sensibility depending on one's communicative openness and responsiveness to indefinitely plural interpretative perspectives. But if one exhibits a complete lack of "alertness or sensitivity" to alternative hermeneutical possibilities, one's communicative interactions are likely to contain failures in hermeneutical justice for which one has to take responsibility, even if it is a shared and highly qualified kind of responsibility.

Those subjects who become co-perpetrators of hermeneutical injustices may often do so without their knowing it and despite their best communicative intentions. Except under special conditions in which hermeneutical responsibilities are suspended (more on this below), those who, by being nonresponsive or deficiently responsive, fail to aid speakers in their attempts to render their experiences intelligible perpetrate hermeneutical injustices. Although they certainly cannot be said to produce the hermeneutic injustices all by themselves, the communicative dynamics they participate in do help to reproduce them and to keep them in place. Hermeneutical gaps are not produced by a single individual or by small clusters of individuals, for they require collective and sustained efforts across temporally and socially extended contexts, that is, they require *patterns* of impoverished communication with specific hermeneutical insensitivities. But those who find themselves in those patterns typically have *some* limited agency to accentuate the gaps or to contribute to their erosion. Judith Butler's concept of the responsibility of *resignification* can **(p.114)** help here:[12] all communicators have no option but to repeat the coined meanings they have inherited—even in rejecting those meanings they are forced to repeat them; but their repetitive use can *resignify* those meanings. Being doomed to repeat does not make us symbolic automata, for, given all sorts of contextual constraints, it is up to us how to repeat, and we have to take responsibility for our repetition, for the specific ways in which we recirculate and resignify received meanings. Of course we always have limited options for resignification no matter how courageous and imaginative our communicative agency happens to be. But it is also true that there are always at least *some* options to meliorate a hermeneutical climate. Most of the time, the failure of our hermeneutical responsibility begins with refusing to take responsibility in the first place, that is, with assuming that derogatory connotations, interpretative lacunas, and expressive limitations are simply there without having anything to do with us and our daily use of interpretative resources. That is why it is so important to insist on our obligation to become increasingly aware of the limitations of our expressive resources, and of how the voices and expressive styles we cultivate might be complicit with those limitations.[13]

In our communicative interactions we must make room for eccentric voices and we must respond to their nonstandard ways of entering communicative dynamics. Being hermeneutically open means being alert and sensitive to eccentric voices and styles as well as to nonstandard meanings and interpretative perspectives. We should collectively assume and share the responsibility of making our communicative contexts and dynamics more hospitable to plural and diverse experiential standpoints. We should open up possibilities for resisting the imposition of mainstream meanings and interpretations, and for countering hermeneutical perspectives that have become exclusionary and hegemonic. Fricker herself, as we saw, recognizes the *possibility of resistance* **(p.115)** against hermeneutical marginalization in the phenomenon of dissonance (pp. 166–8). She points out that the sense of dissonance is “the starting point for both the critical thinking and the moral-intellectual courage that rebellion requires” (p. 168). And rebellious hermeneutical interventions have a tremendous transformative potential, for they can transform not only one’s own communicative life but also that of those around us. As Fricker remarks, hermeneutical resistance and rebellion can be contagious: “one hermeneutical rebellion inspires another” (p. 167). And if it is possible for interlocutors (both as speakers and as hearers) to fight against unfair hermeneutical climates and dynamics, it must also be possible for them to contribute to the *production* of hermeneutical injustices at least in the indirect sense of *failing to resist* or to minimize their occurrence. Fricker’s remarks on hermeneutical resistance and rebellion are, therefore, in tension with her remarks on there being no perpetrators of hermeneutical injustices we can hold responsible. It is of the utmost importance that we learn to assess such responsibilities and that we become attentive to them in our communicative interactions, for such critical awareness and attentiveness are required for the cultivation of self-corrective hermeneutical sensibilities and the melioration of hermeneutical climates.

Sometimes there are exceptional forms of hermeneutical resistance and rebellion, but more often there are just simple ways in which ordinary folks resist and rebel against adverse hermeneutical climates. Unfortunately, even more frequently, there are simple ways in which ordinary folks fail to resist and rebel against hermeneutical injustices in their daily communicative interactions. If there are subjects and groups we could call *hermeneutical heroes* because they are exceptional in defying hermeneutical obstacles and expanding interpretative resources, there are also subjects and groups we could call *hermeneutical villains* because they are exceptional in maintaining hermeneutical gaps in place and blocking attempts to bridge those gaps.[14] Most speakers and listeners are not **(p.116)** exceptional; most interlocutors cannot be characterized in such dramatic ways. But that does not mean that they cannot be praised or blamed for their hermeneutical sensibilities and the interpretative responsiveness that they exhibit or fail to exhibit in their communicative interactions. Hermeneutically responsible interlocutors must evaluate their communicative acts and interpretive reactions: they must hold themselves and each other responsible for how they react to inherited meanings and expressive resources, and for what they do to add to them and in response to attempts to add to them. But these interactive hermeneutical responsibilities have to be contextualized and relativized to the positionality and relationality of the subjects involved in particular communicative dynamics.

Are interlocutors always obligated to help each other improve their understandings and expand their hermeneutical sensibilities and expressive resources? As Fricker has taught us, in the ethics of knowing and interpreting, *context is everything*. And indeed, interlocutors' hermeneutical obligations have to be contextualized, taking into account how hermeneutical inequalities map onto sociopolitical inequalities and power dynamics. Although interlocutors are generally obligated to share hermeneutical resources and to facilitate the communicative and epistemic agency of each other, there could be cases in which these obligations can be relaxed and even suspended if fulfilling those obligations might put sociopolitically oppressed subjects in an even more vulnerable position and at risk of further social harms. The oppressed may occasionally feel obligated to exploit the hermeneutical and epistemic disadvantages of the oppressor in order to resist the situation of oppression. Although it may seem counterintuitive, ignorance and incomprehension can be a means of protection and empowerment for the sociopolitically oppressed, who may be justified in preserving whatever epistemic privilege and hermeneutical superiority they may have as a means of social survival. Oppressed subjects are not obligated to facilitate the communicative and epistemic agency of more privileged subjects if that can worsen their precarious situation and deepen their oppression. As many Latina feminists and colonial theorists have argued, colonized peoples have a long tradition of exploiting the ignorance and hermeneutical limitations of the colonizers to their advantage, which can be justified for the sake of their survival. Similar points have been made by black feminists—such as Collins (1990/2000 and 2005)—who have called attention to how black women have used invisibility as a survival strategy and have exploited public silences for self-protection, to hide themselves and to inhabit safe spaces of intimacy away from the scrutiny of mainstream publics.

(p.117) As some epistemologists of ignorance have emphasized, the ignorance of privileged subjects that typically accompanies systems of oppression can be exploited by the oppressed to their own advantage.[15] This is what Alison Bailey (2007) has called *strategic ignorance*, which includes the various "ways expressions of ignorance can be wielded strategically by groups living under oppression as a way of gaining information, sabotaging work, avoiding or delaying harm, and preserving a sense of self" (p. 77). Bailey argues that "the project of undoing white ignorance" calls for a relational understanding of ignorance and should be put in the context of "a broader coalition of resistance that includes strategic uses of ignorance by people of color" (p. 90).[16] Similarly, I would argue that the various projects of disarming hermeneutical insensitivities and undoing hermeneutical injustices call for a relational analysis of communicative and interpretative dynamics, and for coalitions of diverse forms of hermeneutical resistance and rebellion.

So, in short, differently situated subjects’ obligations with respect to hermeneutical justice need to be assessed in a pluralistic and relational way. Given the demands of hermeneutical justice, Fricker argues that the virtuous listener is obligated “to help generate a more inclusive hermeneutical microclimate” (p. 171). My pluralistic and relational approach adds an important qualification: namely, that differently situated subjects and groups can bear very different burdens and responsibilities with respect to the minimization of hermeneutical gaps and obstacles; and that, occasionally, these hermeneutical obligations can be suspended and even reversed in order to allow for cases in which contributing to maintain a social silence or to reinforce the hermeneutical gaps of certain communities may not be blameworthy and unjust, but the ethical thing to do. As suggested by some race theorists, oppressed groups can be justified in maintaining their oppressor’s ignorance and inability to make sense of certain experiences until a more equal participation in hermeneutical practices is available to all (or perhaps, precisely in order to make more equal participation possible for all). We should think of the work toward hermeneutical justice as being socially and temporally extended in such a way that differently situated subjects should be expected to carry different burdens, and these burdens should also be temporally segmented in such a way that they do not automatically kick in but are subject to prudential considerations and historically situated preconditions.

(p.118) The pluralistic and relational twists I have given to Fricker’s contextualist account of hermeneutical justice are more an extension than a repudiation of her approach. My friendly amendments and warnings have tried to underscore that social silences and hermeneutical gaps are ill-understood if they are uniformly predicated on an entire social context, instead of being predicated on particular ways of inhabiting that context by particular people in relation to particular others. I have simply tried to establish that a more relational and pluralistic—*polyphonic*—contextualism offers a more adequate picture of what it means to break social silences and to repair the hermeneutical injustices associated with them.

Notes:

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(1) As argued in the previous chapter, this is well illustrated by one of the novels that Fricker analyzes, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960/2002). According to my analysis, this novel illustrates how a number of antecedent hermeneutical and testimonial obstacles make it very difficult for epistemic justice to take place at the trial of Tom Robinson. These obstacles make it difficult for people to understand interracial desire and women's sexual agency; and, as a result, Tom has a hard time making his testimony on Mayella's sexual attraction to him credible. His audience does not exhibit much sympathy, communicative cooperation, or interpretative charity. The failure of his listeners is both testimonial and hermeneutical. For listeners such as these to become more charitable and virtuous, they would have to improve, simultaneously, their hermeneutical and testimonial sensibilities.

(2) These communicative interactions are distinct, but interrelated in crucial ways. Indeed, how we learn to communicate experiences to others influences tremendously—but does not fully determine—what we manage to make sense of to ourselves.

(3) In this sense, it is instructive to consider Uma Narayan's cross-cultural comparisons between discourses about domestic violence in countries such as the United States, where such labels have currency, and in countries such as India where their application is blocked. See especially chapter 3 of Narayan (1997): "Cross-Cultural Connections, Border-Crossings, and 'Death by Culture': Thinking about Dowry-Murders in India and Domestic Violence in the United States," pages 82–117. I will discuss some of the issues raised by Narayan, in section 4.4.

(4) Mills (2007) writes, "Black counter-testimony against white mythology has always existed but would originally have been handicapped by the lack of material and cultural capital investment available for its production" (p. 33). There have been all kinds of mechanisms in white epistemic practices that have contributed to maintain "the repudiation of an alternative black memory" (p. 30). This will be discussed in section 6.4.

(5) I borrow this expression from the dissertation of Carolyn Cusick, a Ph.D. student at Vanderbilt University. I am indebted to Carolyn for her insightful remarks on Collins's analysis of silence.

(6) See especially the pioneering work of Nancy Tuana (2004, 2006). See also Sullivan and Tuana (2007).

(7) On this point, see especially Scheman (1997).

(8) After all, we are talking about a man being stalked by another man, which is an experience on which a number of widespread hermeneutical gaps can impinge, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that in our culture many people would be ill prepared to talk about such an experience and to display adequate hermeneutical sensibility in such discussions. And the hermeneutical disadvantage does seem to be directly related to the “general social powerlessness” and the “general subordination” of non-heterosexuals.

(9) Of course, the inability of white subjects to understand their own racial identity and experiences *also* hermeneutically harms others who, in communication with them, will have a hard time making themselves understood on racial matters.

(10) Therefore, the more hermeneutically privileged our interlocutors are (their communicative perspective nicely fitting into the mainstream perspective), the less compelled we should feel to make special interpretative efforts to understand them. And of course we need to take into account the hermeneutical positions of both speaker and listener as they relate to each other, so that our hermeneutical responsibilities should be greater when we interact communicatively with those more marginalized than we are, and lesser when we interact with subjects more hermeneutically privileged than we are. As I will suggest below, this is why there can be communicative contexts in which hermeneutical responsibilities can be suspended for some subjects: for example, for oppressed subjects when they interact with their oppressors and need to speak obliquely to block their understanding for self-protection.

(11) “The form the virtue of hermeneutical justice must take, then, is an *alertness or sensitivity* to the possibility that the difficulty one’s interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being a nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources.” (Fricker: 2007, p. 169; my emphasis)

(12) See especially Butler (1997). As Butler puts it, discursive responsibility concerns *citation*, that is, it concerns *how to repeat or cite* in performative chains of speech acts: “The speaker assumes responsibility precisely through the citational character of speech. The speaker renews the linguistic tokens of a community, reissuing and reinvigorating such speech. Responsibility is thus linked with speech *as* repetition, not as origination (p. 39).

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(13) There are many things we can do to fulfill that obligation, which can be segmented into smaller and more manageable obligations to improve our hermeneutical sensibilities. We can develop communicative and interactive habits that make us increasingly aware of the contours of our interpretative standpoints. For example, we can train ourselves to compare and contrast our expressive resources with that of others; and we can engage in interpretative practices that make our familiar meanings unfamiliar. The former suggestion is contained in Edward Said's argument for the critical and transformative potential of *comparative literature* in connecting different cultural imaginaries that can challenge each other and learn from each other. See especially the introduction of Said's *Orientalism* (1979/1994). The latter suggestion is contained in the interpretative strategies elaborated by queer theorists, who have developed critical genealogies of gender and sexual meanings and have offered the discursive mechanism of *queering* for the disruption and transformation of those meanings. On what it means to queer our received meanings, see especially Scheman (1997).

(14) The expressions *hermeneutical heroes* and *hermeneutical villains* should be taken with a grain of salt. I use these expressions, as I will later use the more general expressions *epistemic heroes* and *epistemic villains*, as rhetorical devices to dramatize in an exaggerated way the roles of agents who make efforts to facilitate or to impede epistemic interactions. But this dramatization should not be taken in a literal way as suggesting that there are special agents who are the ones who in our epistemic practices either create problems and inflict harms (the villains) or repair them (the heroes), while the rest of us remain neutral with respect to epistemic injustices. On the contrary, what I want to suggest is that the dramatic figures of the epistemic hero and the epistemic villain are the extreme cases and that we are in between these extremes, or in other words, that we all have (or can have) a little bit of a hero or a villain in us, something heroic and something villainous in our epistemic characters and actions, some aspects of complicity and of resistance. But this dramatization is a distortion if it is understood as suggesting that the agents of justice and injustice are exceptional individuals, for we are all such agents: epistemic agency is the capacity to engage in fair and unfair epistemic transactions and, therefore, the capacity to facilitate and promote epistemic justice or injustice. As we shall see through different arguments in what follows, resistant agency and resistant imagination do not fall on the shoulders of a few exceptional subjects, but on the shoulders of *all* epistemic agents, although their burdens and responsibilities differ depending on the social positions and relations they occupy. Using concrete examples from the women’s movement and the civil rights movement, in section 5.3 I will debunk the idealized image of the epistemic hero or heroine, underscoring that we are all agents of justice with the responsibility to resist oppression and that, in fact, the success of leaders or heroic figures in a struggle of resistance is crucially dependent on the resistant everyday actions of ordinary folks.

(15) As Sarah Hoagland (2007) puts it, “There is a practice among many who are marginalized by dominant logic of promoting ignorance among competent practitioners of dominant culture and in the process, destabilizing oppressive relationality. For example, at times women keep men ignorant about certain things, and at times blacks keep whites ignorant about certain things” (p. 97).

(16) Following Lugones (2003), Bailey argues for “a curdled reading of ignorance,” which can “offer us a more relational understanding of ignorance by revealing the ways in which people of color have strategically engaged with white folks’ ignorance in ways that are advantageous” (Bailey: 2007, p. 84). Bailey’s relational view of ignorance and its strategic uses will be discussed more fully in section 6.4.

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