Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities

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While in agreement with Miranda Fricker’s context-sensitive approach to hermeneutical injustice, this paper argues 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 expressive practices that coexist in the social context in question. Social silences and hermeneutical gaps are misrepresented if they are uniformly predicated of an entire social context, instead of being predicated of 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 responsivity (or lack thereof) that these subjects and groups display with respect to one another. The central argument is developed through an examination of what in race theory and 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 social positionality.
Introduction

While in agreement with Miranda Fricker’s context-sensitive approach to hermeneutical injustice in her groundbreaking book *Epistemic injustice* (2007), 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 of an entire social context, instead of being predicated of 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. First, I will argue that we need to pay more attention to the performative and pragmatic aspects of communicative dynamics to fully appreciate the patterns of silence that are part of hermeneutical injustices. In the second and core section, I will try to show that a more deeply pluralistic account of hermeneutical injustice 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 the third section, 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 injustice.

Silences and the Communicative Approach to Epistemic Agency

In the communicative approach I will be defending in this paper, hermeneutical injustice is treated, roughly, as the kind of injustice that appears when communi-
Communicative obstacles 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 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 *pre-emptive silences*: people can be *pre-emptively* silenced by being excluded in advance from participating in communicative exchanges. Fricker emphasizes that pre-emptive silencing is “highly context-dependent.” It is unlikely that we could find subjects “whose knowledge or opinions were *never* solicited on any subject matter” (2007, 130–131). Instead, our contextualist analyses of pre-emptive 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. Even when subjects are not excluded from participating in communication, 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*” (2007, 133).

In this second kind of silencing, people’s participation in communicative exchanges is allowed, and their contributions are in fact used for knowledge-production and knowledge-transmission purposes; but nonetheless, they are 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” (Fricker 2007, 132). Fricker emphasizes that “context is all” when it comes to determine whether an epistemic objectification amounts to an epistemic injustice (2007, 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 overtime. I could not agree more with this contextualist perspective. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that epistemic injustices can only be detected in temporally and socially extended contexts where patterns of communicative interaction unfold (see Medina 2011). However, while in agreement with Fricker’s 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” (2007, 133; emphasis added). 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—it is at the service of the inquirer’s questions, assessments, and 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 opinions, and so forth. 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 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 of a limited and defective sort. 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 their article “Free speech and illocution” (1998).
Hornsby and Langton establish a close link between reciprocity and uptake. In the communicative dynamics of an interaction 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 uptake silences speakers and produces 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, but she takes issue with the communicative account of silencing that they offer.

Fricker contends that Hornsby and Langton provide “a purely communicative conception of silencing” which is non-epistemic (2007, 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. (Fricker 2007, 141)

By contrast, Fricker argues that her “epistemic model […] requires less erosion of women’s human status” (2007, 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. The communicative 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 with which we should not be confronted. 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.*

Drawing on the communicative approach defended here, in the next section I will argue that Fricker pays insufficient attention to the interactive and performative dimension of hermeneutical injustice, which is treated mainly as a *semantic* phenomenon concerning the intelligibility of experiential contents. In addition, 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.

**Communicative Pluralism and Hermeneutical Injustice**

As I have argued elsewhere (Medina 2011), 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 was 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, 159). This “grim possibility,” Fricker observes, appears when we find a “speaker struggling to make herself intelligible in a testimonial exchange” (2007, 159). My communicative interactionism suggests that these two types of injustice feed each other and deepen 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 take place 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 hearing and interpreting certain things—because of *hermeneutical insensitivities*—people’s credibility gets undermined. Testimonial insensitivities and hermeneutical insensitivities converge and feed each other.¹
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 meanings. 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” (2007, 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, which, once formed, has a negative impact in 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 Fricker’s analysis of hermeneutical injustice focuses mainly on the lack of intelligibility of the experience of certain groups, without specifying for whom experience is being rendered intelligible, in what kind of communicative interaction and according to which dynamic.

Communicative dynamics are not in the forefront of Fricker’s analysis of hermeneutical injustice, which is not initially couched in explicitly communicative terms, but in terms of the intelligibility of experience. Initially, 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” (2007, 147–148). A deficit in self-understanding can be indeed a key component of hermeneutical marginalization. But, with and through the development of new expressive and interpretative resources, hermeneutically marginalized subjects can eventually achieve understanding of their obscured experiences while they may still remain systematically misunderstood by others (some others) when they try to communicate about those experiences. In these cases the hermeneutical injustice continues even after the lack of self-understanding disappears, which shows that the problem goes deeper and concerns not only a deficient self-understanding, but also and more fundamentally a precarious and unequal relation to expressive and interpretative practices in which experiences are shared with others. Later in her...
book, Fricker’s focus shifts to the communication of experiences, and she then describes being hermeneutically marginalized as enjoying unequal participation in communicative practices in which meanings are generated and expressed. But the problem remains in the ambiguity of the expression “the intelligibility of experience” as a semantic category detached from particular communicative dynamics. 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; for, quite different possibilities are opened up (or can be opened up) depending on those variables: whether one is talking to oneself, to sympathetic 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” (2007, 7). What is meant by this hermeneutical activity of “making sense of an experience”? 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. And when it comes to hermeneutical gaps, it is crucial to pay attention to the communicative attempts through which members of a new emerging public struggle to communicate among themselves about silenced experiences. Through these communicative attempts, subjects begin to work on the melioration of hermeneutical sensibilities, starting with their own and with that of those like them. Through repeated attempts to communicate with ourselves and with those we trust about experiences that have been obscured, 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, it is misleading to assume that only what has been antecedently recognized and included in the shared hermeneutical resources 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. Fricker is certainly right that sometimes we find “a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be” (2007, 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.

We should be careful not to tie too closely people’s hermeneutical capacities to the repertoire of readily available terms and coined concepts, for oppressed subjects often find ways of expressing their suffering well before such articulations are
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. 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.

There may be 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. As I have argued elsewhere (Medina 2006), 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. (Fricker 2007, 166)

Hermeneutical resistance is the phenomenon in which a dissident voice rebels against mainstream voices; and hermeneutical dissonance is the phenomenon in which the communicative conflict is internalized and both the dominant and the resistant voices are within one and the same subject. 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” (2007, 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 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 being 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 and hermeneutical neglect—the interlocutors’ being unmoved or unable to identify what is being talked about—and when they encounter counter-interpretations that systematically distort the speaker’s communicative attempts—for example, when a woman trying to convey that she feels sexually harassed is interpreted as overreacting to “harmless flirting.” As recent 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 inter-racial, inter-gender, and inter-sexual (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.

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. (Fricker 2007, 155; emphasis added)

But whose “collective understanding”? And whose “collective hermeneutical resource” (in the singular!)? 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. Throughout the chapter Fricker talks about “the collective hermeneutical resource,” but is there always such thing? (Can there even be such thing?) Even highly monolithic and homogeneous societies are likely to contain interpretative 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 even within distinctive publics with their peculiar resources, there will be expressive differences, deviations, and idiosyncrasies. 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 blindspots 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 under those blindspots 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?

A complex social body always contains heterogeneous publics with diverse resources, but this heterogeneity is accentuated and radicalized in a society that is fractured, for 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 folks ([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: those who lived exclusively in the white world—unequipped to understand what took place in the other world (and even in their own world); and those who were forced to live in two worlds—the one imposed on them and the one 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 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 tended to develop a special kind of hermeneutical insensitivity with respect to racial meanings, whereas racially oppressed subjects tended to become attentive and sensitive to them. Interestingly, the subjects who became most epistemically harmed and hermeneutically disadvantaged to make sense of their social experiences of racialization were in fact those who benefitted the most from the hermeneutical obstacles, the recipients of the non-epistemic privileges that these obstacles helped to protect. The Du
Boisian analysis of the racial blindness of racially privileged subjects has been elaborated further under the rubric of “white ignorance” in the recent literature. In his now classic *The racial contract,* Charles Mills (1997) 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 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* contain scattered hermeneutical resources, which, in fact, give interpretative advantages to the oppressed and otherwise hermeneutically marginalized subjects.

As the analyses of white ignorance 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. 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 blindspots 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* for 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. (2007, 148; emphasis added)

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 for her approach.

In the first place, Fricker offers some considerations that are directly relevant to the phenomenon of privileged subjects becoming hermeneutically disadvantaged. She discusses explicitly one case in which “the proverbial white, educated, straight man” (Fricker 2007, 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 (2007, 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” (2007, 157), thus assimilating it to those cases of hermeneutical injustice that “are not systematic but incidental” (2007, 156). This is because, Fricker reasons, the character’s hermeneutical disadvantage “has nothing to do with any general social powerlessness or any general subordination as a generator of social meaning” (2007, 157). But clearly, in the case of white subjects who find themselves unable to understand their racialized identities and experiences and to talk about them, their hermeneutical inabilities are part of a widespread pattern. In privileged white ignorance we have something quite systematic and not merely one-off and incidental.

As I have argued elsewhere (Medina, in press), white ignorance is a prime example of *active ignorance*, which is the kind of recalcitrant, self-protecting ignorance that builds around itself an entire system of resistances. This active ignorance is to be contrasted with the mere absence of belief or the mere presence of false beliefs, for it has deep roots in systematic distortions and in hard-to-eradicate forms of blindness and deafness. Active ignorance involves being hermeneutically numbed to certain meanings and voices; and this systematic kind of hermeneutical insensitivity cannot be brushed aside 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” (2007, 151). And she is right to emphasize that hermeneutical disadvantages only amount to hermeneutical injustices if they are not only “harmful but also wrongful” (2007, 151; emphasis added). 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” (2007, 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. Here we can make use of Fricker’s distinction between primary and secondary harms in her discussion of situated hermeneutical inequality (2007, 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 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 privileges thanks to their hermeneutical disadvantages, whereas others who are comparatively more hermeneutically advantaged with respect to racial meanings suffer the practical and political consequences of the hermeneutical obstacles. The privileged white subjects’ inability to understand their own racialized identities and experiences is part of a pattern of injustice not against them, but against those who suffer the consequences of white privilege. 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, but not with respect to those that relate to privilege.

According to Fricker’s definition, hermeneutical injustice consists of 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 own self-understanding), it is not in their interest in another sense (in so far 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 of others that render white ignorance an injustice are both epistemic and non-epistemic (economic, legal, political, etc.). In white ignorance, it may or may not be in the interest of the hermeneutically disadvantaged subjects to understand and know the obscured experiences. But it is clearly in the interest of those who suffer its practical consequences that those experiences be understood and known. And if “interest” is construed in socio-economic 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 the article “On needing not to know and forgetting what one never knew,” Robert Bernasconi (2007) has suggested that the active ignorance which 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 your hermeneutical sensibilities, stubbornly refusing to understand certain things that can destabilize your 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 socio-genesis, 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—perhaps what they need not to know to keep enjoying their privileges without facing uncomfortable questions.

Whether conscious or unconscious, socio-economically 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 one encounters. To conclude, I will offer some reflections and suggestions about our responsibilities with respect to hermeneutical justice.

Our Hermeneutical Responsibilities with Respect to Multiple Publics

How do we responsibly respond to hermeneutical inequalities and work towards 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 bear special hermeneutical burdens, but we all share the collective responsibility to facilitate the hermeneutical
agency of communicators, especially if they have been marginalized. Besides these
general aspects of our hermeneutical duty, we also have specific hermeneutical
responsibilities with respect to the interpretative gaps that appear in the communi-
cative 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, we need 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 her-
meneutical virtue at the end of Chapter Seven teaches us a great lesson about her-
meneutical 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 Fricker
2007, 159, quoted below). A more agential and interactive approach to hermeneu-
tical injustice is needed in order to develop a more robust notion of hermeneutical
responsibility.

The responsibility with respect to hermeneutical justice that differently situated
subjects and groups have needs to be determined relationally in particular contexts
of interaction. That is, whether individuals and groups live up to their hermeneuti-
cal 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
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—re-enacted, we could say—in the speech acts of our daily life.
And we have to take responsibility for how our communicative agency relates to
the blind-spots of our social practices (re-inscribing them, challenging them, etc.).
We have to evaluate whether or not our communicative interactions are contribut-
ing to interrogate and expand hermeneutical sensibilities. 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 com-
municative 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 mar-
ginalization. But the moment of hermeneutical injustice comes only when the back-
ground condition is realized in a more or less doomed attempt on the part of the subject
to render an experience intelligible. (Fricker 2007, 159; original emphasis and emphasis
added)

But why is the attempt to make sense of a hermeneutically marginalized experi-
ence “more or less doomed”? When we have the sense that a speaker has next to
no chance of getting herself understood while 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 the habitual ways in which interlocutors fail to respond to the speaker’s communicative attempts, or respond only in a negative way, will keep stocking the hermeneutical chances against the speaker, whose future attempts will be in the same, or even worse, situation. But not all interlocutors will display the same lack of interpretative charity and hermeneutical responsiveness. Some may be more adept at paying attention, at recognizing the communicative failures, at making the speaker comfortable so that she can keep trying, at facilitating new communicative dynamics that can bring about more hermeneutical openness, and so forth. Sometimes it takes hermeneutical heroes to do that: extremely courageous speakers and listeners who defy well-entrenched communicative expectations and dominant perspectives, and manage to change (or at least disrupt) hermeneutical trends to make room for new voices and meanings. But more often hermeneutical melioration is achieved through the agency of unexceptional communicators and interpreters; it is the result of the sheer accumulation of partially failed and partially successful communicative attempts of wholly ordinary speakers who have received the attention of 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 co-perpetrating a hermeneutical injustice.

It is important that we take responsibility for impoverished communicative and interpretative habits, no matter how well-entrenched, unconscious 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 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 consider the speaker’s perspective. And this shift of the communicative and interpretative burdens from the speaker to the hearer goes especially for hermeneutically marginalized speakers who have the chances of being understood stocked against them. In the spirit of making special arrangements for antecedently marginalized subjects, Louise Antony 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” (1995, 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” (2007, 171; emphasis added). Indeed, hermeneutically marginalized speakers have the chances of being understood stocked 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 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 (see especially 2007, 169).

Fricker’s account of the virtue of hermeneutical justice invokes precisely the kind of communicative pluralism that my polyphonic contextualism defends, for 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. 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 interlocutors. But 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 perspectives. But if one exhibits a complete lack of “alertness or sensitivity” to certain meanings or voices, 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, those who, by being non-responsive or deficiently responsive, fail to aid speakers in their attempts to render their experiences intelligible are complicit with hermeneutical injustices. Although they certainly cannot be said to produce the injustices all by themselves, the communicative dynamics they participate in do help to reproduce them and to perpetuate them. 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. 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. This is why it is so important to become increasingly aware of the hermeneutical limitations around us, and of how the voices and expressive styles we cultivate might be complicit with those limitations.

Notes

[1] As I have argued elsewhere (Medina 2011), this is well illustrated by one of the novels that Fricker analyzes, Harper Lee’s novel *To kill a mockingbird* ([1960] 2002). This novel illustrates how a number of antecedent hermeneutical and testimonial obstacles made it very difficult for epistemic justice to take place at the trial of Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. These obstacles made it difficult for people to understand interracial desire and women’s sexual agency; and, as a result, Tom had a hard time making his testimony on Mayella’s sexual attraction to him credible. His audience did not exhibit much sympathy, communicative cooperation, or interpretative charity. The failure of his listeners was 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] 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 Three of Narayan (1997, 82–117): “Cross-cultural connections, border-crossings, and ‘death by culture’: Thinking about dowry-murders in India and domestic violence in the united states.”

[3] 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 “girlfriend,” “wife,” or “partner,” and a man’s capacity to refer to his “boyfriend,” “husband,” 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 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.


[5] In “White ignorance,” Mills (2007) emphasizes the role that official histories and hegemonic forms of collective memory play in sustaining white ignorance, and also the crucial role that counter-memory needs to play to resist and subvert the epistemic oppression that condemns the lives of marginalized people to silence or oblivion.

[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 own gender and sexuality, lacking interpretative tools and strategies specifically designed to apply to their own case. 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. On this point, see especially Scheman (1997).

[7] As I argue elsewhere (Medina, in press), 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.

References


