

# Two Kinds of Unknowing

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*Miranda Fricker claims that a “gap” in collective hermeneutical resources with respect to the social experiences of marginalized groups prevents members of those groups from understanding their own experiences (Fricker 2007). I argue that because Fricker misdescribes dominant hermeneutical resources as collective, she fails to locate the ethically bad epistemic practices that maintain gaps in dominant hermeneutical resources even while alternative interpretations are in fact offered by non-dominant discourses. Fricker’s analysis of hermeneutical injustice does not account for the possibility that marginalized groups can be silenced relative to dominant discourses without being prevented from understanding or expressing their own social experiences. I suggest that a gap in dominant hermeneutical resources is ambiguous between two kinds of unknowing: hermeneutical injustice suffered by members of marginalized groups, and epistemically and ethically blameworthy ignorance perpetrated by members of dominant groups.*

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Feminist scholarship has supplied the important insight that what is in our interests to know and what is in our interests to ignore crucially affect knowledge practices in ways that cannot be explained by conventional epistemological frameworks. This insight can be read not only as a comment on how one’s own interests affect what one knows but also as a comment on how the interests of others, in particular powerful or dominant groups, can limit or occlude knowledge production and transmission by powerless or marginalized groups.

In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker identifies questions of social power as the impetus behind examining epistemic conduct in an ethical frame (Fricker 2007). Her analysis of epistemic injustice highlights those background conditions that generate systematic unknowing by making visible the ways in which power relations can permit and constrain knowledge generation and transmission unequally on the basis of a knower’s

social identity. She introduces the notion of *hermeneutical injustice*, my focus in this paper, to attend to the inequalities that occur in social-epistemic contexts when meaningful interpretations of social experiences are absent or obscured by relations of power that allow some to neglect or claim interpretive authority over the experiences of others.

Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experiences obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (Fricker 2007, 155). Put more plainly, an individual suffers hermeneutical injustice when her position of social powerlessness results in some experience of hers being poorly understood by herself and society at large. According to Fricker, hermeneutical injustice is a manifestation of the systematic and wide-ranging marginalization of some social identities from the practices through which social meaning is generated. The exclusion of these social identities, says Fricker, produces a collective hermeneutical resource that is deficient with respect to the experiences of marginalized social groups. Hermeneutical injustice thus stems from “a gap in collective hermeneutical resources” (Fricker 2007, 6). In her account, hermeneutical gaps are absences of proper interpretations, “blanks where there should be the name of an experience” (160). Fricker’s analysis explores how these lacunae can unfairly disadvantage members of marginalized groups by preventing them from making sense of their own social experiences.

I begin by providing a reinterpretation of Fricker’s central case of hermeneutical injustice as a means to problematize Fricker’s claim that a “gap” in collective hermeneutical resources prevents marginalized subjects from understanding their own experiences. In section two, I argue that Fricker’s analysis of hermeneutical injustice does not take into account the resistant epistemic and communicative practices of non-dominant subjects and in so doing may contribute to their marginalization and disempowerment. Fricker fails to countenance the possibility that marginalized subjects have non-dominant interpretive resources from which they can draw to understand and describe their experiences despite absences or distortions that exist in so-called collective hermeneutical resources. Thus, although Fricker’s investigation of hermeneutical injustice is germane to the project of examining not simply exemplary but also defective knowledge practices, her account underplays the epistemic agency non-dominant subjects possess despite their marginalization from dominant interpretive discourses.

In section three, I argue that a “gap” in collective hermeneutical resources is ambiguous between two kinds of unknowing: an unknowing to which members of non-dominant social groups are subject by virtue of their systematic hermeneutical marginalization and an unknowing to which members of dominant groups are subject by virtue of their ethically bad knowledge practices. Fricker’s

account of hermeneutical injustice fails to recognize this ambiguity; in so doing, her analysis misses an ethically and epistemologically significant phenomenon, and runs the risk of marginalizing and silencing those non-dominant voices her account seeks to amplify.

#### I. FRICKER'S CENTRAL CASE OF HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE

Fricker grounds her discussion with what she describes as a central case of hermeneutical injustice. Drawing from the memoir of Susan Brownmiller, Fricker explains the hermeneutical injustice done to women prior to the articulation of the concept of sexual harassment, which the U.S. women's liberation movement played a pivotal role in raising to the level of social consciousness. She describes the experience of Carmita Wood, an office employee in the department of nuclear physics at Cornell University. Wood's experience, as recounted by Brownmiller, involved a series of sometimes overt, sometimes covert, but always unwanted sexual advances from a prominent faculty member in the department where she worked. Although Wood went out of her way to avoid incidents with the professor, the stress associated with previous molestations, as well as the real possibility of further unwelcome advances, brought on somatic symptoms such as chronic neck and back pain. After her request for a transfer to another department was denied, Wood's only recourse for avoiding the unwanted treatment was to quit her job. When she applied for unemployment insurance, Wood was forced to explain that she had left her job of eight years for "personal reasons." There was no box on the unemployment insurance form she could check to indicate that she left her job because, after repeatedly enduring unsolicited sexual advances from the male faculty member, her working environment had become hostile to her mental and physical well-being. Her application for unemployment insurance was subsequently turned down (Fricker 2007, 150).

But Wood's story, unlike those of so many women before her, did not end in silence. After her unemployment insurance claim was denied, she enlisted the help of Lin Farley, a pioneering feminist running a seminar on "women and work" at Cornell in the 1970s. Wood shared her experiences with the other women participating in Farley's seminar and quickly discovered that every woman there had been in her position at one time or another. In addition to appealing the decision to deny her unemployment insurance benefits, Wood and the other women in the group decided that they should speak publicly about their workplace experiences. They began coordinating a speak-out, but "the 'this' they were going to break the silence about had no name" (Brownmiller 1999, 281).

We were referring to it as "sexual intimidation," "sexual coercion," "sexual exploitation on the job." None of those names

seemed quite right. We wanted something that embraced a whole range of subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviors. Somebody came up with “harassment.” *Sexual harassment!* Instantly we agreed. That’s what it was. (Brownmiller 1999, 281)

That a significant pattern of behavior in their social experiences was (until then) lacking a name indicated, among other things, that women’s perspectives were poorly reflected in social understandings at the time. Without collective interpretive resources to draw upon, Fricker argues, women were prevented from rendering their experiences of workplace harassment communicatively intelligible to others, and even themselves. On her account of hermeneutical injustice, the lexical gap that was later filled in with the name *sexual harassment* rendered women’s experience of it confused and inarticulate (Fricker 2007, 151).

According to Fricker, this lacuna in collective hermeneutical resources illustrates how a significant area of one’s social experience can be obscured from individual understanding because it remains obscure at the level of social understanding. Insofar as an important part of epistemic life consists of the ability to understand oneself and one’s experiences, and the development of this ability requires adequate social-epistemic resources, a gap in collective hermeneutical resources owing to hermeneutical marginalization wrongfully prevented women such as Wood from full participation in epistemic life (Fricker 2007, 153).

Although Wood may not have gleaned the broad significance of her experience—for instance, that it was a widespread and unfortunately common occurrence in many women’s lives—her actions following her denied unemployment insurance claim betray Fricker’s description of her as someone who failed to understand. As recounted by Brownmiller, Wood sought out feminist Lin Farley, voluntarily shared her experiences of workplace maltreatment with Farley’s consciousness-raising group, and helped organize and participated in a speak-out on the topic—all while appealing the decision to deny her unemployment insurance claim (Brownmiller 1999, 280). These were not the actions of a woman mystified by her experiences of a yet-to-be-named phenomenon; rather, the silencing to which she had previously been subject was exploded by the coalition she formed with other women who both corroborated and supplemented her experiences with their own.

Despite the gap in collective hermeneutical resources, it is not clear that Wood and the women with whom she shared her experiences were incapable of understanding that the furtive molestations inflicted upon them by male co-workers were harmful to their well-being. At the very least, their embodied experiences of harassment were at odds with extant misinterpretations circulating in dominant discourses. By providing a safe space for feminist discussion of the issues and behaviors affecting women’s lives, the consciousness-raising

group in which Wood participated surely enhanced her understanding of her experiences (by, for instance, helping to articulate the systematic nature of the phenomenon she helped to name). But rather than functioning as “a life-changing flash of enlightenment” (Fricker 2006, 98), naming created a hermeneutical environment conducive to organized social activism against one manifestation of sexism. Although the name *sexual harassment* galvanized political action, women’s newly found linguistic ammunition did not indicate that the women were, until then, prevented from understanding their experiences of it. To the contrary, naming does not occur *ex nihilo*: it was precisely women’s interpretations of their treatment as wrongful and unjust that fueled the resistance movement that was responsible for naming sexual harassment.

To be sure, the articulation and uptake of the term *sexual harassment* was an important interpretive achievement that should not be underappreciated. Fricker claims that giving a name to a previously nameless experience can be an astonishing cognitive achievement: the point at which the “hermeneutical darkness” is suddenly illuminated by understanding (Fricker 2007, 149). However, as I’ve suggested, it is not as if the absence of a socially recognized name entails or even implies that a group is prevented from understanding. Although women may have lacked the authority to determine the significance of their experiences in dominant social, political, and legal discourses, the absence of the name *sexual harassment* did not necessarily collude in their individual or collective obfuscation. By beginning the process of codifying their experiences in ways useful for political resistance, the act of naming in which Wood participated incited social change; however, naming *sexual harassment* did not mean that women were only then able to understand that which had previously evaded comprehension.

Using this evidence as our starting point, affirming that women—prior to naming *sexual harassment*—were able to understand their experiences of it suggests an alternative kind of unknowing that is at work when hermeneutical resources fail to countenance the experiences of some members of society. I take up this argument in section three. In the next section, I argue that Fricker problematically identifies “collective” hermeneutical resources with that which is articulated and taken up in dominant discourses. The upshot of this conflation is Fricker’s claim that collective hermeneutical impoverishment renders non-dominant subjects confused and speechless; hermeneutical marginalization prevents subjects from making sense of their social experiences because interpretations of those experiences are absent from “collective” hermeneutical resources (Fricker 2007, 158). Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice thus pays insufficient attention to non-dominant hermeneutical resources to which members of marginalized groups have access in order to render their social experiences communicatively intelligible.

## II. COLLECTIVE, DOMINANT, AND NON-DOMINANT HERMENEUTICAL RESOURCES

Fricker argues that an individual's ability to render her experiences communicatively intelligible can be constrained because "the subject suffers from one or another sort of prejudice against them qua social type" (Fricker 2007, 155). Accordingly, individuals' capacities to understand their own experiences are problematically differentiated by social identity because the operation of identity power controls who can and who can't participate in the pooling of social knowledge. *Identity power* is any operation of power that is dependent on shared imaginative conceptions of social identity, "conceptions alive in the collective social imagination that govern, for instance, what it is or means to be a woman or a man, or what it is or means to be gay or straight, young or old, and so on" (14). That is to say, identity power depends on the context of a functioning social world with shared institutions, shared meanings, and shared expectations that facilitate systematic identity-based prejudice.

The operation of identity power in epistemic contexts means that some social groups will find that their experiences are systematically neglected, ignored, or distorted by social discourses that they have little power to influence or change. Fricker explains how this systematic exclusion from meaning-making practices generates a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource by preventing members of socially powerless groups from influencing social understandings across a broad range of the social world. Under these conditions, collective hermeneutical resources will tend to issue biased interpretations of some individuals' social experiences "because [the interpretations are] insufficiently influenced by the subject group and therefore unduly influenced by more hermeneutically powerful groups" (Fricker 2007, 155). When one's social group is excluded from participating in practices by which social meanings are generated, Fricker argues, one's possibilities for communicative intelligibility can be thwarted by a collective hermeneutical resource that gives short shrift to one's experiences (159).

According to Fricker, the primary epistemic harm done to those whose experiences are systematically excluded from collective hermeneutical resources is that a social experience is not collectively understood and so remains barely intelligible at the level of individual understanding (Fricker 2007, 162). But it is not at all clear that members of non-dominant groups fail to understand their social experiences when collective hermeneutical resources are deficient with respect to them. This is because it is not at all clear that what Fricker describes as "collective" hermeneutical resources are exhaustive of the interpretive resources available to hermeneutically marginalized subjects. Fricker conflates collective hermeneutical resources with that which is articulated and taken up in those discourses from which subjects are systematically marginalized. This conflation means that

“collective” hermeneutical resources function as *de facto* dominant on her account.

Fricker’s understanding of “collective” hermeneutical resources thus glosses over important distinctions—in particular, distinctions between dominant and non-dominant hermeneutical resources—that bear on how we interpret hermeneutical lacunae. A gap in dominant hermeneutical resources with respect to one’s social experiences does not necessitate a corresponding gap in non-dominant hermeneutical resources. For instance, although dominant hermeneutical discourses were deficient with respect to women’s experiences of sexual harassment, this did not mean that non-dominant hermeneutical discourses—those discourses that generated and were generated by the twentieth-century women’s movement—failed to provide women with the interpretive resources to understand and articulate their experiences of it. Certainly, when dominant discourses of interpretation neglect the experiences of marginalized groups, members of those groups suffer some injustice. However, because marginalized subjects may have non-dominant hermeneutical resources to draw upon in order to interpret their social experiences, gaps in dominant hermeneutical resources do not necessarily result in hermeneutical injustice.

By depicting hermeneutical lacunae as a “blanket collective lack” rather than an interpretive deficit that affects dominant discourses of interpretation (Fricker 2007, 161), Fricker neglects the possibility that defective knowledge practices among members of more powerful groups can produce and maintain distorted understandings of the social experiences of marginalized groups despite contrary, and arguably better, interpretations that fail (through systematic hermeneutical marginalization) to gain voice in dominant discourses. Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice overlooks these marginalized or non-dominant hermeneutical resources; in so doing, she misrepresents non-dominant subjects as failing to understand (they suffer from “acute cognitive disadvantage” (151) as a result of hermeneutical lacunae) when they may in fact have a shrewd comprehension of their experiences, perhaps variously and successfully expressed in a variety of marginal discourses that remain inaudible from dominant social locations. In the next section, I argue that by conflating collective with dominant hermeneutical resources, Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice collapses two kinds of unknowing into one.

### III. TWO KINDS OF UNKNOWING

Fricker is concerned to expose how power relations can occlude or obscure individuals’ understandings of their own social experiences. She suggests that hermeneutically marginalized groups can fail to understand their social experiences when those experiences are neglected or ignored by “collective”

hermeneutical resources, thus her use of Carmita Wood's story to demonstrate how a hermeneutical gap can thwart a woman's attempts to render her experiences of sexual harassment communicatively intelligible.

In this section, I argue that because Fricker misdescribes dominant hermeneutical resources as collective, she fails to locate the ethically bad epistemic practices that maintain gaps in dominant hermeneutical resources even while alternative interpretations are in fact offered by non-dominant discourses. Although it is possible that the lack of a well defined, socially recognized name for a particular experience can have ramifications that include self-mystification,<sup>1</sup> Fricker's analysis of hermeneutical injustice does not account for the possibility that marginalized groups can be silenced relative to dominant discourses without being prevented from understanding or expressing their own social experiences. I suggest that an gap in dominant hermeneutical resources is ambiguous between two kinds of unknowing: (1) hermeneutical injustice, and (2) epistemically and ethically blameworthy ignorance.

Feminist epistemology has sometimes focused on how power relations can constrain marginalized groups' ability to know, for instance, by withholding education or, in Fricker's case, by producing hermeneutical resources that are deficient with respect to their social experiences. In contrast, others argue that members of marginalized groups are not necessarily at an epistemic disadvantage. This point has been the lasting contribution of standpoint epistemology: it is from the perspective of the economically, politically, or socially disadvantaged subjects that we find veridical insight into the nature of the social world. According to standpoint theory, the way in which social identity correlates to perceptual access is such that social privilege does not necessarily entail epistemic privilege. That is to say, although membership in a socially powerful group affords certain benefits, privileged social perception is not necessarily among them. Although epistemic access is differentiated according to social location, powerful groups do not *ipso facto* get a better view.

Charles Mills has articulated this view by focusing on ignorance rather than knowledge. He argues that "alternative sets of experiences are not epistemically indifferent vis-à-vis one another but that hegemonic groups characteristically have experiences that foster illusory perceptions about society's functioning, whereas subordinate groups characteristically have experiences that (at least potentially) give rise to more adequate conceptualizations" (Mills 1998, 28). In *The Racial Contract*, Mills takes up this insight to argue that ignorance is a cognitive dysfunction that distorts powerful groups' understanding of the social world (Mills 1997, 18).

Mills introduces the notion of the "Racial Contract" as a way to challenge the assumptions of white political philosophy. In much the same way that feminist frameworks are conducive to discussions of gender that reveal the extent to which traditional moral and political theory is distorted by patriarchal

assumptions, Mills's framework is conducive to discussions of race and white racism that structure society as we think we know it. Thus, instead of focusing on a forward-looking, ideal contract that purports to describe the structure of a perfectly just society in which we should like to live, Mills focuses on a historical, non-ideal contract that describes the origin and nature of the unjust society in which we currently live.

According to Mills, the "Racial Contract" incorporates an epistemological component that is ostensibly absent from traditional social contract theories. The epistemic dimension of the "Racial Contract," Mills argues, consists in a tacit agreement "about what counts as a correct, objective interpretation of the world . . . for agreeing to this view, one is ('contractually') granted full cognitive standing in the polity, the official epistemic community" (Mills 1997, 18). Because the epistemic conditions of the "Racial Contract" require that whites engage in a significant degree of misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and misrepresentation on matters related to race, Mills argues that:

The Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. (Mills 1997, 18)

Ignorance of this kind (what Mills calls "white ignorance") is the product of an epistemic agreement among whites to see the world wrongly—that is, to cultivate and sustain a system of false beliefs.<sup>2</sup> The inverted epistemology of white ignorance thus leaves whites with poor understandings of the social world and their social experiences, which are validated by white epistemic authority.<sup>3</sup> On Mills's view, white ignorance is a kind of epistemically culpable and morally noxious *miscognition* that facilitates the maintenance of the status quo.

As a condition of not knowing, ignorance would seem to have little to do with epistemology, a discipline that studies the operations of knowledge. Although mainstream epistemology has certainly addressed questions concerning the conditions under which we do not have knowledge (for instance, work on counterevidence, defeaters, and unreliable or improperly functioning faculties all focus on impediments to knowledge), the political significance of some forms of ignorance has been underappreciated or at the very least underemphasized in both traditional and contemporary epistemology. Usually, ignorance has been depicted as epistemic deficiency: "something we do not (yet) know" (Tuana 2006, 3). Yet Mills's analysis describes how structures of power and privilege can function to produce doxastic systems that are not simply deficient but systematically distorted (Mills 1997, 18).

Although Fricker takes the absence of a socially recognized name to indicate that marginalized groups are prevented from understanding their own social experiences, Mills's account of white ignorance invites us to think about the circumstances in which powerful rather than marginalized groups can fail to understand through the epistemically irresponsible and ethically reprehensible practices of misinterpretation, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception. On this view, the privileged social location occupied by powerful groups occludes their understanding of the world in which they live and obscures their understanding of their own and others' social experiences. Conversely, marginalized groups occupy a social location outside the epistemic agreement to misunderstand the world, giving them an angle of perception that encourages a more accurate understanding than that of the dominant groups that oppress them. Contrary to Fricker, Mills's analysis of ignorance suggests that socially powerful groups do not necessarily have a better understanding of the social world than marginalized groups; rather, some social identities, even those that have been stereotyped as "non-knowers," may be in a better position to understand not only their own social experiences, but also the social experiences of members of powerful groups (for example, the kinds of social advantages whites regularly enjoy by virtue of their skin color).

To be clear, Fricker's point is *not* that members of dominant groups have a better understanding of all aspects of the social world. Rather, Fricker describes cases of hermeneutical injustice as epistemically symmetrical. She argues that when a hermeneutical lacuna exists with respect to the experiences of a marginalized group, *everyone* fails to understand: the interpretive gap is a collective one, preventing both dominant and non-dominant groups from understanding.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in Carmita Wood's case, both she and her harasser failed to understand that the harasser's behavior was harmful and wrongful. Fricker argues that "harasser and harassee alike are cognitively handicapped by the hermeneutical lacuna—neither has a proper understanding of how he is treating her" (Fricker 2007, 151). However, analyzing hermeneutical lacunae in terms of ignorance reveals an epistemic asymmetry: Wood's harasser, not Wood, lacked a proper understanding of his behavior. He failed to understand that his behavior was harmful and wrongful. On this interpretation, it is not the case that harasser and harassee alike were cognitively handicapped by the general lack of an understanding of sexual harassment; rather, Wood's harasser was cognitively disabled by ethically bad epistemic practices that maintained (to his benefit) his ignorance of her experiences.

At the social level, the ignorance of men about the experiences of women meant that the professor failed to have a proper understanding of how he was treating Wood, and it was his epistemic negligence that was seriously disadvantageous to her, not a lack of understanding on Wood's part. A lack of understanding of sexual harassment was not an interpretive deficit

affecting society at large. It was not the case that “the harasser’s cognitive disablement [was] seriously disadvantageous to her” because Wood’s hermeneutical marginalization did not render her cognitively disabled, as Fricker claims (Fricker 2007, 151). Rather, Wood’s harasser’s cognitive disablement, his failure to understand her experiences, and his refusal to recognize the harmfulness of his behavior, were seriously disadvantageous to her. The injustice Carmita Wood suffered relative to her harasser consisted in the fact that she was disempowered, dismissed, and silenced because of his cognitive failure. The distortions in dominant hermeneutical resources enabled and perpetuated his ignorance, and his ignorance enabled and perpetuated those distortions. The injustice Wood suffered was that of having her social experiences misinterpreted by those with epistemic authority—authority they exerted in order to preserve the existing social order that was, in part, dependent on those misinterpretations.

The framework provided by an epistemology of ignorance for understanding the marginalization of non-dominant groups relative to dominant discourses allows us to understand the unknowing to which members of dominant groups are subject despite—indeed, because of—their positions of dominance. As Fricker herself points out, women’s experience of sexual harassment was a location in social life “where the powerful [had] no interest in achieving a proper interpretation, perhaps indeed where they [had] a positive interest in sustaining the extant misinterpretation” (Fricker 2007, 152). This may manifest in hermeneutical resources that are parsimonious—that is, in dominant hermeneutical resources that inadequately articulate the experiences of women—but it does not manifest in the brute wordlessness of hermeneutically marginalized groups or in their lack of comprehension of their experiences.

By reframing hermeneutical lacunae within an epistemology of ignorance, it can be argued that in communicative encounters in which women like Wood were unable to render their social experiences communicatively intelligible, their comprehensibility to others was thwarted by epistemic practices infected by ignorance, not by their own inability to understand their experiences. The epistemic feat of this kind of ignorance is its sheer intransigence—its persistence despite the availability of alternative explanations articulated by members of non-dominant groups. A gap in dominant hermeneutical resources may obscure, misinterpret, or conceal the experiences of marginalized groups, but it does not perforce prevent them from understanding their social experiences, as Fricker suggests.

All this is not to say that domination and oppression do not or cannot have adverse psychological effects on members of oppressed groups such that their understandings of themselves and their experiences are rendered opaque or distorted. As many anti-oppression theorists have argued, the epistemic disorientation of oppressed groups—their alienation from the kind of

self-understanding dominant groups take for granted—is among the possible, probable, and actual effects of their oppression. An even more serious risk posed by oppressive societies is the possibility that members of oppressed groups might internalize deprecatory images of themselves. As Charles Taylor remarks, “A person or group of people suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (Taylor 1992, 25). Although I do not wish to align myself with discourses of hyperbolic epistemic autonomy that presume a particular conception of experience as transparent and self-knowing, neither do I wish to overstate the case for the internalization of oppressive images or the epistemic bewilderment that might afflict members of oppressed groups as a result of their hermeneutical marginalization.

To be clear, I am not denying the possibility that the conditions of oppression can engender a paucity of interpretive resources that conspire against the self-understandings of marginalized subjects. Indeed, I am in agreement with Fricker that this possibility has been underappreciated by both analytic ethics and epistemology alike. Rather, I am suggesting that we need to be attuned to the ways in which Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice problematically shape our understanding of hermeneutical gaps. Her account fails to acknowledge a different kind of unknowing, one that is perpetrated by dominant groups despite non-dominant groups’ comprehension of their experiences.

I have argued, contrary to Fricker, that Carmita Wood had an understanding of her experience of workplace harassment prior to the act of naming in which she participated. This is well-evidenced by Wood’s actions following the denial of her unemployment insurance claim: seeking out Lin Farley, participating in a consciousness-raising group, and helping to organize a speak-out. Fricker argues that “women such as Carmita Wood suffered (among other things) an acute cognitive disadvantage from a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource” (Fricker 2007, 151). She concludes that Wood’s hermeneutical disadvantage “renders her unable to make sense of her ongoing mistreatment” (149). But surely this claim is overstated. To the contrary, as evidenced by Wood’s subsequent action, she well knew that she had been subject to obnoxious and unwarranted sexual advances from a person in a position of considerable power over her. Fricker argues that the absence of the name *sexual harassment* was disadvantageous to Wood because it rendered her unable to understand an experience that was very much in her interest to understand. As I have argued, however, that hermeneutical gap did not necessarily indicate that Wood failed to understand, even though the name *sexual harassment* was not a part of her linguistic repertoire at the time.

I have also argued that Fricker’s analysis of hermeneutical injustice conflates collective with dominant hermeneutical resources. Consequently, Fricker is too quick to conclude that “collective” hermeneutical impoverishment renders

non-dominant subjects mystified and inarticulate. I suggested that non-dominant hermeneutical resources give marginalized subjects possibilities for self-understanding and articulation despite distortions and absences in dominant discourses of interpretation. Because Fricker misdescribes dominant hermeneutical resources as collective, she fails to locate the intransigence that maintains hermeneutical gaps while alternative interpretations are in fact available.

Mills's analysis of white ignorance further problematizes Fricker's claim that hermeneutically marginalized subjects are prevented from understanding their social experiences when dominant hermeneutical resources are deficient with respect to them. I have suggested that the framework provided by an epistemology of ignorance shows how dominant groups can fail to have a proper understanding of the social experiences of marginalized groups by disregarding or distorting interpretations offered by marginalized groups. On this view, marginalized subjects do not necessarily or even ordinarily fail to understand when their experiences are neglected or misinterpreted by dominant groups. A gap in dominant hermeneutical resources, rather than demonstrating how hermeneutically marginalized subjects can be rendered confused and speechless by hermeneutical resources that fail to articulate their social experiences, is a poignant reminder of the extent to which willfully sustained ignorance can inhibit communicative encounters between members of dominant and non-dominant groups.

## NOTES

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1. Although I cannot address the point in detail here, I am skeptical of the kind of linguistic determinism that underwrites Fricker's claim that a gap in hermeneutical resources prevents someone from understanding her own social experiences.

2. White ignorance does not necessarily pick out a racist cognizer, that is, someone with explicitly prejudicial beliefs about people of color. Indirect racism, on the other hand, can take the form of mistaken or false beliefs without the individual in question believing anything explicitly racist. An example of a false belief formed or maintained as a result of indirect racism is the belief held by some whites that blacks had roughly equal opportunities to whites after the abolition of slavery. An individual might hold this belief "because of the social suppression of the pertinent knowledge [sociological, legal, and historical facts; the testimony of African Americans], though without prejudice himself" (Mills 2007, 21). The corresponding and correct belief held by most blacks is that vast inequality of opportunity between whites and blacks in the United States persists to this day. Blacks' lived experience of discrimination means that they are more

likely than whites to acquire true beliefs about the persistence of racism in the United States. This is not to say that all whites, just by virtue of being white, will have false beliefs about the persistence of racial discrimination; rather it is a defeasible “cognitive tendency” (23).

3. For instance, many white Americans, who do not experience racial discrimination and rarely, if ever, hear racist principles openly endorsed or advocated, believe that racism is a historical rather than a contemporary social problem. African Americans, on the other hand, who regularly experience more covert or subtle forms of racial discrimination that go unnoticed by whites (for example, a black man who is surveilled by store clerks while white customers attract no suspicion), are therefore better poised to understand the ways in which America, far from being the race-blind society many whites believes it is, remains a society in which racist currents run just under the surface. Consider, for instance, that although testimonial and sociological evidence clearly indicates that racial discrimination continues to significantly affect the life-chances of blacks, fifty-two percent of white Americans believe that the lower socioeconomic standing of African Americans is attributable to a lack of motivation among blacks—and sixty-five percent say that African Americans just need to “try harder” (Massey 2007, 66). Although blacks systematically experience a variety of forms of discrimination across various aspects of their lives, the prevailing conviction among a majority of white Americans is that racism is a historical artifact that needs to be forgotten rather than a present-day reality that demands rectification.

4. Fricker does claim, however, that the hermeneutical dominance of some groups means that individuals belonging to them are better positioned to make sense of their social experiences (Fricker 2007, 148). This is because their hermeneutical dominance (they are not hermeneutically marginalized) means that their experiences are more likely to be reflected in the “collective” hermeneutical resource on which individual interpretations rely.

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