Introduction: defining hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical death

In her pioneering book *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), Miranda Fricker gave explicit formulation to a phenomenon that oppressed subjects had been experiencing and calling attention to for a long time: the expressive and interpretative side of their oppression, that is, hermeneutical injustice. Hermeneutical injustice is the phenomenon that occurs when the intelligibility of communicators is unfairly constrained or undermined, when their meaning-making capacities encounter unfair obstacles, or, as Fricker puts it, “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair advantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience” (2007: 1). Hermeneutical harms should not be minimized or underestimated, for the interpretative capacities of expressing oneself and being understood are basic human capacities. Meaning-making and meaning-sharing are crucial aspects of a dignified human life. Hermeneutical injuries can go very deep, indeed to the very core of one’s humanity. Fricker asked: “Is hermeneutical injustice sometimes so damaging that it cramps the very development of self”? (2007: 163)

In answer to Fricker’s question, I want to suggest that there are forms of hermeneutical injustices that are so damaging that they can result in what I call hermeneutical death, that is, phenomena that radically constrain one’s hermeneutical capacities and agency such as the following: the loss (or radical curtailment) of one’s voice, of one’s interpretative capacities, or of one’s status as a participant in meaning-making and meaning-sharing practices. This is something that oppressed groups have denounced for a long time. In particular, it has been poignantly expressed by women of color – from Maria Stewart and Sojourner Truth to Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa – who have felt systematically silenced and misheard by multiple publics. Hermeneutical harms can run so deep as to annihilate one’s self, so as to produce hermeneutical death. On my view, this occurs when subjects are not simply mistreated as intelligible communicators, but prevented from developing and exercising a voice, that is, prevented from participating in meaning-making and meaning-sharing practices. Gloria Anzaldúa described the predicament of hermeneutical death in forceful and dramatic ways when she writes about Anglo White privilege as killing her voice and her capacity to be heard and understood in her own terms, as using (what she called) ‘linguistic terrorism’ to annihilate her self: “El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arranco la lengua. Wild tongues cannot be tamed, they can only be cut out” (1987: 76). “Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self” (1987: 80).
José Medina

Hermeneutical injustices of this extreme form not only demand special attention, but also call for a response that is different in kind to the response appropriate for addressing non-fatal hermeneutical injustices in which one’s status and agency as a communicator and interpreter is preserved even if seriously constrained. Desperate times call for desperate measures and, I will suggest, hermeneutical death calls for a particular kind of hermeneutical struggle with radical features that other hermeneutical struggles do not have. But the different kinds of preventive and reparative work that hermeneutical death and non-fatal hermeneutical injustices demand will have to wait until the final section of this essay. In the next section I will elucidate different versions and dimensions of the concept of hermeneutical injustice and how it relates to issues of epistemic responsibility. The following section will address different possible classifications of hermeneutical injustices and how these classifications offer conceptual resources for diagnosing cases of hermeneutical injustices and for identifying ways of resisting hermeneutical marginalization. Finally, in the concluding section, I will come back to the notion of hermeneutical death outlined by philosophers of color, gesturing toward possible paths of resistance and hermeneutical liberation.

Hermeneutical injustices and hermeneutical responsibilities

The last decade has produced a rich literature on hermeneutical injustice, trying to understand the nature of the phenomenon, its causes and consequences, and its varieties. Fricker characterizes hermeneutical injustice as a structural, large-scale phenomenon that happens at the level of an entire culture. There are important advantages in emphasizing the structural elements of hermeneutical injustice – this emphasis calls attention to the fact that there can be hermeneutical wrongs built into the very structure of our communicative practices, and that people can be hermeneutically disadvantaged in unfair ways even when we cannot point to particular persons acting in ways that are identifiably wrong. Hermeneutical injustices are indeed very often impersonal, widespread, and systematic. But the structural elements of hermeneutical injustice should not be emphasized at the expense of disregarding its agential components. In her 2007 book, Fricker argued that hermeneutical injustices are epistemic wrongs that simply happen, without perpetrators, without being committed by anyone in particular, for they result from lacunas or limitations in ‘the collective hermeneutical resource’ of a culture. Consequently, Fricker contended that when it comes to hermeneutical injustices, unlike testimonial injustices, issues of responsibility do not arise. I have developed two kinds of arguments intended to show that responsibility is in fact a crucial aspect of hermeneutical injustices (see Medina 2012, 2013).

In the first place, I have argued, when we consider the issue of responsibility with respect to hermeneutical injustice, it would be wrong to restrict ourselves to purely individual forms of responsibility such as individual culpability. It is also important to consider here collective and shared forms of responsibility. An entire culture can be held responsible for not trying to understand a particular kind of experience or a particular kind of subjectivity, and, more importantly, different groups and publics within a hermeneutically unjust culture can bear different kinds of responsibility for their hermeneutical neglect in certain areas and/or for their hermeneutical resistance to certain expressive or interpretative efforts. Moreover, I have also argued, when it comes to individuals, their responsibility may be highly limited and diffused, but it does not disappear completely. When it comes to hermeneutical injustices, individuals cannot be left off the hook; that is, they cannot (at least not always and completely) be allowed to hide behind the shortcomings of their culture. There are important issues of complicity with respect to hermeneutical injustices that need to be theorized. We can identify degrees of complicity in how individuals
respond to the lacunas and limitations in the hermeneutical resources they have inherited and in how they participate (or fail to participate) in expressive and interpretative dynamics.

In the second place, I have also developed arguments against a monolithic conception of culture and its shared hermeneutical resources that called into question blanket statements about the impossibility of expressing, understanding, or interpreting an experience, a problem, an identity, etc. It is important to call attention to the inner diversity of a collective, to pay attention to its subgroups and subcultures, and to highlight the diversity and heterogeneity of expressive capacities and resources that collectives typically exhibit. For a pluralistic conception of social groups and cultures, it is problematic to say that it is simply impossible for an experience to be understood within a particular culture. Instead of focusing on complete success or failure of understanding, it is important to appreciate that intelligibility is a matter of more or less: doing better or worse in understanding oneself and others is a matter of trying as hard as one can, of paying attention to the emerging expressive and interpretative possibilities, no matter how inchoate or embryonic. Typically, in an expressive community, there are meanings and interpretations that are well established and widely shared, but there are also meanings and interpretations that have a more limited and precarious circulation, and there are also those meanings and interpretations that are still struggling to be formed and to be accepted – struggling for full expression and for full understanding. Poorly understood and inchoate meanings, interpretations, and expressive styles are the site of hermeneutical struggles, struggles in which there are interpretative achievements and break-throughs (new experiences are named, new phenomena understood), but also struggles in which people become silenced, misunderstood, and hermeneutically marginalized.

When it comes to hermeneutical harms and injustices, the question is not simply whether or not there are expressive and interpretative resources available for meaning-making and meaning-sharing, but how those resources are used, by whom, and in what ways. In this sense, when we recognize that a phenomenon or experience is not talked about or is poorly understood in a culture, and we think that a group of people is unfairly disadvantaged as a result, and we label it a hermeneutical injustice, this should be the beginning – not the end! – of a diagnostic process. This process proceeds by asking more and more specific questions: exactly by whom and in what way is the phenomenon or experience poorly expressed/understood?, in what contexts and for what purposes?, what are the dynamics that contribute to halt any expressive and interpretative progress in this area?, etc. With these more specific questions, crucial issues of positionality and relationality with respect to hermeneutical injustice arise, and they enable us to calibrate complex issues of shared and collective responsibility (which also make room for limited forms of individual responsibility). Calling attention to the crucial role of the epistemic agency of privileged subjects in the production and perpetuation of hermeneutical injustices, Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (2012) has articulated the notion of ‘willful hermeneutical ignorance’ to describe instances in which, despite the availability of alternative conceptualizations put forth by marginalized, resistant knowers, “dominantly situated knowers nonetheless continue to misunderstand and misinterpret the world” (2012: 716).

In her recent work, Fricker has recognized the importance of ‘localized hermeneutical practices’ and has called attention to agential elements in the production of hermeneutical injustices. She has argued that patterns of testimonial injustice can contribute to the production and perpetuation of hermeneutical injustice: “where it is persistent and socially patterned”, testimonial injustice “will tend to create or increase hermeneutical marginalisation. That is to say, it will tend to create and sustain a situation in which some social groups have less than a fair crack at contributing to the shared pool of concepts and interpretive tropes that we use to make generally share-able sense of our social experiences” (2016: 163). Instead of talking about “the collective hermeneutical resource”, Fricker now calls attention to the “shared pool” of hermeneutical
resources, which contains “meanings that just about anyone can draw upon and expect those meanings to be understood across social space by just about anyone else” (2016: 163). And with this more qualified view, she makes room for dissonant meanings and interpretations that are not widely shared. In this sense, Fricker talks about “localised hermeneutical practices”: “fully functioning yet insufficiently widely shared hermeneutical practices”; “localised or in-group hermeneutical practices that are nonetheless not shared across further social space” (2016: 166 and 167). By pluralizing her view of hermeneutical resources and how they enter into hermeneutical dynamics, Fricker’s current view becomes polyphonic and converges with my own, as she herself points out:

Medina is right to emphasise that the intersectional ignorances created by the possession and non-possession of this or that cluster of interpretive concepts growing out of this or that area of social experience tell a ‘polyphonic’ or multi-voiced story of power and resistance, societal conceptual impoverishment and localised interpretive sophistication and creativity.

(2016: 167)

Although Fricker accepts the agential production of hermeneutical injustices, she considers it “a purely structural phenomenon with no individual perpetrator” (2016: 172). But in some cases there seem to be such perpetrators, for example, in the case of racial hermeneutical injustices. There are hermeneutical attitudes inscribed in white ignorance (Mills 2007) that seem complicit with white privilege and with the perpetuation of hermeneutical disadvantages for racially oppressed groups. Fricker argues that white ignorance often functions as the source of epistemic injustices, but not of distinctively hermeneutical injustices, since it typically concerns “a dysfunction at the level of belief and evidence rather than the level of conceptual repertoire and intelligibility” (2016: 173). However, she acknowledges that there can be cases of white ignorance (“albeit non-standard”) that include “the suppression of concepts” and result in “a genuine deficit in hermeneutical resources for the white community” (2016: 174). Despite the availability of the relevant meanings and interpretations in localized hermeneutical practices, the “white-ignorant” subject (who may or may not be white) cultivates hermeneutical attitudes that close his/her mind to alternative expressive or interpretative resources and make him/her remain oblivious to or dismissive of these resources. White ignorance includes what Pohlhaus, Jr. (2012) calls racialized “willful hermeneutical ignorance”. The victims of racially motivated concept suppression are typically not the hermeneutically dispossessed subjects: they often do have the conceptual resources to communicate properly, but they are simply not being adequately heard or understood because of their interlocutors’ hermeneutical deficits. Although privileged subjects are the ones hermeneutically deprived, oppressed subjects are in the end the ones who suffer the most epistemic harms (including hermeneutical harms) as a consequence: non-dominantly situated people often find their meanings and communicative contributions not taken seriously, improperly heard, deemed deficient, reinterpreted, distorted, and too quickly dismissed, and in these ways they are hermeneutically disrespected and wronged. It is important to note that there are cases of white ignorance in which victim and perpetrator coincide: for example, cases in which racially oppressed subjects do not understand some of their own experiences and problems due to internalized white ignorance, and also cases in which underprivileged white subjects are unable to understand predicaments they share with racially oppressed subjects due to a racial ignorance that is not in their own benefit despite their whiteness – think, for example, of white subjects living under conditions of poverty and being seduced by white ignorance to understand their situation as resulting from illegal immigration or from non-whites abusing a welfare system.
Fricker acknowledges that the racially motivated concept-suppression cases are cases in which white ignorance and hermeneutical injustices overlap: cases “in which one group’s communicative attempts meet with failure owing to a paucity of concepts on the part of an out-group and therefore in the shared hermeneutical resource” (Fricker 2016: 174–5). But Fricker still objects against using white ignorance as an agentially produced form of hermeneutical injustice. She argues that individuals can only be considered the cause of particular hermeneutical failures; they can only be blamed for “failing to be virtuous hearers”; but they cannot be deemed the “perpetrator of the broader injustice itself” (2016: 172, note 16).

The debates about hermeneutical injustice will surely go on. There is no doubt that there is something conceptual at stake in these debates: how to understand the phenomenon, how to diagnose it and analyze it, etc. But it is important to notice that there is also (and perhaps more fundamentally) something practical at stake – how to fight hermeneutical injustices, how to prevent them before they occur, and how to repair hermeneutical practices and dynamics when they occur. We will come back to this practical side in the last section before we survey the wild variety of cases of hermeneutical injustices in the next section.

Classificatory pluralism: navigating a heterogeneous terrain

Hermeneutical injustices are indeed wildly heterogeneous phenomena, and we can identify indefinitely many varieties depending on the classificatory lenses we use. There are many different ways of classifying varieties of hermeneutical injustice, depending on the aims of our classification. Classifications are useful for what they enable us to accomplish; they are not simply an idle academic exercise of intellectual dexterity; they are, rather, a conceptual exercise that enable us to navigate the world and to find ways to change it. Instead of aiming at a single, all-encompassing classification that covers all possible varieties in a single list, it would be advantageous to avail ourselves of as many classifications as possible so that we can highlight different elements and dimensions in the phenomenology of hermeneutical wrongs committed against individuals, groups, and publics. It is important to have a rich and broad conceptual toolbox for diagnosing hermeneutical wrongs and finding ways of resisting them and repairing them. In this section, I will elucidate possible classifications of hermeneutical injustices according to four different angles or parameters, inviting others to add to this preliminary list of possible classifications, which should remain forever open and growing. The four parameters or criteria I want to focus on are the source of the problem, the dynamics of the problem, the breadth of the problem, and the depth of the problem.

In the first place, when it comes to the source of the problem, we can distinguish two different kinds of hermeneutical injustice: those that are semantically produced and those that are performatively produced. The semantically produced hermeneutical injustices are the paradigmatic cases on which Fricker and her followers have tended to focus: cases in which hermeneutical disadvantages and harms result from the unavailability of labels; cases where understanding fails because words are lacking, where we find “a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be” (2007: 150–151). A powerful example Fricker examines concerns the hermeneutical obstacles that the Women’s Movement encountered to address experiences of sexual intimidation when labels such as ‘sexual harassment’ were not available. As Fricker remarks, women activists found themselves in the peculiar situation of organizing ‘speak-outs’ in which “the ‘this’ they were going to break the silence about had no name” (2007: 150). Semantically produced hermeneutical injustices also occur when words and concepts are available, but they are not allowed to be used to express certain things. This is what Sojourner Truth powerfully called attention to in her address at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in 1851, when she denounced the fact that...
crucial aspects of black femininity were blocked from entering the meaning of ‘woman’. When Sojourner Truth poignantly asked, “And ain’t I a woman?”, she was unmasking and denouncing the racial biases underlying mainstream conceptions of femininity – whited conceptions of femininity that marginalized black women in the US.

There are also performatively produced hermeneutical injustices, which occur when subjects are judged as unintelligible or less intelligible than other subjects not because of the words they use but because of their communicative performance or expressive style (Fricker 2007: 160ff). So, for example, in certain contexts and for certain audiences, a subject’s accent, unorthodox demeanor, or flamboyant style may be perceived as indicative of defective intelligibility – s/he may be perceived as less articulate or clear than other speakers, her/his interpretations and perspectives may be less likely to be understood in their own terms, and s/he may be more likely to be taken as unable to make full sense of certain topics or areas of experience. Fricker calls attention to the performative aspects 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). When we pay attention to unfair disadvantages and obstacles that arise for the development of dissonant or eccentric voices under adverse hermeneutical climates, we need to shift the focus from the semantics of experiential contents to the pragmatics of meaning-making and meaning-sharing activities.

In the second place, hermeneutical injustices can also be classified according to the particular kinds of dynamics in which they surface. In particular, we can distinguish between structural or institutional dynamics and interpersonal dynamics. Hermeneutical injustices are committed structurally or institutionally when there are structural conditions or institutional designs that prevent the use of certain hermeneutical resources and expressive styles, or simply when those conditions or designs favor certain hermeneutical communities and practices and disadvantage others. We encounter hermeneutical injustices of this sort when institutions refuse to accept certain categories and expressive styles to the detriment of particular publics, as for example when questionnaires (of e.g. a university or a state agency) force individuals to self-describe in ways they don’t want to because of the limited options (e.g. the binary male/female categories when it comes to gender identity, without offering ‘transgender’ as an option), or because certain categories are not provided, and the closest one involves a mischaracterization (e.g. ‘Hispanic’ versus ‘Latina/o’). On the other hand, hermeneutical injustices are also often committed in and through interpersonal dynamics. This occurs, for example, when there are hermeneutical intimidations in interpersonal exchanges, as it is well illustrated by the literature on micro-aggressions. Although the silencing effects of micro-aggressions have been analyzed as causing testimonial injustices (Dotson 2011), they can also be shown to function as intimidations that cause hermeneutical marginalization: “skeptical stares; looking confused, puzzled, or unable to follow; constantly interrupting or questioning one’s meaning, are some of the subtle (sometimes not so subtle) communicative intimidations and micro-aggressions that can silence people or implicitly encourage them to limit their speech or take a discursive detour” (Medina forthcoming: 14). By calling into question one’s intelligibility, not only can micro-aggressions unfairly constrain one’s testimonial capacities, but they can also put unfair pressures on one’s meaning-making and meaning-sharing capacities, thus producing hermeneutical injustices through interpersonal dynamics.

In the third place, we can also classify instances of hermeneutical injustice according to their breadth, considering how far the injustice reaches across the social fabric. From the beginning, Fricker distinguished between incidental and systematic cases of hermeneutical injustice, that is, between isolated and widespread cases of unfair failures of understanding and interpretation. Fricker has emphasized that there are ‘radical’ or ‘maximal’ cases in which nobody, not even the
concerned communicator herself, can achieve understanding because the meanings and expressive/interpretative resources in question are beyond the reach of that community. But she also points out that there are also ‘minimal’ cases of hermeneutical injustice in which there are communicators who can make sense of the phenomenon, experience, or problem in question, but nonetheless when they try to express themselves in that area, they encounter incomprehension and/or misinterpretation: although able to communicate her experience in principle, “she is unable to render it intelligible across social space to some significant social other to whom she needs to convey it” (Fricker 2016: 165). Fricker has underscored that between ‘maximal’ and ‘minimal’ cases of hermeneutical injustice, there is “a continuum of possibilities [. . .] – i.e. a range of cases in which there is shared intelligibility across an increasingly large group or groups” (Fricker 2016: 165). In particular, she has emphasized the importance of “midway cases of hermeneutical injustice”:

cases in which there are sophisticated interpretive practices [. . .], but not shared with at least one out-group with whom communication is needed. Members of such hermeneutically self-reliant groups are vulnerable to hermeneutical injustices whose form does not involve any confused experiences whatever, but only frustratingly failed attempts to communicate them to members of an out-group.

(Fricker 2016: 167)

Finally, in the fourth place, we can also classify hermeneutical injustices according to their depth, that is, according to how deep the hermeneutical harm goes in undermining or destroying the meaning-making and meaning-sharing capacities of the victims of such harm. Here too we can identify a continuum of cases: from skin-deep cases, in which subjects may face unfair uptake in an isolated aspect of their life without leaving any mark in their interpretative powers and hermeneutical agency (leaving intact even whatever epistemic privileges they may have), to marrow-of-the-bone cases, in which the hermeneutical harms become so pervasive that they compromise one’s epistemic life and status as a meaning-making subject in expressive and interpretative practices. In the latter, marrow-of-the-bone cases, the effects of hermeneutical injustice are totalizing, and they reverberate across all the corners of one’s epistemic life, affecting one’s entire hermeneutical subjectivity, that is, one’s voice and capacity to make sense and be understood. The most radical case would be the one in which one’s voice is killed – what I have called hermeneutical death. Although of course it may be extremely rare to find cases in which a subject completely loses her voice and standing as a meaning-making subject, under conditions of extreme epistemic oppressions in which one’s status as a subject of knowledge and understanding is barely recognized, we can find cases that approximate hermeneutical death. Women have found themselves in a predicament that approximates hermeneutical death in the lowest cultural moments of sexist societies, and so have ethnic and racial minorities under conditions of extreme racism – a good illustration of measures that contribute to hermeneutical annihilation can be found in slave traders’ practice of separating African slaves who spoke the same language to maximize communicative isolation and in US slaveholders’ practice of punishing slaves caught speaking African languages. We will come back to extreme cases of hermeneutical injustice in the next section.

These are simply some tentative and preliminary ways in which we can introduce some distinctions and conceptual orders in the vast and heterogeneous field of hermeneutical injustices. The different classifications we can entertain should have a practical pay-off: they should enable us to see different aspects and dimensions of the diverse cases of hermeneutical injustice, and, accordingly, they should enable us to respond to those cases in diverse ways. This is
very important because the responses that may be appropriate and effective for some forms of hermeneutical injustice may be inappropriate or ineffective for other kinds of hermeneutical injustice. For example, expanding the available vocabulary may meliorate some hermeneutical injustices, but it will not do when what is needed is more attunement or sensitivity to an expressive style. Hermeneutical courage and self-trust on the side of those trying to articulate a new experience may be what is needed in some cases, but it will not help with cases in which what creates the problem is a resistance on the listener’s side, not the expressive limitations of the speaker. Improving ways of listening and giving uptake may meliorate hermeneutical injustices produced by interpersonal dynamics, but it will not be sufficient when we need to change structural and institutional conditions of communication that go beyond those dynamics. I want to emphasize, in particular, the distinctiveness of totalizing cases of hermeneutical injustice that approximate hermeneutical death, because these cases require special forms of resistance: what I have called *hermeneutical insurrection* (forthcoming), that is, forms of disobedience to and revolt against expressive/interpretative norms and expectations in order to pave the way to a new hermeneutical order.

**Fighting against hermeneutical injustice and hermeneutical death: resistance and insurrection**

Hermeneutical injustices are complex phenomena that are very difficult to prevent and eradicate, but, as Fricker points out, the fight against them has as a prerequisite that we develop “alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one’s interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical understanding. The point is to realize that the speaker is struggling with an objective difficulty and not a subjective failing” (2007: 169). As Fricker goes on to emphasize, in order to mitigate hermeneutical injustices and work toward hermeneutical justice, we need to cultivate *virtuous listening*. The preventive and reparative work that hermeneutical injustices call for requires the constant improvement of our hermeneutical sensibilities. We need to cultivate hermeneutical openness and self-critical hermeneutical capacities that can make us more attentive to blind-spots, lacunas, and interpretative failures. Active listening and pro-active attitudes of hermeneutical charity can include things such as: knowing when to shut up, knowing when to suspend one’s own judgment about intelligibility,8 calling critical attention to one’s own limited expressive habits and interpretative expectations, listening for silences, checking with others who are differently situated,9 letting others set the tone and the dynamics of a communicative exchange, etc.

But fighting hermeneutical injustices may require more than virtuous listening; it may require encouraging and facilitating *hermeneutical resistance*, that is, exerting epistemic friction against the normative expectations of established interpretative frameworks and aiding dissonant voices in the formation of alternative meanings, interpretations, and expressive styles. As I have argued elsewhere (2012, 2013), communicative contexts are always polyphonic, and there are typically dissonant voices, embryonic formulations of alternative meanings, and resistant hermeneutical practices even in the most adverse hermeneutical contexts. Fricker has called attention to experiences of *dissonance* between one’s meaning/understanding and the interpretative horizon one has inherited, and I have argued that these experiences can function as the source of an important form of ‘resistance’, *hermeneutical resistance*. I have further argued that we all have a *prima facie* hermeneutical responsibility to resist unfair hermeneutical climates. Although this responsibility will take different configurations depending on one’s positionality and relationality
in hermeneutical communities and practices, we should all feel responsible to facilitate, in any way we can, the hermeneutical agency of eccentric voices and perspectives that resist established meanings and communicative dynamics, and work toward the formation of original meanings, alternative expressive styles, and new horizons of interpretation.

Should we always be expected to contribute to the expansion of expressive and interpretative resources? Should we always promote the sharing of hermeneutical repertoires? Fighting hermeneutical injustices typically involves improving communication across hermeneutical practices and communities, and making dissonant meanings and eccentric interpretative frameworks available through the social fabric. However, an important caveat needs to be issued here. Although the default attitude in working toward hermeneutical justice is that of cooperation and sharing hermeneutical resources, that is not always the most appropriate attitude and response for fighting against hermeneutical injustices. Drawing from the recent literature on hermeneutical injustice in critical race theory, Fricker remarks that there are “cases in which it may not be in the interests of an oppressed group to fight immediately for the introduction of local meanings into the wider collective hermeneutical resource” (2016: 168-9). As Fricker explains, this is a point that has been forcefully made by Charles Mills by echoing an African-American folk poem: “Got one mind for white folks to see / Another for what I know is me” (Mills 2007: 18). Under conditions of oppression, sometimes there can be advantages in keeping things local or even private, so as to prevent dangers and vulnerabilities that may come with visibility and exposure for oppressed subjects (see Bailey 2007). Not sharing one’s expressive and interpretative resources may be required for self-protection and for resisting the hermeneutical imperialism that demands access to all resources and take it as legitimate the appropriation of all expressive practices, no matter where they come from or where they are going. In this sense, Fricker has pointed out that in certain contexts it is important to appreciate “the value of maintaining hermeneutical privacy” (2016: 169; my emphasis), citing as an example Alice Walker’s descriptions of how in the segregated American South, black parents “inculcated in their children a way of understanding racial oppression that might be read as incorporating a certain security in on-going hermeneutical separation” (2016: 169). This ‘hermeneutical separation’ can be sometimes the only way to safeguard the hermeneutical resources and practices of one’s community and a necessary strategy for survival as well as “a source of in-group solidarity and strength” (2016: 170). Although non-fatal hermeneutical injustices can typically be resisted through dissenting or eccentric hermeneutical agency geared toward more cooperation and more sharing of hermeneutical resources, this is not the case when we are dealing with cases that approximate hermeneutical death.

In some cases, the conditions of hermeneutical marginalization can be so extreme that more than regular hermeneutical resistance may be required; near-death hermeneutical marginalization calls for insurrection. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, I want to give center-stage to the extreme case of hermeneutical death because it reveals something important about the depth and disabling power that hermeneutical injustice can reach, but also because it reveals that in the difficult and uphill battle of fighting hermeneutical injustices, sometimes radical hermeneutical measures may be needed. As I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming), epistemic death calls for epistemic disobedience and epistemic insurrection: besides relaxing and suspending obligations, situations of testimonial and hermeneutical death also create a right (if not a duty) to fight epistemically by any means necessary (including the right to lie, to hide, to sabotage, to silence others, etc.), demonstrating loyalty and solidarity only with alternative epistemic communities (communities of resistance). This is the rationale for the notions of ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo 2009) and ‘epistemic insurrection’ (Medina forthcoming) that we can apply here to the case
of radical hermeneutical injustice or hermeneutical death. Under conditions of hermeneutical death, subjects owe nothing to those expressive practices and communities that contribute to the annihilation of their meaning-making capacities: communicative obligations (such as making meanings accessible to others, sharing expressive and interpretative resources, listening charitably, aiding others in their attempts to speak, etc.) are suspended because one should not be expected to cooperate with practices that undermine one’s own status and agency or that of one’s fellows. (And note that you don’t have to be hermeneutically oppressed to justifiably engage in ‘hermeneutical disobedience’!)

As Pohlhaus, Jr. (2011: 228) has argued, it is justified for oppressed subjects to engage in “strategic refusals to understand”, that is, in refusals to enter into oppressive ‘rhetorical spaces’ and to cooperate hermeneutically with oppressive meanings and perspectives that constrain their agency. As Pohlhaus, Jr. insists, refusing to entertain certain meanings and to work with certain hermeneutical frameworks and perspectives should not be confused with disengaging and refusing to cooperate altogether. In fact, such refusals are often the prerequisite for opening up new forms of communicative engagement: they are exercises in hermeneutical resistance aimed at disrupting complicity with hermeneutical injustices and at facilitating the articulation of resistant meanings and alternative rhetorical spaces.

Sometimes in order to clear the path for the development of a new language or a new expressive style, we need to make some oppressive expressive styles and interpretative frameworks explode, or at least we need to subject them to sufficient friction – or insurrectionary resistance – so as to feel pressured to change or to learn to co-exist with other styles and frameworks. Sojourner Truth’s explosive interrogation of the meaning of ‘woman’, James Baldwin’s or Audre Lorde’s poetic uses of black English, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s persistent use of Spanglish, dialectical differences and linguistic hybridization, should all count as acts of hermeneutical disobedience and insurrection, attempts to disrupt oppressive linguistic habits and expectations and to form alternative expressive communities. Obviously most of us are not a Sojourner Truth, a James Baldwin, an Audre Lorde, or a Gloria Anzaldúa, but we can help in small ways to rebel against hermeneutical injustices by disobeying oppressive communicative norms and expectations, and by deploying communicative moves that facilitate paths of resistance for eccentric voices, expressive styles, and interpretative perspectives. When we hear someone unfairly constraining someone’s voice by saying, for example, “I don’t think those words can be used in that way” (or some other pronouncement that calls into question the speaker’s intelligibility by unfairly policing her voice), interlocutors (and not just the speaker being targeted) can justifiably object to the norm or expectation (“Why don’t you let me/her talk and see where I/she go/es with my/her words?”); they can call critical attention to the unfair questioning and redirect the hermeneutical challenge (“Why are you assuming that this is nonsense?”), and they can also simply ally their voices and join hermeneutical forces so as to change the communicative dynamics, shift the hermeneutical expectations, and empower the eccentric voice(s) in question. These ordinary ways of resisting hermeneutical marginalization in everyday communication can amount to hermeneutical insurrection if they involve the dismantling of entire expressive styles or interpretative frameworks and the shift to new ones – e.g. when people in professional venues, such as philosophy conferences, refuse to articulate and justify their meanings according to some unique, narrow standard, and they move to more inclusive ways of negotiating meanings and interpretations. As I have argued elsewhere (forthcoming), our micro-resistance to hermeneutical intimidations in micro-aggressions can not only help mitigate the negative impact of hermeneutical injustices, but it can also forge paths of hermeneutical resistance – and even insurrection! – and slowly work toward more liberating hermeneutical climates and dynamics.

Related chapters: 12, 16, 19, 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36
Notes

1 I would like to thank Ian James Kidd, Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., and Miranda Fricker for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this chapter.
2 This is part of my concept of epistemic death, which can take the form of testimonial death and of hermeneutical death. See Medina (forthcoming).
3 Stewart developed an understanding of epistemic oppression as a form of ‘deadening’ and ‘numbing’ of mental capacities that can ‘kill’ oneself as a subject of knowledge and understanding. She wrote: ‘There are no chains so galling as the chains of ignorance – no fetters so binding as those that bind the soul, and exclude it from the vast field of useful and scientific knowledge’. (1932/1987: 45)
4 For Fricker, hermeneutical injustice is not a harm perpetrated by an agent (159) but “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (155).
5 Kristie Dotson has used Pohlhaus, Jr.’s notion to identify a third category of epistemic injustice that combines features of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, which she calls ‘contributory injustice’: an agentially produced form of epistemic injustice in which “an epistemic agent’s willful hermeneutical ignorance in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources thwarts a knower’s ability to contribute to shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community by compromising her epistemic agency” (2012: 32).
6 In other cases, unorthodox demeanors, styles, or dictions may not trigger a negative judgment of intelligibility, but they may provoke reluctance or refusal to engage, resulting in communicative marginalization. I am thankful to Ian James Kidd for pointing this out to me.
7 As Carnavale (2012) points out, “African language groups were separated by slave traders in an attempt to thwart any uprising”; and, “once in the New World, slave owners punished those who were caught speaking African languages: in at least a few cases, by removing their tongues” (Carnavale 2012: 45). I am grateful to Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. for calling my attention to this illustration.
8 A directive in this direction is Louise Antony’s suggestion of 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). While seeing merits in this proposal, Fricker has argued 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; my emphasis)
9 See Ortega (2006). I am grateful to Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. for helping me think through this preliminary list of things to be included in active listening and pro-active attitudes of hermeneutical charity.
10 I owe these apt formulations to Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., who pointed out to me the connection between the problematic epistemic expectation of dominantly situated subjects to have access to everything and Shannon Sullivan’s (2006) discussion of white ontological expansiveness.
11 Pohlhaus, Jr. borrows this notion from Lorraine Code (1995) and explains it as follows: “Just as the arrangement of material space can enable and disable whole groups of people, so, too, can the arrangement of ‘rhetorical space’ (to use Lorraine Code’s apt phrase)”. (2011: 228).
12 I would say that one of the best examples of hermeneutical defiance and insurgence can be found in Truth’s discourse, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (1851), in which she exercised hermeneutical disobedience in refusing to accept established meanings of femininity and in insisting on the inclusion of alternative contents in the very meaning of ‘woman’.

References