

names are not enough

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### abstract

Standard examples of hermeneutical injustice involve a gap, or *lacuna*, where a term to describe an important social experience is missing. In contrast, this paper introduces *hermeneutical dilution* and *hermeneutical monumentalization* as two categories of hermeneutical occlusions which do not require the absence of a term. These occlusions instead have to do with the inability to specify one's particular experience using existing terms, either because the term is inaccessible or because it is not sufficiently specific. Despite this difference, I argue that both categories of occlusions can constitute hermeneutical injustices. Furthermore, I suggest that, unlike lacunae, dilutions and monumentalizations can give rise to *hermeneutical conflicts*, that is, necessarily conflicting claims to hermeneutical resources. To be plausible, our conception of hermeneutical justice must have an explanation for how to navigate these conflicts and prioritize particular claims.

## introduction

Last spring, I gave a talk on epistemic injustice as part of an outreach program for local high school students. The lecture—*To Speak and Be Heard*—appealed to the sensibilities of my audience, drawn from a near-universally epistemically disenfranchised group: children. The talk began with a discussion of *testimonial injustice* and how we fail to fairly judge others' trustworthiness. As age confers an—often unjust—credibility deficit, I expected this to be of particular interest to the students. Yet I soon found that their real interest was in the notion of *hermeneutical injustice*; that is, injustices relating to the distribution of interpretive resources available for expressing social experience. For the students, the concept of hermeneutical injustice was both subtle and deeply familiar.

Each generation bears its own linguistic burden, but the advent of social media, and its universality for young people, has transformed and accelerated the language-production process. My students found themselves readily able to provide examples of experiences for which, until recently, no concept existed to describe. A transgender student offered *boymoding*, a Hispanic student suggested *code-switching*. After a year of online classes, everyone was familiar with *Zoom fatigue*. Crucially, many of these students had lived these experiences and struggled to describe them before assimilating the language to do so.

The students told me where they'd learned the terms: Instagram, TikTok, Twitter. As I tried to come up with examples from my experience on social media, something occurred to me. "Speaking of Twitter", I asked, "I have a question for you. Imagine you see a tweet from an acquaintance of yours. It says 'worst day ever. want to kill myself.' How would you respond?"

It was an awkward half-minute before someone gave an answer. "Honestly? I'd probably comment 'same.'" A titter ran through the class, but many of them were

nodding. The seal broken, other answers were quickly suggested: 'ikr', 'so true', and, of course, 'real' were the primary opposing contenders. I polled the class, asking if they agreed or if they thought the comments were more likely to offer resources and support. Overwhelmingly, the students choose the first answer. They intellectually understood the tweet might express a pressing suicidal intention, but this wasn't their first impulse. Instead, they viewed the tweet as expressing a less severe emotion to which the proper response was not concern but joking commiseration. When I asked them how they could tell if there was an imminent threat to the life of the person who wrote the tweet, their response was a more-or-less statistical one: people use the term in the less serious fashion far more often, so they favored that explanation.

As a final question, to gauge their familiarity with substitute terms, I asked the class how many of them were familiar with the term "suicidal ideation." Just over half raised their hand.

This is not a paper about the degeneration of language among today's youth. Every generation, from birth until death, struggles to express themselves, and as the previous examples show, today's teens are uniquely empowered to articulate their social experiences. However, I argue that my students' inability to recognize suicidal intention in the hypothetical tweet serves as a guiding example towards an often-overlooked type of hermeneutical injustice that I call *hermeneutical dilution*. Hermeneutical dilution consists of the "watering-down" of an existing term-like 'to kill oneself'—to the point where it is functionally unable to specify some crucial social experience. In this paper, I describe hermeneutical dilution and its counterpart, *hermeneutical monumentalization*. I argue that using dilution and monumentalization, we can construct plausible, just, and necessarily competing claims to hermeneutical resources. These claims force us to reflect on our vision

of an ideal hermeneutical climate, and complicate naïve theories of hermeneutical justice that attempt to avoid political specificities.

Hermeneutical dilution and monumentalization also differ from traditional examples of hermeneutical injustice (e.g., missing terms for sexual harassment or postpartum depression) in the sense that these examples usually take the form of a gap where a missing term “should be” and cannot be used to construct necessarily conflicting claims. Thus, dilution and monumentalization are not merely subdivisions of the existing concept of hermeneutical injustice but a concerted attempt to recognize families of hermeneutical injustices that have been invisibilized in many feminist epistemologies.

## i

The traditional story begins with the *hermeneutical occlusion*, or what Miranda Fricker calls a *hermeneutical gloom*.<sup>1</sup> As an illustrative example, Fricker retells the invention of the term “sexual harassment” from Susan Brownmiller’s memoir. Brownmiller recounts the story of an employee, Carmita Wood, who suffered what we would today call sexual harassment by a distinguished professor in her lab. After eight years in the department, Wood quit; besides the emotional consequences of the professor’s constant harassment, the stress and alienation had induced physical problems such as chronic pain. Wood applied for unemployment insurance, but was required to describe why she had left. She found herself “at a loss to describe the hateful episodes” as the term “sexual harassment” did not yet exist.<sup>2</sup> Thus, she could only answer that “her reasons had been personal.” As a result, her claim was denied, leaving Wood and her two children unemployed and unsupported.

As Fricker tells it, it was only the following academic year, when Wood shared her story with other women

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<sup>1</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 149.

<sup>2</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 150.

at the university, that she realized her experience was ubiquitous among the other women (though her experience was particularly severe). The group found, however, that they had no name for their shared experience, and so decided to invent one. They tried "sexual intimidation", "sexual coercion", and "sexual exploitation on the job", but found that none of them captured the full spirit of their experience. Eventually, someone proposed the term "sexual harassment." As in each of Fricker's examples, the introduction of the right term was revelatory: as Karen Sauvigne recounts, "*Sexual harassment!* Instantly we agreed. That's what it was."

Here Wood suffered from a *hermeneutical occlusion*, "an acute cognitive disadvantage from a gap in the collective hermeneutical resource."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Wood, her harasser, and the claims investigator who denied her unemployment insurance were all subject to the same hermeneutical occlusion. Yet only Wood suffered the emotional and material consequences of being forced to quit her job without unemployment insurance. Furthermore, Wood was particularly *epistemically* affected; though all three parties suffered the same hermeneutical occlusion, it was Wood whose ability to communicate and make sense of her experience was particularly impeded. From the fact that Wood was the only one to suffer an injustice, while all three parties suffered the same hermeneutical occlusion, it follows that occlusion, at least on its own, is an insufficiently precise notion to capture our intuitions about hermeneutical injustice. This shows the need for a more specific concept; Fricker provides *hermeneutical marginalization*.

Hermeneutical marginalization occurs when

there is unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area(s) of social experience.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 151.

<sup>4</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 153.

Hermeneutical marginalization is a form of discrimination, for a hermeneutically marginalized subject is unable to participate in the construction of meaning relating to their social experiences in a fashion that would be advantageous (even necessary). This concept is broad enough to cover both systemic and incidental cases but precise enough to single out the wrong being done. It serves as a basis for the definition of *hermeneutical injustice*, which Fricker gives as follows:

the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization.<sup>5</sup>

This conception of hermeneutical injustice has not gone unchallenged. Rebecca Mason critiques Fricker's account on the grounds that it fails to distinguish between dominant and non-dominant hermeneutical resources.<sup>6</sup> A similar point is made by José Medina, who argues that it is necessary to give "a pluralistic analysis of... different interpretative communities and interpretative practices."<sup>7</sup> Kristie Dotson argues for a better account of individual responsibility via the concept of "willful hermeneutical ignorance."<sup>8</sup> Finally, the most similar critique is made by Arianna Falbo, who explicitly identifies, as do we here, the overemphasis on "gaps" in the literature.<sup>9</sup> Falbo argues that an important species of hermeneutical injustice arises from the "overabundance of distorting and oppressive concepts which function to crowd-out, defeat, or pre-empt the application of a more accurate hermeneutical resource." These criticisms, taken together, read as an

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<sup>5</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 158.

<sup>6</sup> Mason, "Two Kinds of Unknowing," 300.

<sup>7</sup> Medina, "Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities," 202.

<sup>8</sup> Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression," 31.

<sup>9</sup> Falbo, "Hermeneutical Injustice: Distortion and Conceptual Aptness," 343.

identification of a need for a more complex material analysis of the conditions of justice, as a critique of the idealism inherent in intentional or unintentional reductions of the subject of study to hegemonic additions to a single, pure resource, and as a recognition of the myriad ways that meanings come to bear in disenfranchised communities. The intervention here is in the same vein: against the obfuscating abstraction of "names" and demonstrating that injustices are not reducible to names but to what those names make or unmake legible, illegible, or hyperlegible.

In each example of a hermeneutical occlusion, Fricker refers to a gap "where the name of a distinctive social experience should be."<sup>10</sup> In this paper, I call these types of occlusions—where the cognitive gap is caused by the absence or ignorance of a particular term or concept—*hermeneutical lacunae*. Two points are immediately clear. First, a hermeneutical lacuna is repaired not just by the existence of a name, but through its inclusion in the collective hermeneutical resource. The process of this inclusion is often vacillatory (leading to issues of dilution or monumentalization) or arduous (inducing limits on the collective hermeneutical resource). Second, nothing in the definition of a hermeneutical occlusion or hermeneutical injustice requires the explicit presence of a lacuna.

In short, the presence or absence of a name for a social experience is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for hermeneutical justice or injustice. This demands a recognition and discussion of those hermeneutical occlusions that have less to do with the existence of names and more to do with how those names are in practice made accessible or inaccessible for the interpretive project. Yet, not just in Fricker's examples but across the literature on the subject, many examples of hermeneutical occlusions take the form of

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<sup>10</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 151.

hermeneutical lacunae, and the history of terms beyond their introduction is rarely examined.

It is from this gap between how hermeneutical injustice is defined and how (at least in much of the work in feminist epistemology) it is used that my two main theses arise. On one hand: there exist examples of hermeneutical injustice which are not lacunae. In **ii**, I will give these examples, and in **iii**, I will argue that they induce the same epistemic and material harms as hermeneutical lacunae. On the other: these non-lacunae occlusions necessitate an interrogation of our intuitions about when hermeneutical occlusions constitute wrongs or injustices. In particular, I suggest that the existence of non-lacunae occlusions necessitates a move away from naive theories of hermeneutical justice and towards specific principles analogous to those found in theories of material justice. I defend this idea, and illustrate where it can take us, in **iii** and **iv**.

Fricker gives an account of three harms (one primary, two secondary) done by hermeneutical injustice. The primary harm, an immediate consequence of the injustice itself, is that "the subject is rendered unable to make communicatively intelligible something which it is particularly in his or her interests to be able to render intelligible."<sup>11</sup> This wrong is distinctly hermeneutical, in the sense that it is an explicit limitation on a person's participation in the interpretive process along the lines of privilege and disprivilege.

One important characteristic of the definition of the primary harm is that it is agnostic as to whom the subject is attempting to communicate. In particular, some of the most striking consequences of a hermeneutical wrong occur when a subject is unable to make sense of their experience, even to themselves. Consider, for example, the experience of transgender people; missing terms for ever-present experiences such as gender dysphoria can "knock your faith in your own ability to

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<sup>11</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 162.



make sense of the world.”<sup>12</sup> “If this was a real thing,” a trans person might tell themselves, “someone would’ve surely spoken about it already.”

The point is that limitations on one’s hermeneutical participation can lead to the stifling of one’s development of self. This is one of the secondary harms resulting from a hermeneutical wrong: epistemic self-doubt, a degradation of one’s confidence in their ability to understand their own experience. The other secondary harm is material; that is, the practical harms resulting from one’s inability to render their experiences communicatively intelligible. This is perhaps the easiest wrong to identify. In Carmita Wood’s case, the denial of her application for unemployment benefits constituted a secondary practical harm, distinct from both the immediate anxiety around being unable to interpret her experience of sexual harassment and the long-term self-doubt which it induced. For trans people, these practical harms can constitute the denial or restriction of medical services, or the classification of services necessary to live at peace as “cosmetic.”

As we will see, each of these harms—primary and secondary—can arise in quite similar ways for occlusions which are not lacunae.

## ii

Let us begin by considering a thought experiment related to Carmita Wood’s story. Imagine a woman named Mary has a coworker with whom she is friendly. Her coworker, James, repeatedly asks her out, and eventually she acquiesces in hope of getting him to stop without creating an air of awkwardness at work. On their date, James repeatedly hints that he would like to go home with Mary, and when the date is finished, he tags along on Mary’s ride home. Mary does not want him to come, but feels uncomfortable telling him to leave. At Mary’s home, James repeatedly asks her to have sex;

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<sup>12</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 163.

though he does not use physical force, his unwillingness to leave exerts coercive pressure that eventually forces Mary to verbally agree. The following month, Mary, who has worked for a long time in the department, quits because she has developed panic attacks associated with seeing James. She applies for unemployment insurance, but, as in Wood's story, Mary finds herself unable to describe why she has quit beyond "personal reasons"—despite, in this case, being quite educated about sexual assault and sexual coercion in the workplace. Her claim is denied.

A word exists to describe the experience that Mary has gone through: rape. Furthermore, Mary knows this word. She has used it many times before and is familiar with Merriam-Webster's definition. Perhaps she has even studied the concept in a class on feminist philosophy or legal theory. We imagine Mary to be fully intellectually conscious of the practical and philosophical definitions of rape. However, Mary finds herself unable to access this hermeneutical resource—a resource which would give her the clarity required to emotionally process and obtain recourse for what she has gone through. That is, Mary finds herself hermeneutically occluded with respect to her experience. This is not because she does not know the word "rape", but because she finds herself unable to recognize her experience as an example of rape; for her, the concept has been hermeneutically monumentalized.

What has happened, at least in Mary's specific case, is that her conceptualization of the word "rape" carries with it certain characteristics that we might think prototypical of rape: it happens through physical coercion, by a stranger, in an unfamiliar place, etc. This conceptualization generates prohibitive tension when Mary tries to apply the definition she has learned to herself. Mary's example is far from theoretical. There is substantial literature, for instance, on how racial stereotypes are tied up with people's internal

conception of sexual assault (and thus their ability to recognize it). We refer the reader to the work of Sarah Brophy<sup>13</sup> and Rachel Fraser<sup>14</sup> for a more thorough discussion of the ways in which the term has been monumentalized and to what effect.

From this example, we give the following definition of hermeneutical monumentalization:

*Hermeneutical monumentalization occurs when a hermeneutical resource is rendered inaccessible for describing an experience because of a sociolinguistic restriction-operative either on the speaker or the listener-on the recognized instantiations of that resource.*

This definition is applied directly to hermeneutical occlusions; it makes no reference to any harm, wrong, or injustice, and it includes a whole range of incidental and systemic occurrences. In particular, it is agnostic about *who* is doing the restricting (Mary herself, the people who she speaks to about the experience, etc); as far as the definition is concerned, by a "restriction" we mean simply a gap between the definition a person *knows* and the actual concept they find themselves able to *apply* in interpreting their experience. This lends a natural amenability to pluralistic analyses.

The opposite process, *hermeneutical dilution*, is also possible, but the nature of the occlusion is slightly different. Rather than being unable to apply the hermeneutical resource to their experience, the speaker finds the use of the resource ineffective for the interpretive project. This happens because it is insufficiently precise to specify key properties of the speaker's experience. Thus, in the case of monumentalization, the speaker fails to communicate because their experience is not part of the shared understanding of the concept. On the other hand, in the case of dilution, the speaker fails to communicate their experience

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<sup>13</sup> Brophy, personal conversation, May 30, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Fraser, "The Ethics of Metaphor," 728.

because there are too many diverse or conflicting experiences also described by the concept. This is the tightest connection with Falbo's piece, but notice an important distinction: Falbo's overabundance analysis writes how one concept can crowd out another, but dilution interrogates how competing extensions of a single concept can do very similar work.

This idea is codified in the following definition:

*Hermeneutical dilution occurs when a hermeneutical resource is rendered insufficiently precise for describing an experience because of a sociolinguistic broadening-operative either on the speaker or the listener-of the recognized instantiations of the resource.*

There is no claim that this list-lacuna, dilution, and monumentalization-is comprehensive. For instance, there are hints of still more alternate histories of hermeneutical injustice in Dotson's work on willful hermeneutical ignorance. Dotson's work points towards a host of potential hermeneutical injustices which could arise from *pragmatic* limitations on the use of interpretive resources; for example, someone who finds themselves (and their interlocutor) in full awareness of a term which accurately describes their experience, but is unable to use it (not just in conversation but in their own procedures of sense-making) because they have come to associate it with reprisal, might be suffering from a pragmatic form of hermeneutical injustice. However, we focus on dilution and monumentalization because, as we will see in the following sections, they offer a particular opportunity to test certain intuitions about hermeneutical justice.

### iii

In Mary's story, it is undeniable that an injustice has occurred, and that this injustice, besides having material consequences, has a particularly hermeneutical character. Similarly, the dilution of terms related to suicidality can be understood not just as a series of

incidental harms but a wide-reaching instance of hermeneutical injustice shaping the ways young people are able to access social support and mental healthcare. Yet it is not always so straightforward: not only are there cases of monumentalization and dilution in which it is difficult to suggest anyone was truly harmed, but there are cases where people *are* harmed by instances of monumentalization and dilution which, by an intuitive account, do not constitute injustice.

Is including hermeneutical marginalization and dilution in the definition of hermeneutical occlusions (and therefore potentially in hermeneutical injustice) itself an unacceptable watering-down of the term? After all, language is constantly evolving, with the relationships between concepts and our resources to describe them changing in turn. Kleenex, at one point, referred only to a single brand of tissues; now, in everyday conversation, the term is often taken to refer to any tissue, regardless of brand. Does this constitute a hermeneutical occlusion? Perhaps, though not one the company itself is likely dissatisfied with. Yet this occlusion is, for all intents and purposes, entirely insignificant both morally and practically. Recall that part of the intention with hermeneutical occlusions was to pick out cases lacking serious harm.

This example suggests that a hermeneutical occlusion can only constitute a wrong if it relates to a significant social experience—the Kleenex example does not. To refine the criteria further, recall the three potential harms which Fricker recognizes as arising from hermeneutical marginalization: the primary harm of limited intelligibility, the secondary harm of epistemic self-doubt, and the secondary harm of material consequences. In the previous section, we briefly discussed how dilution and monumentalization can lead to limited intelligibility: the speaker's intention is either lost in a sea of potential other intentions which use the same term, or their intention is not recognized as belonging

to the set of examples of the concept. This gives the following criteria for when dilution and monumentalization lead to the primary harm outlined by Fricker:

*Dilution and monumentalization constitute hermeneutical harms when they lead to limited intelligibility about some significant social experience; in particular, when they cannot be easily circumvented with a replacement term.*

However, the seriousness of the wrong is also a function of the severity of the secondary harms which are produced. As Mary's story illustrates, the same sort of material consequences can arise from dilution and monumentalization; there is no need to repeat this analysis here. However, the relationship between the other secondary harm, epistemic self-doubt, and dilution and monumentalization does deserve further elaboration. I suggest that the epistemic self-doubt which arises from dilution and monumentalization consists of a tendency to internally downplay one's experiences; that is, to develop the specific belief that one's personal narrative is exaggerated. In the case of hermeneutical dilution, this takes the form of an observation that one's experience (as one understands it through the lens of whichever concept is used to describe it) is tied up with a number of other experiences which one judges as, in some sense, not that serious. With respect to the particular example of suicidality, this could take the form of someone believing that their struggles with mental health are minor because other people use the same language they do without any indication it hampers their quality of life.

Besides the potential material consequences—say, someone eschewing necessary mental healthcare—there is a deep epistemic harm in discounting your own suffering; as Fricker notes, this can be a severe limitation on the development of the self.

In the case of monumentalization, downplaying is a product of the belief that one's experience lies outside the purview of a concept which includes the

"serious" versions of their experience. To give an example, Mary might say (to herself or others) that her experience was "no big deal" since it didn't (by her incorrect understanding) rise to the level of "sexual assault" or "rape." In both cases, we see that the dilution or monumentalization has led to a specific and similar type of epistemic self-doubt. Such beliefs are tied up with other issues of epistemic injustice, in particular testimonial injustice, but an analysis of this connection is not necessary for our project.

The point is that the same types of harms arise from hermeneutical dilution, monumentalization, and lacuna, and so similar criteria can be used to judge when they constitute wrongs (and how severe these wrongs are). At the very least, this observation should make it clear that it is necessary to include dilution and monumentalization as instances of hermeneutical wrongs.

There is, however, an important difference between lacuna, at least as they have been treated outside of Falbo's work, and dilution or monumentalization: how we treat harms which arise from their reparation. When the hermeneutical injustice suffered by Carmita Wood was repaired by the introduction of the term "sexual harassment", perpetrators of sexual harassment undeniably suffered a number of material harms (losing their jobs, potentially getting criminal sentences, etc). For obvious reasons, it is easy for us to dismiss these harms, because, put simply, they were just. Our ease here is not special: a common intuition, prior to Falbo's work, was that the act of introducing a new term to resolve a hermeneutical lacuna is an intrinsically morally positive act. This can be critiqued as idealistic in two ways: firstly, as Falbo does, by showing that the introduction of terms can cause harms of overabundance, and secondly, as this paper does, by showing that there exist further hermeneutical wrongs that are not so easily reduced.

Our alternate histories do not have the same appeal to simplicity; there are a number of unintuitive results that can arise from trying to pin down when dilution or monumentalization are wrong. In particular, trying to repair an act of monumentalization or dilution can result in serious, hard-to-ignore harms. Consider the term "sexual harassment." It did not simply pop into existence with its modern connotation; though the term has always referred to "a range of subtle and unsubtle behaviors", in the years after its introduction, its meaning was significantly more restricted than it is today. In 1975, Carmita Wood's group Working Women United defined it in testimony to the New York State Human Rights Commission as specifically "unwanted sexual advances against women employees by male supervisors, bosses, foremen or managers."

Today, we would consider this definition to be overly narrow for a number of reasons: sexual harassment does not have to happen in the workplace, it does not have to be done by a man to a woman, and it can come from coworkers or subordinates, and not solely from bosses. In fact, we might even consider these issues to indicate the continuing presence of hermeneutical injustice; as long as the narrow definition of sexual harassment is the predominant one, a man might plausibly experience what we would now call sexual harassment and lack the interpretive resources to understand or express what has happened to him. In this sense, we might consider the dilution of the term to be morally *necessary* for justice.

However, such a dilution does not serve everyone equally. Imagine another woman is harassed by her male boss in the workplace and is attempting to describe the specific aggravating details of her experience. That is, the experience that she wants to communicate is intimately tied up with the fact that the sexual harassment she suffered came from someone in a position of authority (so, perhaps, she is scared for her job) and



from a man (so, perhaps, she has an increased fear of retributive physical violence, or she is under more severe social pressure to avoid speaking about her experience). Then, this woman's ability to make sense of her experience to herself and others might be genuinely harmed by this dilution. A clarification: the suggestion here is not that sexual harassment is, in general, or even *prima facie*, 'worse' when it happens to women (or other minorities). Instead, the point is a material one: part of some specific instances of sexual harassment is the existence of a power structure that changes the character of the harassment, or exerts a coercive effect on one's ability to respond. For example, the constant threat of masculinization experienced by Black women as part of misogynoir socially stigmatizes and therefore coercively constrains their ability to respond to sexual harassment without the anti-Black label of "aggressive" or "hostile". This, broadly speaking, shapes the experience of street harassment for *Black women* into a unique social phenomenon, which it is important to specify.

Thus there is at least a *pro tanto* reason to take seriously the possibility that female victims of sexual harassment and victims of sexual harassment from workplace superiors experience a serious secondary material harm from the dilution. Furthermore, without the ability to distinguish certain aggrieving elements of their experience of sexual harassment at the terminological level, they might also suffer hermeneutical and epistemic harms as they try to make sense of the experience. Yet, though this harm is both severe and non-incidental, it remains difficult to defend the case that a grave injustice was done specifically through the act of broadening the definition of "sexual harassment". Indeed, as above, it would seem that the grave injustice would be to avoid this broadening.

From this example, it follows that the characteristics of a hermeneutical wrong—how severe it is, how

widespread it is—is not sufficiently precise to describe intuitions about whether it constitutes a hermeneutical injustice, because it is possible to make *competing claims* to the pool of hermeneutical resources.

#### iv

Before proceeding, it is important to discuss why the claims discussed earlier—those of the male victim of sexual harassment and the women who want to specify the gendered aspects of her experience—are *necessarily* placed in competition. For a simple response to being presented with such a hermeneutical conflict is to suggest subdivision, that is, branching off the experiences into two separate terms. Perhaps sexual harassment is to retain its broader, modern meaning, and the concept of *gender-aggrieved sexual harassment* is appended to the collective hermeneutical resource to compensate. However, there are a number of problems with this response. The initial problem, of course, is that the project of subdivision cannot happen forever. There is a finite limit on how many concepts we, as humans, can learn and know. But, of course, this only shows that subdivision cannot always be the answer; it does not explain why subdivision is not a reasonable answer in this particular case.

A helpful tool for explaining the limitations on our collective hermeneutical resource is given by the concept of *mnemonic labor*, as introduced by Avishai Margalit in *The Ethics of Memory*.<sup>15</sup> Margalit introduces *mnemonic labor* as a term for the effort required to elevate a term into a people's shared memory, but we can just as easily understand it as the labor required for a concept's inclusion in the collective hermeneutical resource. Until now, we have spoken as if the creation of a term happens in an instant, but creating recognition and understanding across communities is an incredibly arduous process. This point has not gone

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<sup>15</sup> Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 52.

unnoticed; consider, for example, Nora Berenstain's introduction of the concept of epistemic exploitation (that is, the labor that is demanded of marginalized groups in exchange for epistemic participation).<sup>16</sup> Berenstain noted that hermeneutical lacuna are often caused not by the absence of a term, or even the speaker's ignorance, but the receiver's unawareness of or active refusal to use existing terms. In this case, both the speaker and receiver are hermeneutically occluded. However, while the moral responsibility falls on the receiver, the consequences—and, therefore, the labor to remove the occlusion—falls on the speaker.

The point is that suggesting subdivision as a resolution to competing claims to hermeneutical justice is no more sensible than, say, suggesting "getting more resources" as a resolution to competing claims to material justice. Put simply, to foist off the mnemonic labor of including *gender-aggrieved sexual harassment* in the collective hermeneutical resource onto the women experiencing it is to set back the process of achieving hermeneutical justice.

The point is not to suggest that there is anything fundamentally wrong with the idea of hermeneutical justice and injustice. In fact, the need to balance competing claims about what a person or group is owed in the face of limited resources is precisely what theories of justice are meant to do. Rather, the point is to suggest that hermeneutical injustice is subject to similar complications as material justice, and that a naive account of what constitutes hermeneutical injustice, or what a just hermeneutical climate might look like, is just as doomed to fail as a naive account of material justice is.

Until this point, a focus on paradigmatic cases has allowed social epistemologists theorizing about this topic to avoid philosophical commitments about which particular notions of justice should be used in

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<sup>16</sup> Berenstain, "Epistemic Exploitation," 570.

constructing a theory of hermeneutical justice. By broadening our conception of hermeneutical occlusions, however, it becomes clear that this is not, in general, a viable philosophical approach.

The question of what is demanded of a just resolution to competing claims to hermeneutical ideals is, in general, far beyond the scope of this paper. To give an answer to this question is to give a theory of hermeneutical justice, and, as I have just argued, this is necessarily a highly complex philosophical project. However, in the remainder of this section, I would like to theorize about the example given in the previous section, in order to hint at how general principles of justice can inspire principles of hermeneutical justice that might come together to constitute a full theory.

One principle of justice I take to be particularly relevant to our case is the principle of *formal equality*; that is, the idea that a just framework must necessarily treat various identity groups with in-principle procedural equality. I suggest that this principle prioritizes the claim of the male victim to be included in the concept of sexual harassment, and might be the reason why, at least in theory, most people find themselves more sympathetic to this perspective. For, if the term "sexual harassment" is to be included in the collective *legal* hermeneutical resource, it becomes the purview of formal equality, and then men and women must be treated formally equally as potential victims and perpetrators.

The problem is that formal equality exists in tension with other principles of justice, such as principles of *relational equality*—the idea that a just system must create an environment in which citizens can relate to one another as equals. If, in the workplace, there are gendered aspects to sexual harassment which are obstacles to relational equality, it is hard to defend the idea that formal equality will be sufficient to overcome these obstacles. Women undeniably experience

sexual harassment more often than men, and subordinates undeniably experience it more often than superiors; these groups have suffered a particular hermeneutical injustice. Equal hermeneutical treatment may fail to help these particularly disadvantaged groups "catch up." Furthermore, such treatment might be subject to *elite capture*; that is, acts of hermeneutical dilution and monumentalization in which particularly privileged members of a group adopt a concept to perpetuate their own advantage. Hence, if formal equality is the only principle by which we allocate hermeneutical resources, it will be difficult to address existing issues of relational inequality.

### **conclusion**

This essay shows that the concept of a hermeneutical occlusion, besides containing the paradigmatic cases of lacunae, also includes cases of dilution and monumentalization. These cases can be used to construct conflicting claims to hermeneutical resources, and by reference to the concept of mnemonic labor, I have shown that these conflicts are not illusory. They provide serious challenges for our conception of hermeneutical justice that an intuitive or idealistic account will not be sufficient to address. Finally, I discussed how principles traditionally applied to material justice, such as formal or relational equality, can be applied to questions of hermeneutical justice.

It would be easy to write an entire treatise on subdivisions of hermeneutical injustice; the concept is rich, ever-present, and constantly evolving. However, we should not lose ourselves in the euphoria of appending new adjectives to old concepts. The point of our project is, as always, to better equip ourselves to reach towards justice. To this end, dilution and monumentalization offer an important collection of examples for testing our hermeneutical intuitions and refining theories of justice as it is shaped by language.

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