

“A LITTLE OF HER LANGUAGE”: EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AND MENTAL DISABILITY*

Josh Dohmen

Abstract: In this essay, I argue that certain injustices faced by mentally disabled persons are epistemic injustices by drawing upon epistemic injustice literature, especially as it is developed by Miranda Fricker. First, I explain the terminology and arguments developed by Fricker, Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., and Kristie Dotson that are useful in theorizing epistemic injustices against mentally disabled people. Second, I consider some specific cases of epistemic injustice to which mentally disabled persons are subject. Third, I turn to a discussion of severely mentally disabled persons who, because they are unable to share information or develop interpretations of shared social experiences, may fall outside Fricker’s discussion of epistemic injustice. Fourth and finally, following arguments given by Kristie Dotson and Christopher Hookway, I define and explain a type of epistemic injustice: intimate hermeneutical injustice that I believe supplements other discussions of epistemic injustice.

In this essay, I argue that certain injustices faced by mentally disabled persons are *epistemic* injustices. The long histories of individualizing models of disability have meant that epistemic subjectivity has been especially undermined by disability oppression. When telethon organizers raise money for cures thinking they know what is best for autistic people, for example, or when the medical community supports the view that a cure is the only way to solve the “problem” of a disability, it is precisely the knowledge and experiences of disabled persons that are undermined. To analyze these and similar instances, I draw upon epistemic injustice literature, especially as it is developed by Miranda Fricker (2007). First, I explain the terminology and arguments developed by Fricker, Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (2014), and Kristie Dotson (2012) that are useful in theorizing epistemic injustices against mentally disabled people. Second, I consider some specific cases of epistemic injustice to which mentally disabled persons are subject.

* This title refers to Jim Sinclair’s advice to parents of autistic children: “You’re going to have to . . . let your child teach you a little of her language, guide you a little way into his world” (2012b, 17). I discuss this quotation in greater detail in [section 2](#).

Third, I turn to a discussion of severely mentally disabled persons who, because they are unable to share information or develop interpretations of shared social experiences, may fall outside of Fricker's discussion of epistemic injustice. Fourth and finally, following arguments given by Kristie Dotson and Christopher Hookway, I define and explain a type of epistemic injustice—*intimate hermeneutical injustice*—that I believe supplements other discussions of epistemic injustice.

1 Injustice: Testimonial, Hermeneutical, and Contributory

In her book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker (2007) discusses two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Hers is a virtue epistemological account, relying on epistemic sensibility, virtues, and vices to understand the phenomena she considers. She also notes that she intends to focus on specifically epistemic concerns. Because questions about the distribution of information or education are not distinctly epistemic—that is, because “it seems largely incidental that the good in question can be characterized as an epistemic good”—this is not her focus (1).¹

Testimonial injustice is broadly defined as the attribution of less credibility to a speaker as a result of a hearer's prejudice. But Fricker is especially concerned with what she calls the “central case” of testimonial injustice—“*identity-prejudicial credibility deficit*” (28). Testimonial injustices result from *prejudicial* stereotypes,² where “prejudice” refers to a judgment that is resistant to counter-evidence due to an “*affective investment on the part of the subject*” (35). Because prejudices can be positive or negative (i.e., a hearer can be disposed in favor of or against a speaker), Fricker is concerned with *negative* prejudicial stereotypes.³ Second, the prejudices with which Fricker is especially concerned are those based on *identities* found in shared social imaginations.⁴ An individual with idiosyncratic prejudices might commit testimonial injustices, but not of the central type. Fricker explains that the identity-prejudicial credibility deficit is her central case because it tends to be both systematic and persistent (27–290). It is *systematic* because

¹ David Coady is critical of this view, arguing that the epistemic good of “interesting true belief is an intrinsic value” such that distributive concerns about this good are not “only incidentally epistemic” (2010, 106). For a response, see Fricker 2010, 175.

² Fricker defines stereotypes as “*widely held associations between a given social group and one or more attributes*” (2007, 30). Stereotypes are epistemically advantageous, on her view, as long as they remain responsive to counter-evidence.

³ Fricker gives two arguments for the view that positive prejudices leading to credibility excesses are not cases of epistemic injustice (2007, 19–21). José Medina disagrees with Fricker on this point. For his argument, see Medina 2013, 59–60. This may well be relevant to discussions of disability. As Havi Carel and Ian James Kidd (2014) have noted, potential problems result from credibility excesses attributed to medical professionals.

⁴ The fact that identities result from the social imagination is important because it reveals identities as contingent. Fricker defines the social imagination as “*shared imaginative conceptions*” that often operate without individuals' conscious awareness (2007, 14).

identity-prejudicial credibility deficits tend to intersect with injustices in other arenas, such as legal, economic, or political injustices. It is *persistent* because such injustices tend to occur, not in isolation, but repeatedly over time. Indeed, perhaps one of the most systematic and persistent forms of epistemic injustice is what Fricker calls “pre-emptive testimonial injustice” (130). Pre-emptive testimonial injustice occurs when the subject does not share information at all because she is perceived to have no credibility in advance; she is silenced by others who do not seek her knowledge.

Due to the systematic and persistent nature of testimonial injustices,⁵ they pose an array of harms to the speaker. Generally, the speaker is “wronged in her capacity as a giver of knowledge,” which is, for Fricker, an essential capacity for ethical subjectivity (44). Another way of understanding this harm is as a form of epistemic objectification; when a speaker’s testimony is neither sought nor trusted, she can contribute to the sharing of knowledge only as an object of knowledge (132–133). She is a source of information, but not an informant. Fricker’s benign example here is the difference between a guest who enters with a wet umbrella from which you can infer that it is raining outside (a source of information) and someone telling you it is raining when asked (an informant). Pohlhaus convincingly argues, however, that in most cases this harm is better understood as an epistemic form of “truncated subjectivity,” because those subject to testimonial injustice *are* treated as subjects, but their contributions are acknowledged only as “derivative of another’s” (2014, 107). In other words, a victim of testimonial injustice can contribute to the epistemic resources of a community, but she cannot do so from her unique, lived perspective, and thus she is “not permitted to contribute in ways that would . . . trouble the veracity of the dominantly experienced world” (107).⁶

Importantly, the individual harm of epistemic injustice rarely exists in isolation. Because being a potential giver of knowledge is so important to our understanding of ethical subjectivity, any challenge to the speaker’s status as a knower is also symbolically a challenge to her *ethical* subjectivity. And in the case of testimonial injustice, the speaker is undermined because of the social identity perceived by the hearer, such that the challenge becomes a problem not just for that speaker’s epistemic and ethical competence, but for the knowledge and value of all who are perceived to have the same social identity. Testimonial injustice is in this way oppressive, not just a one-off ethical harm.

Beyond the primary harm of being undermined as a knower, there are several secondary harms caused by testimonial injustices. First, there are practical harms. Because testimony is such a central part of our affairs, being assigned unjust credibility deficits is likely to have broad implications for one’s life. For example, if one is not trusted in court, she is less likely to

⁵ Here and following I use “testimonial injustices” to refer specifically to the central case of testimonial injustice.

⁶ My thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to note this difference.

be found innocent and more likely to face stiffer penalties. Or if a person is seen as lacking credibility at a job, she is less likely to advance in her career. There are also secondary epistemic harms. Those who experience testimonial injustices may actually lose knowledge, epistemic confidence, or virtues like epistemic courage. For example, a person's self-esteem may be undermined such that she loses confidence in sharing her beliefs, or she may even lose confidence in those beliefs herself. Such a loss of self-esteem may also hinder one from gaining knowledge that she may have otherwise gained. Imagine, for example, a student who knew the stages of mitosis very well, but because she is subject to testimonial injustices from her teacher loses confidence that she actually knows about mitosis and, moreover, fails to learn as much as she could have about other topics because she starts to perceive herself as incapable. It is also likely that being subject to recurring testimonial injustices would lead one to lose, or fail to develop, epistemic virtues like courage, "the virtue of not backing down in one's convictions too quickly in response to a challenge" (Fricker 2007, 49). Clearly epistemic courage is helpful in contributing to knowledge; without it, we would revise our beliefs in response to challenges from others, whether our beliefs were true or not. For those subject to frequent testimonial injustices, however, it may be difficult to maintain their beliefs in the face of continuous challenges to their credibility.

As a corrective to testimonial injustice, Fricker develops the epistemic virtue of "testimonial justice." The ideal for the testimonially just hearer is "*to neutralize the impact of prejudice in her credibility judgements*" (92). Importantly, our attributions of credibility deficits should not be understood as inferential, but as perceptual. When one is assigned less credibility than she deserves as a result of her social identity, the hearer is usually not making an inference, but *perceives* her as less credible. Thus, achieving (or approaching) the virtue of testimonial justice will require a training of one's testimonial sensibility. This could occur in two ways. Some may have the virtue *naïvely* if their judgments are "free from prejudice from the start" (93). When this is the case, it is likely to be specific to some social identities, since it is unlikely that any hearer would be free from prejudices regarding all social identities. On the other hand, one may have the virtue of testimonial justice as a *corrective*. This can be done through reflection or spontaneously. In neutralizing prejudices reflectively, a hearer recognizes that she either has attributed, or is likely to attribute, unjust credibility deficits as a result of the speaker's social identity and seeks to neutralize those prejudices. To do so, the hearer must consciously give the speaker more credibility and, ideally, about as much credibility as she would have given the speaker in the absence of such a prejudice. Other ways to correct for one's prejudice might take more institutional forms, like sanctions for apparent prejudice or "anonymization" of school or job applications, exams, or other assignments (2010, 165). The corrective form of testimonial justice could also be

achieved spontaneously through familiarity or habituation. In the former, frequent interaction with a member or members of a social identity may lead distorting prejudices to gradually disappear. In the latter case, the hearer develops the virtue by being diligent enough about assigning neutralized credibility assessments that it becomes second nature. This is the ideal of testimonial justice.⁷

The second form of epistemic injustice Fricker develops is hermeneutical injustice. The central case of hermeneutical injustice is “*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). By “collective hermeneutical resource,” she means the interpretive possibilities available in a given social environment.⁸ So a systematic hermeneutical injustice occurs when a person cannot explain her experiences to others (and perhaps cannot even understand them herself) because the hermeneutical resources of her community are lacking in regard to the experiences of members of her social group. Moreover, this gap in hermeneutical resources is asymmetrical; it does not affect all equally. Fricker’s main example here is sexual harassment, which names an experience that was at one time difficult to discuss as a shared experience. Given this gap in the hermeneutical resources of the time, the abilities of women to articulate their experiences of ill-treatment, and thus their abilities to address these shared problems, were significantly impaired. Only through sharing similar experiences could these women gain a common understanding of the phenomenon, name it, and begin a project of introducing the concept into the broader hermeneutical resources while rejecting the phenomenon in practice. Importantly, this hermeneutical lacuna perpetuated harms faced by women, but it did not pose a harm to men. Indeed, it was to men’s benefit that this behavior was only understood as “natural” or “harmless play.”

The harms of hermeneutical injustice map roughly on to the harms of testimonial injustice. The primary harm is that the persons affected are undermined in their capacity as knowers; that is, they are excluded “from the pooling of knowledge” because of an identity prejudice (162). And as in the case of testimonial injustice, there are both practical and epistemic secondary harms. Practical harms occur when the inability to

⁷ It should be noted that testimonial justice is also an *ethical* virtue because it aims to reattribute subjectivity to the speaker and to resist the practical ethical harms resulting from testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007, 121–122).

⁸ Medina is critical of Fricker on this point. For Fricker, hermeneutical injustice results from gaps in “*the collective hermeneutical resource*” (2007, 155, my emphasis). For Medina, it is inaccurate, and indeed dangerous, to talk about a single collective hermeneutical resource (2013). As Kristie Dotson (2012) points out, in her concern to delimit the concepts of epistemic injustice, Fricker may end up excluding the development of other forms of epistemic injustice, placing potential epistemic injustices that do not fit within her framework in the category of “epistemic bad luck.” Medina and Dotson share the concern that we need to always keep open the possibility of hermeneutic resources existing, especially in the most “remote and obscure corners of the social fabric” (Medina 2013, 103).

communicate one's experiences leads to other negative consequences, like the continued exposure to physical and psychological harm or the barriers to career advancement in the example of the yet-unnamed sexual harassment. Secondary epistemic harms occur when one loses knowledge or epistemic virtues one might have had were it not for the hermeneutical gap. Because those subject to hermeneutical injustice may feel themselves to be alone in their incomprehensible or incommunicable experiences, self-doubt and a lack of epistemic courage are likely consequences.

To correct for hermeneutical injustice, Fricker calls for the epistemic virtue of "hermeneutical justice." This virtue is a "sensitivity" to the fact that what another is attempting to communicate is difficult given the available hermeneutic resources rather than writing the unintelligibility off as "nonsense" or a "subjective failing" (169). As in the case of testimonial justice, this is achieved through adjustments in attributions of credibility. Ideally, the hearer who is hermeneutically just would attribute credibility to a speaker's interpretation as if it were given in a more hermeneutically inclusive environment. Of course, imagining one's response within a more inclusive hermeneutical environment before its arrival is a difficult project, precisely because our imaginations are constrained by the hermeneutic resources of our various communities. But there are several concrete forms this credibility adjustment could take. First, a hearer may seek out evidence of similar, but similarly inexpressible, experiences. In the case of women's mistreatment in the workplace, for example, a coworker could have sought out other working women to see if there was a common set of experiences. Second, a hearer may temporarily suspend judgment.

So far I have discussed testimonial and hermeneutical injustices separately, but in practice they are likely to be related and reinforce one another. In cases where a person is subject to hermeneutical injustices based on a negative identity prejudice, that person is also likely to be subject to testimonial injustices resulting from the same prejudice. In other words, when one is a member of a group whose experiences are unintelligible either to all (including themselves) or to those in the dominant social identity or identities, she will probably also be viewed as less credible in her testimony because of her social identity. She does not have the words to explain her experiences, and when she tries, she is unlikely to be believed anyway.⁹ This is a danger that makes the epistemic virtues of testimonial justice and hermeneutical justice all the more important, but all the less likely.

Before moving on to apply these insights, it will be helpful to briefly discuss one more form of epistemic injustice developed by Kristie Dotson (2012) in response to Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice. She argues that Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice assumes both (a) *one* collective hermeneutical resource and (b) that both the marginalized speaker and dominant perceiver have equal difficulty in making the marginalized

⁹ Medina expands upon this point (2013, 96).

person’s experiences intelligible. This is rarely the case, however. Thus, Dotson develops the term “contributory injustice” to name injustices in which a perceiver’s “willful hermeneutical ignorance” (Pohlhaus, Jr. 2012) leads her to continue using “structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources” rather than being open to marginalized hermeneutical resources (Dotson 2012, 32). Importantly, this impedes the speaker’s “ability to contribute to shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community,” thus the name, “contributory injustice” (32). In other words, a contributory injustice occurs when structurally prejudiced, mainstream¹⁰ hermeneutical resources continue to be consulted and marginalized hermeneutical resources are blocked. Here, those within the marginalized epistemic community *have* interpretive resources for understanding their experiences, but these cannot be adequately communicated in mainstream discourse. To address contributory injustices it is important to be open to and to seek out the interpretive resources of epistemically marginalized communities.

2 Epistemic Injustice and Mental Disability

In this section, I turn to epistemic injustices faced by mentally disabled persons. There is growing literature on epistemic injustice in relation to somatic illness, disability, and medicine. For example, well before the publication of Fricker’s book, Susan Wendell (1996) discussed a variety of epistemic consequences of the ways disability is understood and responded to in both medical and everyday contexts. Havi Carel and Ian James Kidd have published several articles applying Fricker’s analysis to medical settings (Carel and Kidd 2014; Kidd and Carel 2016). And Alistair Wardrope has interpreted critiques of “medicalization” as concerns about hermeneutical injustices, while warning that such claims may commit testimonial injustices by ignoring the voices of patients, many of whom find great relief in the practices of medicine (2015).¹¹ Here, I aim to provide a similar analysis, but one that is specific to mental disability.

Before doing so, a few qualifications are in order. First, by dividing physical disability, sensory disability, and chronic illness from mental disability,

¹⁰ I use the term “mainstream” rather than “collective” to flag the possibility of alternative hermeneutical resources. By mainstream, I mean those interpretive resources generally accessible to most people in a given social context. One can imagine mainstream music or media, for example, where most people recognize and have access to these media, but there are a variety of other media that are available, even though they do not have the widespread recognition of those in the mainstream.

¹¹ While I find Wardrope’s analysis of hermeneutical injustice to be convincing and helpful, I worry that in accusing critics of testimonial injustice he may be failing to take into account more nuanced criticisms of medical practices and knowledges, criticisms that are attentive to the voices of patients. Still, it provides a helpful caution that I hope I have addressed here by attending to the writings of mentally disabled persons and their caretakers. Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to relate the arguments in this paper to other recent developments.

I do not intend to understand them as opposed. Instead, because mental disability can pose a unique challenge to discussions of epistemic injustice—specifically the question of whether or not persons who are understood to have epistemic limitations can be subject to epistemic injustices—I have chosen to focus on this issue. Of course, there will be common themes that emerge in discussing disability in its myriad forms (themes that may be especially important for political organizing), and there are persons who are both physically disabled or chronically ill and mentally disabled. Second, I do not address all, or even most, mental disabilities in this section. What I hope to accomplish is to understand some themes that have emerged in disability studies with the tools of the epistemic (in)justice literature discussed above. Third, I think it is worthwhile to focus on mentally disabled persons because of the anxiety it seems to arouse in academic settings. Eva Kittay writes about the birth of her mentally disabled daughter, Sesha, for example, “Nothing mattered to me as much as to be able to reason, to reflect, to understand. . . . If my life took its meaning from thought, what kind of meaning would her life have?” (1999, 150). Similarly, Margrit Shildrick reflects on her own work, writing, “My own failure, as yet, to adequately address the issue of sexuality and developmental disability, for example, is not, I suspect, a simple matter of assessing where the greater relevance to my project . . . lies, but more in the nature of a resistance to disorders of mind” (2009, 88). And in the introduction to her book on mental disability in academia, Margaret Price writes, “Academic discourse operates not just to omit, but to abhor mental disability—to reject it, to stifle and expel it” (2011, 8). Thus, if academic work, including philosophy, has investments which result in epistemic injustices committed against persons with mental disabilities, it is important to ask what form these injustices take and what can be done to rectify them. Fourth, I adopt the term “mental disability” from Margaret Price because of its breadth. It can include mental illnesses, cognitive disabilities, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and perhaps even the mental effects of other disabilities and illnesses.¹² What makes these disabilities problematic in the context of this chapter is that they seem to hinder or bar the possibility of participating in the knowledge pooling practices with which Fricker is concerned. In other words, mental disability *may* be a feature that inherently hinders one’s epistemic capabilities such that taking it into account when we assess epistemic competence may be warranted, and this is unlike gender, race, physical disability, or other identities discussed in the epistemic injustice literature. For example, according to the DSM-V, a person diagnosed with “profound intellectual disability” has “very limited understanding of symbolic communication in speech or gesture” ([American Psychiatric Association 2013](#)). Could others be said, then, to limit her hermeneutic

¹² Price’s example, here, is “the ‘brain fog’ that attends many autoimmune diseases, chronic pain, and chronic fatigue” (2011, 11).

resources or assign her an unjust credibility deficit? Autism rights advocate Jim Sinclair writes that an autistic child may not “respond in any way you recognize as being part of that system [of communication]” (Sinclair 2012b, 17). Given this “communication breakdown,” would others not be justified in thinking it is autism and not hermeneutic resources that hinder our collective interpretations of her experiences? I will answer these questions negatively. In many such cases, credibility deficits are unwarranted and epistemic injustices *are* often committed against such persons.

In general, this is because the myriad people considered to be mentally disabled are very different. Although people with intellectual disability (ID) may all share something in common, namely their fitting certain diagnostic criteria, those criteria are vague. All that is required to fit this diagnosis is a deficit in “intellectual functions,” a deficit in “adaptive functioning,” and onset “during the developmental period” (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Thus, differences can occur both within and between levels of severity (mild, moderate, severe, and profound). While one person with a mild ID may have difficulty with mathematical reasoning, another may have difficulty with reading. And whereas a person with a mild ID may experience difficulty with a small range of tasks, a person with a severe ID may have difficulty with a broader range of tasks. The same analysis could be given to any of the disabilities I am considering under the heading of mental disability. The capacities and experiences of individuals given these diagnoses are unique. Thus, attributing credibility deficits to mentally disabled persons in general is unjustified, because it assumes that all persons who share these diagnoses deserve equal (and usually equally low) credibility. Furthermore, attributing generalized credibility deficits to a mentally disabled person based on a limited range of specific capabilities is also unjustified.

To better understand these epistemic injustices, I will discuss four common themes found in disability studies scholarship and in the written testimony of persons with mental disabilities: testimonial injustices resulting from the use of technological or personal aides, epistemic injustices resulting from the use of generalized definitions or hyperbolic examples, epistemic injustices in interactions with professionals and service providers, and epistemic injustices faced by those attempting to organize for social or political change.¹³ Next, I will move on to consider some ways in which these forms of epistemic injustice might be addressed.

First, consider the ways in which using technologies or personal aides often leads to unwarranted credibility deficits for persons with mental disabilities. For example, Amy Sequenzia, who is labelled as a “low-functioning” autistic person because she does not communicate orally, discusses the ways in which her use of communication technology discredits her in the eyes of others. She writes, “I am a self-advocate and I can type

¹³ This list is not intended to be exhaustive.

my thoughts. But at the moment I show up with my communication device and an aide, my credibility, in the eyes of most neurotypical people, is diminished” (2012, 159). Indeed, she goes on to explain that most people assume her aide is present to speak *for* her, when in fact she requires aides to help her with “everyday tasks,” while her device helps her communicate for herself (160). This is an instance of testimonial injustice because others find Sequenzia’s testimony less credible simply because she communicates using a device. Indeed, when her personal aide is present, she reports being epistemically objectified as others address her aide for information about herself, information which Sequenzia is perfectly capable of providing.

Second, generalizations about and hyperbolic examples of persons with mental disabilities often cause certain epistemic injustices. In academic philosophy specifically, Licia Carlson notes that many philosophers who use (often fictional) intellectually disabled persons as examples do so without consulting disabled persons or the disabled community. She writes, “While individuals with profound and severe intellectual disabilities may be incapable of entering into the conversation, there is a paucity of work that includes the voices of those with mild intellectual disabilities” (2010a, 121). This is especially chilling given that intellectually disabled persons are often used as cases to justify abortion, prenatal testing, and, through comparisons with animals, animal rights.¹⁴ Appealing to examples of intellectual disability without consulting their own experiences constitutes a testimonial injustice that undermines intellectually disabled persons as knowers, contributes to their treatment as inherent sufferers, and may keep them from participating in other epistemic practices. Uses of intellectual disability in philosophy also constitute contributory injustices by continuing to use prejudiced mainstream hermeneutical resources and thereby blocking alternative hermeneutical resources developed by mentally disabled persons. As one example, this has contributed to an unquestioned link between intellectual disability and suffering. Carlson notes, however, that when the experiences of ID persons are consulted, a more complex understanding of the relation of ID to suffering can emerge. For example, in mainstream philosophical discourse, the suffering experienced by intellectually disabled persons can only be imagined as caused by the disability itself. This obscures the ways in which suffering may in fact be caused by external factors like social attitudes and institutional mistreatment, rendering the experiences of ID individuals unintelligible to such philosophers.

Elizabeth J. Grace offers a similar caution based on an experience she had with a prominent autism researcher. On the basis of research positing that autistic persons lack a theory of mind, this researcher claimed: “By definition, a person with autism does not know what it means ‘for life to be like something for someone,’ so she cannot possibly get the concept of what it is like to be herself” (2012, 142). In other words, the assumption that

¹⁴ Carlson gives a helpful overview of these trends in philosophy in [Carlson 2010b](#).

autistic persons cannot empathize with or understand the thoughts and feelings of others¹⁵ bars any interpretation of autistic experience as empathic or social. The professor mentioned above even suggests that autistic people have no understanding of their *own* sense of self. Such claims, especially if widely accepted, create testimonial injustices by discrediting a broad range of autistic person’s experiences. They also perpetuate contributory injustices by blocking the interpretive resources of autistic persons and communities from mainstream recognition and use.

Third, mentally disabled persons are often subject to epistemic injustices in their interactions with professionals and service providers. For example, Katie Aubrecht describes her experience with psychiatrists, writing:

I was constantly quizzed about how well I knew the experiences I had were actually true experiences. I couldn’t be sure what I felt, liked, or wanted anymore. I did, however, become ever more familiar with what doctors felt, liked, and wanted, and that those things would be the right things to feel, like, and want. (Fabris and Aubrecht 2014, 190)

Here, Aubrecht gives an account of how the testimonial injustices of her physicians undermined her epistemic subjectivity (the primary epistemic harm), led to self-doubt, and ultimately led her own knowledge to be covered over by the knowledge of the doctors (secondary epistemic harms). One may object that if the doctors were quizzing her, it seems unlikely that they would disregard her knowledge. On Aubrecht’s description, however, the quizzes did not serve as genuine requests for testimony about her experiences and beliefs, but instead introduced skepticism about her testimony. Moreover, it is clear that as she describes it, the doctors resisted evidence to the contrary, gradually moving Aubrecht to confusion and compliance. Here we see an example of what Pohlhaus calls “truncated subjectivity.” Aubrecht’s testimony *is* consulted, but it is granted credibility only insofar as it confirms the doctors’ perspective, and this leads her to begin to understand her own experiences on their terms. Similar concerns arise in her discussion of being medicated. Among other complaints, Aubrecht reports practical harms because she experienced her medicated self as “alter[ing] the very way I moved,” fatigued, disoriented, restless, nauseous; the medication made it “seemingly impossible to *be where I was*” (2014, 191). Despite these complaints, doctors continued to assure her that medications for depression and anxiety are normal, that they would help her be more social, and even that the source of her “problems” might be estrogen levels such that her birth control prescriptions were experimented with. She sought therapy only for anxiety, but the aggressive and skeptical questioning of

¹⁵ As Penni Winter notes, this assumption is a sloppy one that often fails to take into account the distinction between *cognitive empathy*, or the ability to pick up on non-verbal cues to recognize others’ emotional states, and *affective empathy*, or the emotional responses one has to knowledge of others’ emotions (2012, 118).

her doctors revealed a general distrust of her self-understanding. Moreover, their insistence that she remain on medications undermined her trust in herself, since she experienced them as worse than her original anxiety.

Similarly, Charla Hageman reports an experience of testimonial injustice. She, along with her family and the staff at her housing and employment agencies, met to discuss her potential marriage to another disabled person. She reports of this meeting, “It seemed like they were making decisions for us. They would talk about you like you weren’t even in the room. . . . I felt I did not have any say about how I wanted to live my life” (2009, 49). Eventually it was agreed that Charla could marry her partner if they proved their stability by living together for two years before getting married. Thus, while many people who are not intellectually disabled decide to get married with little foresight, Charla, who knew her partner for about seven years before the two-year living agreement was reached, was not trusted to make this decision. Professionals here treated Charla as an epistemic object because of her diagnosis and because of the epistemic authority they understand themselves to have.

An anonymous contributor to the Loud Hands Project describes another instance of testimonial injustice. She was placed in a “special-ed high school” for “fighting” and her principal tried to convince her not to take a “mainstream” Spanish course. “He said it was too ‘difficult’ for a special-ed student, and I didn’t need a language. I only needed the lesser diploma that doesn’t get you into college” (2012, 154). She went on to earn a master’s degree. The principal discredits her in two ways, here, first by assuming that the course will be too difficult simply because of her label as a special-ed student (when in fact, students funneled into special education programs have a variety of abilities and struggles), and second, by assuming that even if she could pass the class it was not worth it to try since she would not attend college anyway. In this way, her difficulties with speech and sensory sensitivities were generalized by the label of “special education” to discredit her knowledge and her future epistemic potential.

Fourth and finally, mentally disabled person’s efforts to organize for social or political change are often undermined by epistemic injustices. For example, despite the objections of many in the Mad Pride movement, organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness continue to support a biological explanation of and biomedical responses to mental illness, rather than bringing critical reflection to the social context and causes of mental illness (Rembis 2014, 148). And when President Bush created the New Freedom Commission to re-evaluate mental health services in the United States, only one of its fifteen members had “personally experienced the mental health system” (Lewis 2006, 348). Even organizations that are supposed to advocate for mentally ill persons reject the interpretive resources of those who identify as mentally ill and those who have experiences in the mental health system in favor of mainstream hermeneutical resources. Thus, in addition to preemptively silencing the testimony of mentally ill persons, this is also an instance of contributory injustice.

Similarly, Jim Sinclair explains how he was discredited in his attempts to form an autistic community. Because of assumptions about autistic persons’ lack of sociability, for example, the idea of an “autistic community” becomes an oxymoron, and friendship with or between autistic persons becomes unintelligible. Indeed, Sinclair explains that in the process of forming Autism Network International, he was discredited as a member of the autistic community by non-autistic persons, especially “experts,” precisely because he was seeking to express himself, form a community, and engage in other activities seen as inconsistent with biomedical understandings of autism (2012b, 34–35). Again, this is an example of related testimonial and contributory injustices. Attempts to silence Sinclair’s testimony preemptively perpetuated mainstream interpretations of autism and thus blocked the inchoate, marginalized hermeneutical resources he hoped to develop and share. And the contributory injustices that block alternative hermeneutical resources for understanding autism lead to testimonial injustices like the one Sinclair discusses.

As a final example, consider efforts to organize against institutionalization. The knowledge of mentally disabled persons about the institutions in which they live, like group homes, nursing homes, and psychiatric wards, is often disregarded. Mark Friedman and Ruthie-Marie Beckwith, writing about two self-advocacy groups of intellectually and developmentally disabled people (Speaking For Ourselves of Pennsylvania, Inc. and People First of Tennessee, Inc.) note the frequent testimonial injustices faced by disabled members as they have sought to organize against institutionalization. They explain, for example, “Insightful reflections shared by leaders [of the organizations] were dismissed as the product of manipulation and subversive mind control techniques employed by the nondisabled organizers and advisors” (Friedman and Beckwith 2014, 239). Here, it is clear that the organizers faced testimonial injustices. Professionals and the family members who assumed that they should be institutionalized found the testimony of the organizers to lack credibility because of their disabled statuses. Indeed, the assumption was that these ideas must have been coming from outside, from nondisabled organizers manipulating the disabled organizers. This treatment led to the sorts of harms Fricker discusses. In addition to disrespecting their epistemic subjectivity (the primary epistemic harm), many members of the organization had developed a sort of learned helplessness, a feeling of inability to trust their own knowledge (the secondary epistemic harm) and make decisions about their lives. It was also common for them to acquiesce to poor treatment, abuse, and threats in institutions (a practical harm) because of this conditioning over the course of their lives. Indeed, one member, Betty Potts, recalls her experience of trying to bring awareness to an instance of abuse: “I once spoke up about their hitting someone and handled rough but they said I lied about it but I didn’t” (Fricker 2007, 241). Although she remained insistent, and thus resisted some of the secondary epistemic harms (e.g., loss of epistemic courage), she was clearly subject to

a testimonial injustice in this case, one that undermined her as a knowing subject and that led to continued practical harms.

Addressing these problems will require both epistemic virtues exercised in interpersonal interactions as well as spaces in which new interpretations of mentally disabled persons' experiences can be created and from which those interpretations can be expressed to revise hermeneutical resources in broader communities. Working toward epistemic justice will require new skills and patience from those who tend to discredit, silence, or deny the knowledge of mentally disabled persons. In academic settings, for example, teachers may need to set aside assumptions about what presence and participation mean for students. Price suggests that when designing courses, instructors should structure them with access in mind, rather than accommodation. While *accommodation* assumes that there is a problem faced by an individual that needs to be fixed, leaving the course structure mostly unchanged, improving the *access* of a course is to design it such that it is "flexible, multi-modal, and responsive to feedback" (2011, 130). To be clear, Price is not suggesting here that teachers extend themselves beyond their means. Instead, she is noting that different instructors have different skills and preferences that may be more beneficial for some students and less so for others (89). If all instructors opened their range of communication styles to those they find comfortable, this would create a range of channels of communication both within individual courses and between classes such that students would have maximum ability to choose those styles of communication that best suit them. For example, some students may find online discussion boards to be the most helpful, while others may prefer face-to-face communications; some may prefer agonistic environments and others may prefer cooperative interactions. The point is not to be accessible to all of these modes of participation and presence in each course, but to define participation and presence widely enough within courses and between courses so that as many students as possible can benefit.

Sinclair offers another helpful example of what epistemic justice requires in the case of mental disability. Autism includes difficulties in normalized forms of communication and as such offers a special case of the need for testimonial justice. Because autistic persons may experience themselves as "foreign" to shared systems of communication, taking them seriously means "[y]ou're going to have to learn to back up to levels more basic than you've probably thought about before, to translate, and to check to make sure your translations are understood. You're going to have to . . . let your child teach you a little of her language, guide you a little way into his world" (2012a, 17). So while testimonial justice in the case of mental disability may require challenges that are unique compared with other forms of testimonial justice, it is certainly possible.

Addressing hermeneutical and contributory injustices will require imagining otherwise in regard to the experiences of mentally disabled persons. Kafer provides an example of this in the case of Ashley X, the girl determined to be "permanently unable" who was given what has become

known as the “Ashley Treatment”: the removal of breast buds, a hysterectomy, and estrogen patches which accelerate puberty leading to a forty percent reduction in predicted weight and twenty percent reduction in predicted height (pillowangel.org 2012).¹⁶ As Kafer notes, in justifying this “Treatment,” Ashley’s doctors and parents and other advocates mentioned the myriad sources of potential pain that Ashley might face without the “Treatment,” but “[i]t is seemingly inconceivable to imagine Ashley’s body—her disabled female body—as the source of any sensation other than pain” (2013, 65). Indeed, severing the link between mental disability and suffering in the mainstream hermeneutic resource would be an important form of hermeneutic justice generally. Other examples of hermeneutic justice might include being open to treatment alternatives outside institutionalization and pharmaceutical treatments, which many in the Mad Pride movement and other survivors of the mental health system have come to understand as a form of “chemical constraint” (Fabris and Aubrecht 2014). Such alternatives might include peer-run services (Lewis 2006), or even the formation of alternative spaces or communities (Ben-Moshe 2014). Indeed, such work is already available. Organizations like the Center for Mental Health Services and Mindfreedom have been important sites for gaining new understandings of the experiences of mentally ill persons and imagining new alternatives to living with mental illness (Lewis 2006, Rembis 2014, Fabris and Aubrecht 2014); Autism Network International and the Loud Hands Project provided a space in which to develop, and resources to disseminate, new understandings of the experiences and lives of autistic persons, understandings which challenge the biomedical model of autism that understands autism as a personal tragedy rather than a different set of ways of experiencing the world (Bascom 2012, Sinclair 2012b).¹⁷ Unfortunately, it seems there is little room for interpretations of mentally disabled experiences like this in current, mainstream hermeneutical resources.

¹⁶ Each of these aspects of the “Treatment” is justified as having both direct benefits and additional, indirect benefits. For example, the primary “benefit” of removing the breast buds is preventing the future pain of predicted large breasts, and a secondary “benefit” is that it “avoids sexualization towards caregiver[s]” (pillowangel.org 2012). As Kafer explains, it is unclear why the imagined large breasts are only considered a source of potential pain and not a source of potential pleasure. She is also critical of the claim that having small, undeveloped breasts would make Ashley X any less likely to be abused (2013, 64–65).

¹⁷ One such development is a profound reversal of normal understandings of autism. Sinclair writes, “Each of us who does learn to talk to you, each of us who manages to function at all in your society, each of us who manages to reach out and make a connection with you, is operating in alien territory, making contact with alien beings. We spend our entire lives doing this. And then you tell us that we can’t relate” (2012a, 18). In other words, Sinclair suggests, maybe it is “normal” people who have difficulty communicating with autistic people and not vice versa.

3 Epistemic Injustice and Severe Mental Disability

With all of this in mind, however, there are persons whose testimony or interpretations of their own experiences may never go beyond expressions of likes or dislikes, pleasures or pains. Eva Kittay's daughter Seshu and Ashley X are likely examples given the descriptions we have of their behaviors and experiences. What would it mean to be testimonially or hermeneutically just in one's interactions with such persons? I believe there are at least four considerations to keep in mind here.

First, others should be open to the expressions of pleasure, pain, preferences, and dislikes of even the most severely disabled persons and take them seriously. Such expressions are, after all, means of sharing information about experiences. Treating a disabled person's pleasure or pain as less worthy of consideration is also a way of disregarding her testimony about her experiences. Disregarding a disabled person's musical preferences, for example, also places one's own testimony above hers. Whatever such persons express, however limited in scope it may be, should be taken seriously. But this principle is not likely to carry nondisabled persons very far in determining how to respond to those with severe intellectual disabilities.

Second, then, it is important to be open to the testimony and interpretations given by others who are close to severely intellectually disabled persons. Others who are disabled but expressive and are institutionalized alongside severely disabled persons or are given similar medical treatments may very well have insights into the experiences of their more severely disabled peers. Such persons may also be more open to listening to severely disabled others as a result of their own experiences of being silenced or shared coping techniques. Grace explains an example of a "man who said everything through lines from famous movies, television shows and commercials" (2012, 142). Because she was willing to listen, she understood that he was using these quotations to communicate, not repeating them randomly, and was able to convince his staff such that they gained limited communication with him. Because of her own experiences, Grace was open-minded and diligent about other autistic persons' attempts to speak in ways that non-autistic people were not. Similarly, others who work with or care for severely mentally disabled persons may be in a better position than others to understand their experiences. Carlson discusses this suggestion in detail as a "spectrum of certainty" (2010a, 178). For example, the caregiver who works closely and frequently with a disabled person is likely to have a better understanding of the person's life than a medical professional who only interacts with the person in short appointments and understands the person's experiences only through biomedical diagnostic and treatment frameworks. Eva Kittay similarly suggests that caregivers are likely to have particular knowledge of their severely disabled charges that others, including medical professionals, do not (1999, 169–170). Still because the doctor does have this knowledge, she would be situated higher

on the spectrum of certainty than the armchair philosopher who has not interacted with the person (or even other disabled persons). However, these evaluations must be made cautiously. Others who are subject to similar treatment may *tend* to have more insight into the experiences of severely disabled persons, but their experiences may differ widely. And although caregivers may better understand the experiences of those they care for, they may in fact be radically closed to their experiences or project their own concerns, feelings, or experiences onto them (Carlson 2010a, 187–191). Consider, for example, the reflections of Joann Hagen who wanted her daughter, who had aphasia, to receive an “endometrial ablation,” which is cauterization of the uterine lining to prevent eggs from implanting. In discussing her reasoning, she writes, “I did not even want to consider how she would conceive a child!” (2009, 56). To be clear, I do not mean to comment on Hagen’s conclusion, here, especially if her daughter is indeed unable to communicate consent. Given her discussion of the issue, however, it seems that Hagen’s understanding of what is in her daughter’s interest is significantly influenced by her discomfort with thinking of her daughter engaging in sexual activity. Thus, while it may be useful to think of epistemic justice for persons with severe intellectual disabilities as including others on a spectrum of certainty, it is important to remain vigilant about such attributions, especially in cases in which the prejudices of the others are likely to influence their interpretations.

Third, the development of epistemic capabilities should be fostered to the greatest extent possible. Recent history is filled with examples of mentally disabled persons who, because of assumptions about their epistemic capabilities, were subject to testimonial, hermeneutical, and contributory injustices that limited their development as epistemic subjects. The practice of institutionalizing children with Down syndrome, as Michael Bérubé notes, surely contributed to their limited epistemic achievements for decades as they were confined to environments that did nothing to support the acquisition of knowledge and epistemic skills. He writes,

Right through the 70s . . . it was pronounced by the best-trained medical practitioners in the world, who told families of kids with Down’s that their children would never be able to walk, talk, dress themselves, or recognize their parents. . . . It’s impossible to say how deeply we’re indebted to those parents, children, teachers, and medical personnel who insisted on treating people with Down’s as if they *could* learn, as if they *could* lead ‘meaningful’ lives. (1996)

Being epistemically just in interactions with mentally disabled people requires an openness to new epistemic capabilities, even if they do not develop on a “normal” timeline. Speaking specifically of autism, Penni Winter calls this “maximisation” to distinguish it from normalization, because the

goal, in her view, should be to develop the capabilities of autistic persons *as* autistic persons, rather than forcing them to conform to non-autistic, neurotypical standards (2012, 116). A similar caution is appropriate for all interactions with mentally disabled persons; others should be open to their knowledge and interpretations in as many communicative methods as possible. If, for example, a person communicates through quotations, as in Grace's example discussed above, taking these attempts at communication seriously may result not only in immediate forms of epistemic justice, but also the development of greater epistemic and communicative capabilities. Persons who do not communicate orally may be able to communicate through gestures or the use of communication devices, and providing these options is a form of epistemic justice that allows them to provide testimony, share interpretations of their experiences and develop these interpretations with others, and to develop epistemic capabilities that would have otherwise remained unattainable. Indeed, given frequent advancements in technology, the developments of new forms of therapy, and other changes in understanding disability, it is important to resist institutionalization and to recognize the limits of current medical knowledge to foster the development of epistemic skills for as many persons as possible.

That having been said, there are important qualifications to be made. First, because of current models of service provision and inequitable distribution of resources, following the imperative to foster epistemic capabilities is a thoroughly political affair. If family members, legal custodians, or service providers are not provided adequate resources, it is unrealistic to expect them to be constantly open to those they care for, as they will likely be overwhelmed with concerns about physical health, finances, finding time to care for themselves, and so on. Thus, it is likely that wealthy caretakers will be most able to act on this imperative. Fostering epistemic justice for mentally disabled individuals, then, will surely require fighting for economic and political justice through myriad changes like higher standards for service provision, better pay for caretakers, subsidized service provision and devices to increase access to them, and inclusive settings in schools and care facilities. Second, even with the best means available, it is likely that there will still be persons who will not develop the epistemic capabilities of others, such that they have little or no knowledge to share, form few or no interpretations of their own experiences, and develop few or no epistemic virtues (or vices). So while I want to suggest fostering the development of epistemic capabilities in all to the greatest extent possible, it is also necessary to respect mentally disabled persons *as they are*. Writing about her daughter, Sesha, Kittay criticizes the sole aim of independence, writing:

I fear that the stress on independence reinstates Sesha as less than fully human. With every embrace, I know her humanity. And it has no more to do with independence than it has to do with being able to read Spinoza. So when

we think of mothering a disabled child as enabling and fostering development, we must also reconceive development, not only toward independence, but toward whatever capacities are there to be developed. Development for Sesha means the enhancement of her capacities to experience joy. (1999, 173)

We could easily replace “independence” in this quotation with “epistemic capabilities.” Accepting mentally disabled persons as they are while remaining open to their attempts to share information or interpretations is important to avoid the tentative understanding of disability. As Campbell writes, “positioning disability as tentative conjures up the notion of disability *in waiting*, disability *standing in reserve* for technologies that can restore wholeness. This view of disablement has the potential to realign social planning away from a focus on ‘care’ to that of ‘cure” (2009, 44). Thus, emphasizing the constant possibility of development may end up reinscribing the individualizing discourses disability advocates have been at pains to reject. It will be important, then, to balance fostering epistemic capabilities with both a recognition that the development of epistemic capabilities (and indeed, what counts as an epistemic capability) depends on influences outside of an individual’s biology and an acceptance of individuals as they are at the current moment regardless of their epistemic capabilities or signs of development.

4 Epistemic Injustice beyond Information

In this final section, I argue that Fricker’s focus on “information” unnecessarily restricts her account of epistemic injustice in ways that limit her account from recognizing and accounting for epistemic injustices against those with severe mental disabilities. Here, I follow Dotson (2012) in rejecting Fricker’s closed system that describes those injustices not encompassed by testimonial or hermeneutical injustice as epistemic bad luck. To see why this is the case, it will be helpful to return to Fricker’s account, specifically her use of Edward Craig’s state of nature account of testimony. For Craig (1990), certain pressures have meant that what we mean by “knower” is “good informant.” That is, in our everyday epistemic interactions, we recognize one as a knower only if they are a good informant, if they “participate in the sharing of information” (Fricker 2007, 144–145). What this drives home, for Fricker, is that while we may think that undermining one’s testimony is not the same thing as undermining one as a knower (after all, one could object that a person may very well know something but not be allowed to give testimony about it or not be trusted when they share that knowledge), in fact, what we mean by knower is a person who is a participant in the sharing and pooling of information. Thus, to undermine one’s testimonial capacity *is* to undermine one’s status as a knower. In

Fricker's words, "the [testimonial] injustice sends the message that they are not fit for participation in the practice that originally generates the very idea of a knower" (145). It is not at all clear, however, that our only or original reason for epistemic practices is the pooling of information. Consider, for example, Christopher Hookway's (2010) response to Fricker's book. He offers a distinction between two perspectives on epistemic injustice: the informational perspective and the participant perspective. According to the informational perspective, the relevant questions about epistemic competence concern one's reliability as a source of information. According to the participant perspective, the relevant questions about epistemic competence concern one's ability to be involved in the activities that contribute to the growth and sharing of knowledge (157). Hookway argues that the participant perspective is in fact broader and suggests incorporating testimonial injustice as a type of participant injustice. This would allow us to understand injustices in which one's tentative suggestions or hypotheses are discounted, one's questions not taken seriously, or one's ability to "recognize relevant information" is cast in doubt (157–158). These forms of participation are, for Hookway, not reducible to sharing information but are just as important to the development of knowledge and one's status as a knower. In a reply, Fricker agrees with Hookway that these are important aspects of our epistemic projects. She suggests instead, however, that we should consider instances of what Hookway calls participant injustice as testimonial injustices because they are peripheral to the "basic epistemic practice" of "passing on knowledge" (Fricker 2010, 175–176).

I aim to take up Hookway's suggestion here to suggest, contra Fricker, that there are epistemic practices for which the aim is not, ultimately, passing on knowledge understood as information. In particular, I would like to focus on the practices through which we develop interpretations of our worlds in interpersonal, or intimate settings. On the analyses of epistemic injustice discussed so far, testimony is a concern for small, interpersonal interactions, like those between two people or those in courtrooms. Interpretation, or hermeneutical injustices, on the other hand, are concerns for large-scale, structural interactions. In Fricker's example of sexual harassment, there is a small group of women who come together to name this harm, but the harm being named is something that concerns all women (at a particular point in the history of the West). I believe there are small-scale, interpersonal interactions, however, in which the interpretation of one's experiences, and not testimony, is what is at stake. The foreclosure of these interpretive interactions based on another's identity prejudices is what I will call *intimate hermeneutical injustice*.

Consider, for example, Jim Sinclair's discussion of his experiences as an autistic person. Persons with autism are often denied entry into epistemic practices that contribute to the interpretations of their experiences, even when they are asked to speak. Sinclair discusses the phenomenon of the "self-narrating zoo exhibit," in which autistic persons are expected to explain their experiences to parents and professionals as a resource to parents

of autistic children, but they are not treated as people worthy of interaction in themselves or as people with interpretations of their experiences that may counter medicalized understandings of autism as an individual tragedy (2012b, 55). Notice that here Sinclair *is* being called upon to provide testimony, to participate in a knowledge-pooling practice, to be a good informant. Moreover, it is testimony directly relevant to his experiences as an autistic person. However, it is a tokenizing solicitation, one that precisely seeks *information* (and information understood to be relevant to other autistic people) but cannot tolerate alternative *interpretations*. The epistemic practices through which many people seek to give meaning to and understand their own lives—the inchoate ways in which most people try out interpretations of their experiences with others to see if they fit—these are the experiences that being a self-narrating zoo exhibit denies Sinclair.

Eva Kittay’s discussion of her daughter Sesha offers another example. It is not uncommon to hear those who provide services for disabled persons say things like “She doesn’t know what she wants.” Nor is it uncommon for those in the surrounding community to ignore the severely mentally disabled entirely. And yet, Sesha and others with similar levels of ability have interpretations to share. Take this example that Kittay recounts from the perspective of Sesha’s caregiver, Peggy:

I was working terribly hard trying to get Sesha to cooperate and do what I was supposed to get her to do. . . . I thought, how am I going to do this? How can I possibly do this job, when I looked down at Sesha and saw her little head pushed back against her stroller moving first to one side and then to another. I couldn’t figure out what she was doing. Until I traced what her eyes were fixed on. She had spotted a leaf falling, and she was following its descent. I said “Thank you for being my teacher, Sesha. I see now. Not my way. Your way. Slowly. (1999, 157)

Wrapped up in her assignment of completing exercises with Sesha, Peggy was not listening to her, she failed to open herself to the meanings Sesha found in her experiences. Sesha did not say or sign “I want to watch this beautiful leaf,” but her following eyes and the movements of her body contain a meaning no less: fascination, perhaps joy or curiosity. Because Peggy’s initial failure involves the development and sharing of meaning or interpretations of experience, rather than the exchange of information, and because it is an interpersonal exchange, not one that is representative of a shared, collective, or structural experience, this is another example of intimate hermeneutical injustice (one that Peggy recognizes and learns from).

Recognizing intimate hermeneutical injustice is important for two reasons. First, it points out ways in which persons can be subject to epistemic harms because of their social identities but in ways that are not generalizable to all or most who share one’s identity or identities. In other words, it

resists tokenization. Second, it recognizes even those with severe mental disabilities as epistemic subjects seeking to make sense of, to find significance in, to interpret their worlds. Like Dotson's contributory injustice, then, I believe intimate hermeneutical injustice identifies a gap in discussions of epistemic injustice. It is not, however, a replacement for or alternative to the types of epistemic injustice discussed by Fricker and others. Hopefully by recognizing and resisting intimate hermeneutical injustices, we can learn to listen like Peggy.

Josh Dohmen

E-mail: jdohmen@westga.edu

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