The Power of 0

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Abstract: Here I propose that a Lacanian feminist undertaking today requires the assertion of two sets of rights: the positive rights of a traditional feminist agenda, together with the rights of the not-all. To illustrate this, I draw on the contemporary political events of Donald Trump's inauguration and the Women's March on Washington.

Key words: feminism, Lacan, Imaginary, writing, Twitter, psychosis, Compensatory Make-believe Symbolic.

A couple of weeks before Donald Trump's inauguration in 2017, *The Washington Post Express* ran a cover story about the upcoming Women's March on Washington. As is well known, this massive protest — which sparked similar marches throughout the world — asserted women's rights in advance of what many feared would be an all-out assault on women and minorities by the new administration. But what quickly drew worldwide attention and ridicule was the image the *Express* created to illustrate its story, which was headlined "The Modest Start of a Massive March". Working from a stock photo depicting a neutral mass of people in a circle,[1] the paper's designers tweaked the picture to make it take on the shape of a gender symbol and coloured the background pink (of course). What they didn't realize until the issue was already out was that the

shape they had chosen was not the gender symbol for woman but for *man*.

Predictably, it unleashed a Twitter storm, with many chastising the WaPo for its lack of women in the creative department and in journalism more generally. The corporate culture of layoffs and outsourcing also played its part for some. "This is how Fake News start", tweeted Erik Spiekermann, "Nobody knows anything nor bothers to check". A few people urged understanding and restraint, recalling similar errors of their own in the past. Twitter user ani (@virgo_27) reminded her followers that "ppl don't deal w[ith] this symbol very often", and reflected that the symbol "looks more like a flacid dong" and that women get confused by this.

But perhaps this was emblematic of more than just a silly oversight, for it is hard not to be reminded here of the key Lacanian insight that there is no signifier for Woman in the Symbolic. Ani's comment, that the symbol ♀ looks confusingly like a detumescent penis, vividly illustrates how women can occupy a place in the Symbolic only as proxy men. Is this in fact why the symbol for woman is not dealt with very often? Perhaps it too viscerally reminds us of the failure of the sexual relation, which is Lacan's other way of saying that Woman has no place in the system of signification except as a proxy, non-virile man.

Shortly before the election, Twitter captured another meme. The former congressman and radio host, Joe Walsh tweeted "If you want a country with 63 different genders, vote Hillary. If you want a country where men are men and women are women, vote Trump". Walsh was riffing on Facebook's growing list of options by which users can identify their gender. A list collated by ABC news in 2014 includes 58 "custom" options, which include Agender, Bigender, Cisgender, Gender Fluid, Gender Questioning, Neither, Pangender, Two-Spirit, as well as a variety of trans-combinatorials of Female, Male, Man, Woman and Person.[2]

What we have come to call the 21st century's "post-truth" condition manifests symptomatically as a proliferation of genders, as if in over-compensation for the more deeply embedded Symbolic absence of Woman that the WaPo's error exposed. Indeed, the more Facebook's "custom options" endeavour to accommodate and extend sexual identity, the more they perform Woman's whole-scale disappearance into what Juliet Flower MacCannell forbodes as the looming "triumph of the masculine universal". In a recent essay, MacCannell outlines the ways twenty-first century capitalism is characterized by the excision of the female body shape from today's cultural image storehouse.[3] The wider context for this expulsion lies in something MacCannell has been tracking with great perspicacity for a long time now, namely, the supercession of older Symbolic models of community by those of the Imaginary.[4] Drawing on the Freud of *Group Psychology,* MacCannell explains that, whereas Symbolic forms of identification are rooted in abstract symbols, image-based identifications

are founded on an external visual object. This external object then absorbs the subject's split, which is projected outwards to accommodate an "undivided ego" whose chief characteristic is that it no longer needs to sacrifice its jouissance to the collective. For the image-object "asserts we can all have (the object) and be (the object) at the same time — not despite, but because of our social commitment, our tie to the whole which in group psychology becomes just a flat mirroring of all by all".[5]

Thus the ego-ideal as unconscious point of identification with the Symbolic Father is replaced by the ideal ego who stands captivated before the external visual object as if trapped too long in the funhouse Lacan calls the mirror stage. And where, under previous models of Symbolic identification, it was possible to emerge from this Hall of mirrors through the avenue of paternal prohibition, it seems the flight of this organizing principle away from the S_1 towards the multiple — for which today's gender fluidities are the most visible symptomatic example — implies the equality of access to enjoyment for all. MacCannell comments, "'Jouissance for all' could be [the Imaginary's] slogan".[6]

But as MacCannell also points out in her analysis of contemporary fashion, the over-saturated site of an All conjured by Imaginary identification is by necessity exclusionary of Woman. Moreover, implied in the image-bound society's tendency to splinter into smaller and smaller, mutually hostile groups is another exclusion. This is the foreclosure of the lack on which Symbolic identification rests. Symbolic identification ensures equality negatively, in the mutual prohibition of enjoyment. "The fundamental definition of *Symbolic equality*", MacCannell explains, "is not that everyone enjoys the same things, but that *no one fully enjoys*".[7] By contrast, Imaginary identification, "fashions the solidarity of the whole society on the basis of a faith in the equal enjoyment of all, a belief that creates the condition for an equal love of all for all within the whole without distinctions".[8]

The question that interests me is the interface between the written word and the reign of the Imaginary today. For one thing that is clear is that the early 21st-century seems resurgent with the written word. It is also clear that, if something seems changed in our relation to writing since the advent of email, social media, texting and so forth, it must turn around this wider question of the retreat of the Symbolic and its forms of signification. If the early 21st century merely consolidates the wider undoing of older rhetorico-political models that began in the previous century, one of the first casualties, at least according to Lacanian analysts such as Jacques-Alain Miller, Marie-Hélène Brousse and others, has been the Name-of-the-Father in its role as the guarantor of collective meaning. These analysts have drawn attention to the prevalence of certain clinical presentations today, including the widespread rise of anxiety and its

bodily affects in the 21st-century's "clinic of additions". Miller has coined the term "ordinary psychosis" to account for these phenomena at the structural level. "Ordinary psychosis", as Jonathan Redmond explains, extends Lacan's idea of an "untriggered" psychosis.[9] Traditionally, psychosis is explained as the foreclosure of the master signifier, the S_1, but in some cases this structure remains latent. Very little then distinguishes a neurotic from a psychotic in terms of clinical presentation, even though the subject's link to language and enjoyment differs in a fundamental way.[10] Originally thought to concern only rare cases, ordinary psychosis is regarded by Miller and colleagues as being far more common than supposed.

At this point it is worth recalling a comment of Lacan's concerning the therapeutic role of the Imaginary in potentially preventing the onset of psychosis.[11] It seems that Imaginary identifications may sometimes help to protect psychosis from becoming triggered, offering a sort of prosthesis or crutch that can stand in for the missing, or incompletely subjectivized, paternal signifier. For this, to recall, is the chief difference between neurotic and psychotic structures: whereas the neurotic's access to enjoyment is mediated by the Name-of-the-Father which, as we saw, institutes a prohibition on jouissance, in psychosis, the paternal function fails to fully be subjectivized. There is accordingly a "hole", as Lacan puts it, in the psychotic's Symbolic system: "At the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is summoned" he explains "a pure and simple hole may thus answer in the Other; due to the lack of metaphoric effect, this hole will give rise to a corresponding hole in the place of phallic signification".[12] However, as Miller observes, in some cases an Imaginary replacement of the Name-of-the-Father may come to serve the structuring function of the missing phallic signifier. Miller designates this Imaginary replacement the "Compensatory Make Believe" Name-of-the-Father, or, facetiously, the "CMB". The CMB is a "supplementary device" which, in papering over the hole in the Other with an Imaginary construct performs the role of stabilizing the psychotic's world.

Could the resurgence of writing in the 21st century be functioning in a comparable way? MacCannell notes how Lacan seems to have uncannily anticipated today's flood of technical gadgets with his concept of *jouissances en toc* - the "counterfeit enjoyments" that characterize our experience of contemporary "i-objects": the iPods, iPhones, iPads, etc. The question is whether today's steady drip-stream of inscriptions, for which these objects are the chief vehicles, might be considered in terms of a CMB Symbolic, in the sense of an Imaginary writing where text operates like an image? For to understand today's avalanche of writing in terms of an Imaginary relation might help to explain something that is otherwise rather puzzling, namely, the way that the written

word, and particularly in its expression on social media platforms like Twitter, veers so rapidly into hate speech and frenzied trolling.

For there is surely a paradox here. Traditionally, writing was thought to offer a vital spacing function, providing a sustaining airpocket in the otherwise all-embracing Real. As Alain Badiou put it in 1969, inscription always presupposes "an out-of-place blank".[13] Called forth in the act of inscription, the blank previously guaranteed what MacCannell identifies as the Symbolic's "crucial openness to change, to creating meaning, to becoming rather than being". But increasingly this function seems to be in crisis today, as though writing's out-of-place blank had become yet one more representational object. Caught and trapped by today's digital media, inscription's blank would have become simply *one more image among others*. As a result, it is perhaps no surprise that today's writing on social media quickly degenerates into the crash that Lacan invokes when describing Imaginary relations. Calling up the figure of an amusement park ride of dodg-em cars, whose sole mechanism for movement is rooted in mutual reflection of each other, Lacan muses that it will not take long for the cars to all end in a pile-up. Positivized as an image, the blank loses its mercurial ability to breathe life and space into the Symbolic. We end up with "a collision, everything smashed to a pulp".[14]

Let me therefore propose this as an approach to one of today's most prominent and prolific users of social media, US President Donald Trump. Jacqueline Rose comments that Trump has "licensed the obscenity of the unconscious. He has set the worst human impulses marching".[15] Even prior to taking office, he seems to have permitted an enjoyment that was previously prohibited. The Southern Poverty Law Center has already documented hundreds of real life incidents of verbal and sexual assault in the lead-up to Trump's victory, including and especially Trump's horrific "pussy grabbing" gesture, which appears to have become the political meme for 2017. Copycats include Christopher von Keyserling, a Republican from Connecticut, who reportedly gloated, "I love this new world, I no longer have to be politically correct" as he imitated Trump's now signature gesture of grabbing a woman's vagina.[16] In Trump's America, the image has adopted, as Lacan puts it, "the sexualized function without the need for an intermediary".[17] What was previously forbidden is allowed once the exception, the previously excluded Father-of-Enjoyment, becomes one of us.

In such disastrous circumstances, the question is once more Kant's: "What may I hope for?" Clearly, wishing for the return of the old Oedipal order is clearly both undesirable and futile. In fact, one might even see in Trump's rise the profound malignance of that desire for older Symbolic models. Trump's larger-than-life self-caricature suggests nothing so much as a Macy's Thanksgiving

parade balloon, an Imaginary cartoon of the exceptional Father of Enjoyment doling out a license to everyone to enjoy *just like him*. To recast the words of Joe Walsh, we now have a world where "women are women and men are Trump". So now, when it seems that anything, even the blank space, can be absorbed and colonized as image, what forms of resistance might remain for feminists? Here one might point to a suggestive connection between the artifice of Twitter's 140-character limit and a curious feature that Lacan observes in the psychotic's relation to language. What Lacan names the "between-I", that is, the Imaginary identification with the little other as a compensatory stand-in for the absent big Other, is characterized by a specifically linguistic dimension. The psychotic suffers, as Lacan puts it, from words that are "a kind of running commentary on existence". He explains,

> There is a sort of teasing use of the signifier in the sentences that are begun then interrupted. That level of the signifier which is that of the sentence comprises a middle, a beginning, and an end, and thus requires a conclusion. This is what enables the play upon expectation, a slowing down that occurs at the Imaginary level of the signifier, as if the solution to the enigma, for want of being able to be formulated in any really open manner other than through the primordial assertion of the other's initiative, is given by showing that it's a question of the signifier. (194-5).

If Twitter educes our collective, public version of the psychotic's internal "running commentary on existence", its very truncated, fragmented speech bubbles might nevertheless be put to work for us. For what Twitter's text balloons perhaps inadvertently bring out is precisely the spacings *between* characters in the digital environment. Blanks are *counted equally* in Twitter's traditional 140-character limit. Thus there is something oddly poetic, almost Mallarméan, about the way the space is exposed as one among the continuum of alphabetical possibilities today. But perhaps this also serves to remind us of the artifice of any signifier. It visually recalls us, in other words, to how our habitual patterns of Symbolic representation possess a certain history, a certain way of fitting-into a signifying system, which could also, potentially, have gone another way. *Flattening* the discursive field with the incorporation of the blank in the Symbolic field, the Imaginary thus also has the ability to release another kind of productivity, exposing in the process a certain linguistic plasticity that precedes the distinction of word to letter and letter to number.

Consider what this means. It suggests that when we march to assert our rights — as of course one must — one should hear spaced within these demands

not just the complete set of positive claims (which in the 21st century remain those that have always been at the top of any feminist agenda, namely, the right to abortion, to equal pay for equal work, the right to fight, and so forth). In this catalogue of positive rights, we must also signify the rights of what is absent from these claims, namely, those of what is "not" — the right, in other words, not just of women to have control over their own bodies, but also the right of the unborn not to be born; the right not only have one's work recognized and compensated in the same way as men, but also the right not to participate in work and the capitalist machinery *tout court*; the right not just to bear arms like men, but also the right not to kill, etc. etc.

How might these "rights of the not-all" be represented in today's CMB Symbolic? Here the WaPo's creative department might have unconsciously shown the way. For perhaps we have in fact been writing the gender symbol for Woman wrong all these years. Rotating the ♀ a quarter turn to the right in the manner of the male symbol ♂, the "flacid dong" transforms into an x supporting a circle.

Figure 1

What would it mean to read Woman as "x to the power of zero"? It means that, possessing no signifier of her own in the Symbolic, Woman is free to occupy any signifier (x). But the *feminine* universal she solicits — what, in the Thinkstock image, was generically titled "Large crowd of people in a circle" — subjects this (x) to an exponential power, a power of O. And the peculiarity of this exponential power is that any number raised to the power of zero will always result in a One, a result that, generated from a different operation than the phallic count-as-One of the Symbolic, carries the potential to knot the social bond in another way.[18]

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1   "Large crowd of people moving toward the center" http://www.think stockphotos.com.au/image/stock-photo-large-crowd-of-people-moving-toward-the/473511944/popup?sq=people%20crowd%20circle/f=CPIHVX/p=2/s=DynamicRank&countrycode=AUS

2   Russell Goldman, "Here's a List of 58 Gender Options for Facebook Users" http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2014/02/heres-a-list-of-58-gender-options-for-facebook-users/ [accessed 28 January, 2017].

3   Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Refashioning Jouissance for the Age of the Imaginary," *Filozofski vestnik* 37.2 (2016): 167-199.

4   See her *The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy* (London: Routledge, 1991).

5   MacCannell, 183.

6   MacCannell, 181.

7   Except, as she also points out, for the One who rules. MacCannell cites Freud in *Group Psychology*: "Do not let us forget, however, that the demand for equality in a group applies only to its members and not to the leader. All the members must be equal to one another, but they all want to be ruled by one person" (GP 121).

8   MacCannell, 180, 181.

9   Jonathan Redmond, "Contemporary perspectives on Lacanian theories of psychosis", *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): 1-15.

10   See Lacan's comment that "there is nothing that more closely resembles a neurotic symptomatology than a prepsychotic symptomatology". *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III, The Psychoses 1955-1956* (New York: Norton, 1993) 191.

11   Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 192-3.

12   Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis", *Ecrits: the first Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Heloise Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: Norton), 465-6.

13   Alain Badiou, "Mark and Lack," in *Concept and Form*, Volume 1, ed. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (London: Verso, 2012) 187.

14   Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 96.

15   Jacqueline Rose, "Donald Trump's victory is a disaster for modern masculinity", *The Guardian* 16 November, 2016. [https://www.theguardian. com/commentisfree/2016/nov/15/trump-disaster-modern-masculinity-sexual-nostalgian-oppressive-men-women](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/15/trump-disaster-modern-masculinity-sexual-nostalgian-oppressive-men-women) [accessed January 16, 2017].

16   See "Ten Days After: Harassment and Intimidation in the Aftermath of the Election", *Southern Poverty Law Center,* November 29, 2016 https://www.splcenter.org/20161129/ten-days-after-harassment-and-intimidation-aftermath-election#antiwoman [accessed 20 January, 2017]. See also Richard Marchant, "Von Keyserling, RTM member, arrested on criminal charge", *Greenwich Time* 12 January, 2017. http://www.greenwichtime.com/policereports/article/Von-Keyserling-RTM-member-arrested-on-criminal-10852811.php [Accessed January 16, 2017].

17   Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 205.

18   For the mathematical explanation of zero's unique exponential power, see for example *Wolfram Mathworld* http://mathworld.wolfram.com/Power.html [accessed 28 January, 2017].

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