

Comments on three encounters between feminism and the sexual non- relation

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The temporality of contemporary feminist movements is particular. It is not stated in linear continuity. Rather, we are talking about successive waves that make the history of feminisms. The current times, according to some authors, would coincide with a fourth wave (1). This particular juncture between discourses deserves to be examined. A renewal of feminist discourse is occurring, out of three movements developing across the western world. First, the denunciation of femicide; second, the reopening of the debate on rape by the MeToo movement; and, finally, in academia with those concerned with LGBT communities and the importance of the Trans movement, the insistence on inclusive language in the written form. The denunciation of femicide is foremost, and the question arises how these various movements are articulated, and whether there is a causal relationship between them. They converge however, to produce a new urgency, that of a debate, beyond the difference between the sexes, on the question of what is woman (2).

What does violence against women and femicide testify to?

Let us remember that it was in Latin America, Mexico and Argentina, at the beginning of the 2010s, that the denunciation of femicide first started. "On January 6th 2011, the Mexican poet Susana Chávez, who had fought relentlessly against femicides [...], was found mutilated and murdered in Ciudad Juárez, a city sadly famous for the numerous murders of women that have been committed there since 1993 and to which Roberto Bolaño's novel 2666 refers. [...] In 2015, the murder of Chiara Páez, a 14 year old teenager from Argentina three months pregnant, triggered demonstrations with the slogan "Ni Una Menos," "Not One [Woman] Less," bringing together more than 300,000 people across the country" (3). Today the wave of condemnation has reached Europe, particularly Spain and France. The September 2019 protests in Madrid illustrate this; both rape and murder are denounced with clear slogans: "They are killing us," "There is no justification," "Women's lives matter." What is characteristic of the Spanish situation since 2004 however, is that Spain has passed "the first law in Europe against violence against women, providing free legal assistance and special tribunals for victims. At the end of 2017, members of parliament adopted, also unanimously, further measures intended to strengthen this law" (4). Still, "1,017 women have been killed in Spain by their partners or ex-partners since the official record of these murders began in 2003. Since the beginning of the year, 42 women have been killed in the country from domestic violence, including 19 this summer, according to figures from the Internal Affairs Ministry." Despite these strengthened legislative measures, the violence has not stopped.

In France, legislation is underway, following an extensive debate led by Marlène Schiappa, State Secretary for equality between women and men. This "summit on domestic violence" concluded on 29 October 2019 and made public 60 proposals which led to government measures released this year on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (5).

The ongoing violence against women's bodies resonates particularly with Lacan's saying that men do not know what to do with a woman's body. "There's only one thing he [a man] literally doesn't know what to do with [...] and that's a woman. There's nothing he knows less what to do with than a woman. Ask yourself. What is more awkward (*embarrassant*) for a man than a woman's body? So much so that Plato even noticed it. He noted it in his Symposium where he recounts at the mythical level – myths are very useful, even indispensable – that they made only one body – and what's most annoying is that that's never been seen again. Freud, falling into the same trap, tells us that Eros is a tendency towards the One. And that's precisely the whole question – that the real is actually two, and from that it's perfectly clear that the real, as I put it, is precisely the impossible. Namely the impossibility of that which would give a meaning to the relation called sexual." (6) The writer Patricia Highsmith, who gave us classics like *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, being very talented and tormented herself, testifies in her own way in her soon-to-be-published diaries: "The American male doesn't know what to do with a girl once he has her. He is not really depressed or inhibited by inherited or environmentally conceived Puritan restraints: he simply has no goal within the sexual situation." (7)

Femicide testifies that in the face of the enigma of sex, a demand for jouissance with a woman's body can be absolutized [*s'absolutiser*] without limits. In "Kant with Sade," Lacan objects to the example given by Kant, who relies heavily on the Law to protect women: "Suppose someone alleges that his lustful inclination is quite irresistible to him when he encounters the favoured object and the opportunity. [Ask him] whether if in front of the house where he finds this opportunity a gallows were erected on which he would be strung up immediately after gratifying his lust, he would not then conquer his inclination?" (8) Lacan objects that "a partisan of passion [...] would make trouble for Kant by forcing him to recognize that no occasion precipitates certain people more surely towards their goal than one that involves defiance of or even contempt for the gallows [...]. Desire, what is called desire, suffices to make life meaningless if it turns someone into a coward" (9). The man of desire is the one who refuses to lose what makes his desire the very meaning of his life. Lacan quotes in Latin Juvenal's maxim that the desiring man is the one who refuses "to destroy the reasons for living for the sake of life." If we add to this the man of jouissance, the sadistic pervert, as Jacques-Alain Miller did in a commentary on the "Ethics of psychoanalysis," then we see how the pervert may indeed stop at nothing to accomplish his goal and sadistically kill a woman (10). In the case of more common feminicides, it is striking to see that men who kill do it in spite of the reminders of the Law, the police and judicial prohibitions, and often following numerous incidents. Repetition of an offence is also very common. Ordinary violence is testimony to the fact that the only thing a male subject tends to do is to mark the body of the loved/hated one. "The Other, when all is said and done [...], is the body [...] that is made for inscribing something on it that is called a mark [...]. It has always been done, [...] the very beginning of the gesture of love is always, a little bit, to more or less initiate this gesture" (11). It ranges from tickling to violent marking. One must also add to feminicides, the acid that is used to mark the body, disfiguring it. In femicide, we could speak of an ordinary absolutization of jouissance, which veils the hole of the sexual non-relation.

Inclusive writing and feminization of speech

Another way of veiling the hole of the sexual non-relation isn't on the side of jouissance and its absolute condition. It relies on the signifier's capacity to neutralize differences, sexual difference among others. In the United States particularly, academic discourse has vehemently sought to remove hate speech from discourse. Yet University students don't feel happier or more connected with one another. The various communities to which they belong operate as identity refuges. Ultimately, the feeling of loneliness and rejection among students has never been greater. Suicide rates have increased dramatically among adolescents since 2011-2012 (+ 25% for boys and + 70% for girls) (12).

Many campuses have recently declared their intention to combat "microaggressions," further fueling the debate around the need to consider everyone, identity politics and freedom of expression. Microaggression defines the subtle injuries that affect individuals exposed to some form of discrimination through language. These phenomena particularly affect minorities by referring them back to their otherness. The task of political correctness is therefore endless. Having tried to address the broad categories of discourses, we are now attempting to go further and clear away the harmful effects of speech. The fight against microaggressions started in New York, of course, and at Columbia in particular. A professor named Derald Wing Sue, a son of Chinese immigrants, raised the issue of microaggressions in his 2010 *Microaggressions in Everyday Life. Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. He defines microaggressions as insults or attitudes, "intentional or not," that "communicate hostile or disrespectful messages targeting people on the sole basis of their belonging to a marginalized group." The spreading of the range of microaggressions which, for some, seems justified and promising is, for others, encouraging excess, which tends to add further risks of segregation amongst communities (13). From the position of the victim [*la position victimaire*], some see a growth in antagonisms between social groups and in hypersensitivity to verbal aggression. A book published in July 2018, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (14), is construed as a wish for refuge, for a bubble even, due to the coddling or "pampering" young people are said to have been the recipients of since childhood. Both authors, who do not hide their disapproval of the concept of microaggression, describe the excesses of the *safety culture* on campuses. They blame the role of social networks in facilitating hate messages and personal attacks.

The recourse to inclusive writing and the debates it raises form part of the desire to address aggression between genders. In Argentina the movement has now taken root not only within the University, but also in its anteroom, the Carlos-Pellegrini high school: "Natalia Mira, vice-president of the student center of the Carlos-Pellegrini high school, one of the most prestigious in the capital, was interviewed on television. An interview that has gone viral, not for its content, but for its form. "*Hay pocas diputades que estan indecises*" [*Few members of parliament are undecided/peu de député.e.s sont indécis.e.s*"], she said with disconcerting ease, as was her ensuing three-minute speech" (15) Professors from San Martin University (UNSAM) in Buenos Aires may also be asked by certain groups of students to speak only of the "*Gran Otre*," neutralizing the masculine of *Gran Otro*, big Other.

The push for inclusive writing follows what J.-A. Miller had noticed in the movement for the feminization of language endorsed by American feminist discourse.

You know that today in some Bibles one no longer says of God *that he wanted that...*; instead one switches every other paragraph from *he wanted* to *she wanted*. It has gone quite far inasmuch as it now erases from language the privileging of the masculine gender. In the same vein, one objects to the use of the word *mankind* in which the word *man* designates both genders, the species. A feminist academic, with strong gay support, is working to drive the word *mankind* out of the American vocabulary and replace it with a newly created word that is sufficiently devirilized to be able to designate both men and women. I am not assigning blame to this, I am reconsidering a certain amount of contemporary phenomena in line with what Kojève tells us. Kojève's thesis - the "*virile*," *man, no longer exists* - can be used to interpret contemporary phenomena. We can just as easily consider it in the light of Lacan's statement "Woman does not exist." (16)

Indeed, beyond microaggressions against identities, the hypothesis of the discourse of hysteria, one of the names of feminist discourse as such, is to maintain the universal of the feminine. The inclusion of inclusive writing comes at this price. It is based on the fact that signifiers as such can erase sexual difference. In this sense, it comes to mask in a new way the non-writing of the sexual relation, by playing inclusively on gender, which Lacan will class as secondary sexual characteristics. "Assuredly, what appears on bodies in the enigmatic form of sexual characteristics - which are merely secondary - makes sexed beings. No doubt. But being is the jouissance of the body as such, that is, as asexual, because what is known as sexual jouissance is marked and dominated by the impossibility of establishing, as such, anywhere in the enunciable, the only One that interests us, the One of the relation "sexual relationship" [*rapport sexuel*]" (17). He adds: "Don't talk to me about women's secondary sexual characteristics because, barring some sort of radical change, it is those of the mother that take precedence in her. Nothing distinguishes woman as a sexed being other than her sexual organ [*sexe*]." The radical nature of Lacan's definition of sex must be appreciated in all its glory in order to participate in the great debate on what woman is that some feminists are calling for. To say that it is only on the side of women that sex comes to the speaking being is to get away from the identification of the libido with the phallus, and to assert that sex as such is nothing more than the maintaining of the gap between the jouissance obtained by a woman, her ex-sistence, and the impossibility of defining the essence of the feminine, Woman [*La femme*]. From this perspective the sexed being comes to be defined as a performance, in a very different sense from that of Judith Butler: "The sexed being is only authorized by him/herself [...] and by some others" (18). No secondary sexual characteristic can seal the question of this "authorization," any more than can the possession of the phallus, which is nothing more than the wrong answer to the question of sex posed in these terms. Phallic jouissance becomes the obstacle to what would be the jouissance of the sexed body of a woman: "I will go a little further - Phallic jouissance is the obstacle owing to which man does not come [*n'arrive pas*], I would say, to enjoy woman's body, precisely because what he enjoys is the jouissance of the organ." (19)

Contemporary feminist movements interlaced together, knot the same question on the definition of what woman is. The debate could gain clarity by starting to consider what J.-A. Miller named the *partner-symptom*, which allows a careful separation of what takes place at the level of the signifier and what takes place at the level of jouissance.

The MeToo movement and the feminism of the seventies

The MeToo movement that was launched by an article is a hashtag that went viral on social media in October 2017 exposing sexual assault and harassment, specifically in the workplace. It was launched by the actress and television producer Alyssa Milano, herself a woman of power, who encouraged women to share their experiences on Twitter. Her message was timely, and went on to be shared more than 12 million times in the space of 24 hours. She did it following the publication of a lengthy investigation into the actions of American producer Harvey Weinstein, of whom she herself had been a victim. This hashtag takes its title from the MeToo campaign, launched in 2007 by African-American activist Tarana Burke, to denounce sexual violence against women belonging to “noticeable [visible] minorities.” The article that ultimately triggered the scandal was written by Ronan Farrow, Woody Allen and Mia Farrow’s son, who had already sued Woody Allen in the courts. It was published in the *New Yorker* in October 2017. The journalist (along with New York Times reporters Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, who together were the first to publish an investigation on Harvey Weinstein) received the Pulitzer Prize in the category of “public-service journalism.” The #MeToo movement turned the debate on the issue of rape on its head as American feminists had set its terms in the 1970s, in particular Germaine Greer the Australian feminist, with her bestseller *The Female Eunuch*, published in 1970. It is now considered to be the start of second-wave feminism. In January 2018, almost fifty years later, she [Greer] gave an interview to an Australian daily newspaper wherein she distanced herself from what she called the #MeToo “business,” a movement she found to be “whinging.” She believed it would not work because “all the powerful men who are now in all sorts of trouble are already briefing their lawyers. It’s going to be the OJ Simpson trial all over again in spades, it will go on and on. [...] And I’m really concerned that the women who have given testimony now will be taken to pieces, because power is power, ultimately, and the people protesting are people who don’t have power.” (20) Finally, she regrets that this movement does not speak to women of minority groups who have ordinary jobs. In the same year, 2018, she published a book, *On Rape* (21), which outlines her views on ordinary rape, as distinct from violent rape. Speaking at the Hay Literary Festival prior to its publication, she speaks of ordinary rape not as violent, but as “lazy, careless and insensitive.” These remarks were widely commented on and considered hurtful and outdated. Some pointed out that they were also demonstrating her *transphobia* when she made the statement that “it was not enough to cut off one’s sex and put on a skirt to become a real woman.” The book itself is more nuanced than the author’s cookie-cutter remarks. Such a well-known feminist figure as Mary Beard has published a more measured appreciation of G. Greer’s suggestions for the new criminalization of rape that she proposes (22). She would like to see more convictions and says that a lesser crime than rape should qualify as “ordinary rape.” It is a debate that has all its currency in Spain where the qualifying of simple “sexual abuse” has been upheld by judges for particularly cruel acts: a court in Barcelona has convicted five men of “sexual abuse” found guilty of forced penetration and fellatio, under the influence of drug and alcohol, on a 14-year-old teenager. “Another shameful sentence of patriarchal justice” denounced the mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, on Twitter (23).

The difference in discourse between old feminism and the MeToo movement is, however, perfectly clear. As Jean-Claude Milner put it, the movement makes it clear that in Hollywood circles rape was the rule not the exception, and that this is linked to the very structure of the sexual act. The MeToo hashtag in its very name has limitless aggregative logic [*logique aggregative*]. It implies “a mechanism of indefinite addition” (24). J.-C. Milner notes that this is consonant with the American civilization program which is to tame the savage, especially sexual savagery, without stopping at the European program. For Europeans, what “had begun with Quattrocento Humanism had reached its peak at the beginning of the twentieth century. Admittedly, the two world wars destroyed most of its achievements. Yet nothing essential needed to be added to the model itself, especially in sexual matters. The task was merely to restore what had been lost.” (25) For Americans, the program is a *work in progress* and the MeToo movement is an opportunity to make a fresh start and to mark a break with academic feminism. It is no longer a question of identity microaggressions, but of the macroaggression that is coitus as rape: “According to MeToo, the decisive battlefield was no longer the campus; it was, rather, public opinion. The utility of clever articles and brilliant books belonged to the past. Mass media and social networks were more important. The question of coitus needed to be raised bluntly; in order to do that, uneducated lesser celebrities of the Internet were preferable to the icons of *Women’s Studies*.” (26) J.-C. Milner goes so far as to say that the leap out of the academic discourse of the movement renews the debate on the status of the sexual relation.

Lacan starts from the same point as Kant. In the sexual non-relation, two remains two. This is Kant’s observation for whom the *copula carnalis* implies “the use of their sexual attributes by each other.” (27) But then a major problem arises. Each partner, contrary to ethical principles, treats the other as a thing, as a means to jouissance. The solution, for Kant, lies in the contract, assuming explicit consent, which in itself confirms this lack in ethics. This contract is the “legal consequence of our obligation not to engage in a sexual liaison other than through the mediation of reciprocal possession of persons.” The Scandinavian countries, notes J.-C. Milner, have gone far, and continue to explore in their legislation the need for explicit contractual consent in any relationship for sexual purposes. In the United States the explicit concern was less emphasized, but the theory of mutual consent was supposed to determine sexual relations between adults and to resolve power struggles between partners; “The Weinstein case blew up these beliefs ... relationships were always based on inequality.” (28)

On this point, psychoanalysis separates itself from both the contractual solution and the solution of an ever-present power struggle. It makes sexual coupling, in whatever form it takes, the knotting of jouissance that comes in the place of what creates an impasse at the level of signifiers. It will always do so, irrespective of any subtle inclusions that we may choose to dangle before it. From this double reading, both at the level of signifiers and at that of the sexual, Lacan makes of the impasse a solution. This is what J.-A. Miller has conceptualized in the partner-symptom. It offers two ways of reading the relation that is not.

Translated by Mia Lalanne

1 : Bourlet E., "Le féminisme est révolutionnaire ou il n'est pas", à propos de Koechlin A., *La Révolution féministe*, Paris, Amsterdam, 2019

2 : Beard M., "The Greer Method", *London Review of Books*, vol. 41, 24 October 2019, pp. 12-14.

3 : Cf. Bourlet E., "Le féminisme est révolutionnaire ou il n'est pas", *op. cit.*

4 : "En Espagne, des milliers de personnes manifestent contre les violences faites aux femmes", *Le Monde* avec AFP, 21 septembre 2019, available [here](#).

5 : Bouchez Y. & Cordier S., "Soixante propositions pour lutter contre les violences conjugales", *Le Monde*, 28 octobre 2019, disponible [ici](#).

6 : Lacan J., "The Lacanian Phenomenon", *The Lacanian Review* no. 9 (Spring 2020), p. 31.

7 : Alter A., « Patricia Highsmith's diaries to see print », *New York Times*, International edition, 31 octobre 2019.

8 : Kant I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, in his *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 163; quoted by Lacan in "Kant with Sade" (1962), *Écrits*, New York, Norton, 2006, p. 659.

9 : Lacan J., « Kant avec Sade », *op. cit.*, p. 782. (p. 660 in the English)

10 : Cf. Miller J.-A., « *La Ética del psicoanálisis* », Inaugural lecture of the Madrid Seminar of the Freudian Field, 10 December 1988, published in *Introducción a la clínica Lacaniana. Conferencias en España*, Barcelone, ELP-RBA, 2006, reprinted in *El Escabel de la Plata, n° 1*, EOL Sección La Plata, 2018, p. 37.

11 : Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIV, The Logic of Fantasy (1966-1967)*, lesson of 10 May 1967, unpublished.

12 : Lesnes C., « Sur les campus américains, la dénonciation des "microagressions" racistes fait débat », *Le Monde*, 29 November 2018.

13 : Cf. Lesnes C., « Contre les microagressions, une illégitime défense ? », *Le Monde*, 1 December 2018, available [here](#).

14 : Lukianoff G. & Haidt J., *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Penguin press, 2018.

15 : Montoya A., « Quand je dis "todos", je me corrige tout de suite" : le langage inclusif prend racine en Argentine », *Le Monde*, 10 October 2019.

16 : Miller J.-A., « Bonjour sagesse », *La Cause du désir*, n° 95, April 2017, p. 85.

17 : Lacan J., *Encore*, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge (1972-1973), Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, Translated by Bruce Fink, New York, Norton, 1998, p. 6.

18 : Lacan J., *Le Séminaire*, livre XXI, « Les non-dupes errent », leçon du 9 avril 1974, inédit

19 : Lacan J., *Encore*, op. cit., p. 7.

20 : Flood A., « Germaine Greer criticises “Whingeing” #MeToo movement », *The Guardian*, 23 janvier 2018, available [here](#).

21 : Greer G., *On Rape*, Melbourne University Press, 2018.

22 : Cf. Beard M., « The Greer Method », *London Review of Books*, 24 October 2019, available [here](#).

23 : Morel S., « Nouvelle polémique sur le statut juridique du viol en Espagne », *Le Monde*, 3-4 November 2019.

24 : Milner J.-C., « Reflections on the Me Too Movement and its Philosophy », *Problemi International*, vol. 3, n° 3, 2019, p. 65.

25 : *Ibid.*, p. 66.

26 : *Ibid.*, p. 67.

27 : Kant I., *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), “The Universal Doctrine of Right”, Part I, §27, in his *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 429.

28 : Milner J.-C., « Reflections... », op. cit., p. 74.