

# Digital Feminisms and the Split Subject: Short-circuits through Lacan's Four Discourses

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**Abstract:** *This paper takes the emergent field of digital feminisms as a case for thinking about the ways in which Jacques Lacan's theory of the four discourses – that of the master, hysteric, university, and analyst – can contribute to our understanding of the subject in digitally mediated communications. Lacan's theory is useful in articulating the relationship between the feminist subject, knowledge production, and the modes of enjoyment that structure speech particularly where feminist discourses are animated in digital communications. As a protest discourse, feminist discourse has been equated with the productive discourse of the hysteric, but once institutionalized, I argue, it takes on the structure of the university discourse, bypassing the critical phase of the analyst. Digital feminisms offer a particularly reflective case for understanding this structural shift as, with no gatekeepers, nothing impedes the personal becoming political in digitally mediated spaces. Here, the structure of feminist discourses is amplified, exposing the dynamic affects in different discursive positions that obfuscate communication and make 'true dialogue' problematic. Drawing on Lacan's theory of the four discourses, I map some of these affects as digital feminist discourses shift into the position of knowledge (what Lacan calls  $S_2$ ), where they are divided – cut off from their own experience and enjoyment – and positioned to address the jouissance of the Other. In this, I hope to show how Lacan's theory of discourse offers a means of understanding the frustrations felt in much digitally mediated communication.*

**Keywords:** *digital feminisms, the subject, Lacan, discourse of the hysteric, discourse of the university, jouissance, knowledge, affect*

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## 1. Introduction

This paper offers a theoretical consideration of the ways in which we might understand digital feminist discursive practices through Jacques Lacan's theory of the four discourses articulated in seminar XVII (2007). Within Lacan's theory of the four discourses – that of the master, hysteric, university, and analyst – feminist discourse has traditionally been equated with that of the hysteric (Bracher, 2006) for, as I elaborate in this paper, it is a 'protest' discourse associated with social, political, and epistemological change. This protest takes on many forms, from every-day rejections of social norms, to more theoretical rejections of the language used to create those norms. The work of *écriture féminine* is perhaps the most literal example in that it identifies with hysterical speech where it is perceived to be the only legitimate form of female discourse within phallogentric cultures, and mobilizes this discourse of protest to articulate a radical woman's political *aesthetic* (Dane, 1994: 241). In protesting the status-quo, feminist discourse (as with hysterical discourse) speaks an epistemic desire: it generates a desire for knowledge. Yet even in its early association with hysterical discourse – seen by many as a proto-feminist protest (Showalter, 1987) – feminist discourse has drawn on personal, subjective experience to protest the status quo. Drawing on Lacan's theory of discourse, I show how the affective quality of this knowledge (and aesthetic) production creates counter-productive conflicts *within* feminist discourses that are exacerbated in digitally mediated spaces.

Digital technologies have provided a particularly useful stage for feminist protest, where platforms like Twitter can aggregate isolated voices into collective political movements. An emerging field of scholarship engaged in the study of what I broadly call 'digital feminisms' canvases a variety of feminist discourses and practices that use digitally mediated platforms and services to mobilize feminist agendas, protest, and praxis. With some speculating that the affordances of digital media technologies have generated a fourth "wave" of feminism (Phillips & Cree, 2014: 938) that challenges mainstream media representations of a *post-feminist* era (Gill, 2016: 613), this field of scholarship has focused on organized "hashtag" feminisms (Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2014) and networked communities in the form of blogs, as well as activist and pedagogical websites, YouTube channels, tumblrs and memes (for example, Baer, 2016; Fotopoulou, 2016; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Pruchniewska, 2016; Scharff,

Smith-Prei, and Stehle, 2016; Seidman, 2013; Taylor, 2011; Thrift, 2014; Vivienne, 2016). Included in these forms of digital feminisms are moments when feminist discourse is invoked (and re-distributed) in digitally mediated spaces to express feminist knowledge and assert feminist identities in ways that may or may not be organized or *intended* forms of feminist praxis or pedagogy (see, for example, Dobson, 2015; Keller, 2016; Thelandersson, 2014). Indeed, within the age of media convergence it can be difficult to separate digital feminist discourses – activism, protest, and praxis – from offline discourses given that digital platforms and services allow for the promotion, sharing, and pedagogic redistribution of some of these offline (or analogue) activities. Despite their intention or origin, then, digital feminisms share common characteristics with the discourses and praxis of non-digital feminisms, such as disparities in the production of feminist knowledge with considerable debate over their authenticity and definitional positions. Such characteristics are enhanced, however, through digital technologies, platforms, and services because these technologies give voice to disparate discourses and agendas, and allow them to be widely shared and distributed. Nowhere is this more evident than in the contrasting tumblrs’ “Who Needs Feminism?” and “Women Against Feminism”, where privileged *and* marginal voices are mobilized into conflicting forms of protest. Indeed, the proliferation of feminist discourses in digitally mediated spaces sees the blend of amateur, professional, and celebrity voices create and imagine feminism for the new millennium with a contrariness indicative of the post-feminist era (see Horbury, 2015).

Yet where digital technologies promise the ability to subvert the political and economic hierarchies of media industries, the resulting frustrations in digital feminist communication often seem inexplicable. While tentatively celebrating the revolutionary possibilities of the digital sphere (to overcome barriers of distance, difference, time, generation, knowledge, economics, and power in the production of feminist discourse) feminist scholarship is equally cautious in detailing the emerging threats to this utopia (see, for example, Baer, 2016; Cole, 2015; Dobson, 2015; Keller, 2016; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Pruchniewska, 2016; Thelandersson, 2014; Vivienne, 2016). The tenor of this scholarship nevertheless tacitly invokes both user and producer of digitally mediated culture as a fantasy of Enlightenment thinking, where digital feminists are perceived to be the perfect producers who challenge the hierarchies of traditional media

industries. Undermining this fantasy of a rational subject of discourse, however, is the production of radically inassimilable ideas denoted in the rise of “toxic Twitter wars” and feminist in-fighting over the authenticity and legitimacy of feminist knowledge (see Thelandersson, 2014). The provocation of trolls within digital feminist communities contributes to this discord and, I suggest, reveals the particular composition of feminist knowledge in this space.<sup>2</sup> For where trolls contest the legitimacy of feminist knowledge (for amusement or malicious enjoyment), this can, as Ganzer observes, *replicate* feminist in-fighting (2014), where it exposes the role of affect in knowledge, discourse, and communication, as I explore in this paper.

Drawing on a variety of digital feminist discursive practices that are illustrative rather than exhaustive, I sketch some observations regarding the effects of these practices where they shift from the ‘productive’ discourse of the hysteric to that of the university in the construction of an ideal feminist identity online. In particular, I introduce Lacan’s theory of discourse to explore the impact of this shift on the productive character of digital feminisms as well as the experience of subjects occupying this position. In addition to the institutionalization of feminisms within the academy, the sheer volume of production afforded by digital technology – and the erosion of distinctions between amateur, professional, academic and celebrity voices – brings a symbolic weight to feminist knowledge production in digitally mediated spaces where I argue, it takes on the status of the ‘big Other,’ or  $S_2$  in Lacan’s matheme. Identification with it demonstrates, I suggest, the way in which feminism becomes a signifier constituting onscreen identity; it functions to support idiosyncratic subjects, offering a consistency via the guarantee of the big Other in  $S_2$ . Challenges to this signifier then, effectively act as a challenge to the subject’s stability: as an attack on the screen that supports the fantasy of the subject’s rational, symbolic existence, especially where the attack addresses feminist knowledge. Moreover, where feminist knowledge-as- $S_2$  becomes the ideal-ego of the agent’s online identity, the agent of this structure occupies the discourse of the university in Lacan’s schema, a split subject, cut-off from the subjective truth of their experience. The split subject speaks from the position of feminist knowledge to address the other who now occupies the position of object  $a$  in the matheme – what is lost

<sup>2</sup> I take Jonathan Bishop’s definition of trolls as agents who deliberately antagonize other individuals or communities online with the aim of drawing them into a futile debate, either anonymously for personal (sadistic) pleasure, or publically in the spirit of communal humour (2014: 8–10).

to the subject, *jouissance*. Here, the agent of digital politics can be caught in the screen of the big Other, which alienates them from the truth of their own experience and where *jouissance* appears in the form of the Other's enjoyment.

## 1.2. Why Psychoanalysis?

To introduce psychoanalysis to the topic of digital feminisms may appear especially problematic, for though the analysis of women in various media spaces was initially informed by the psychoanalytic ideas taken up in second wave feminisms, Judith Butler's epistemic turn in *Gender Trouble* (2008) has reoriented this scholarship away from such engagements (see Horbury, 2015: 45). This leaves the field, as Peter Dahlgren has observed (2013), of media and communication studies more generally, with a subject assumed as a product of the Enlightenment: a rational being whose flexible and contingent persona is nevertheless *not* informed by any unconscious desires, conflicts, or fantasies. This assumption is incredibly problematic for feminist media studies, where, as I have argued elsewhere (Horbury, 2015: 41), the subject of this scholarship – texts for women and the audiences for them – over time become informed by the ideas of feminist scholarship. Here, the “triangular network of influence that has formed between critical feminist discourses, public cultural commentary, and the dramatization of women in media texts” can no longer be untangled or imagined outside of their relationship with one another (Horbury, 2015: 8). Where feminism is popularised in cultural production it is then absorbed back into feminist analysis and integrated into new feminist discourses, perhaps explaining, as Gill notes (2016), the confusing reemergence of feminist ideas in mainstream media alongside post-feminist sensibilities. Moving into the digital sphere only increases this triangular relationship as the line between textual user and producer becomes blurred, as does the line between academic and amateur production of feminist knowledge – albeit a blurring of an already permeable boundary. Nevertheless, any study of communication must take into account the subject of that communicative act – be it the producer or receiver of that act – and, as Marshall Alcorn succinctly puts it, “[t]o understand speech, as opposed to language, one must understand what it means to be a subject” (1994: 23). This is not to say that psychoanalytic thought offers a complete solution to the study of communication; rather, it constitutes a significant per-

spective that is absent from many efforts to theorize the subject of communicative praxis.

While psychoanalytic ideas have been entertained in media and communication studies, the scepticism with which they are treated and largely circumvented in the classroom is perhaps, as Roger Silverstone suggests, because “the shift from clinical theory and practice to cultural critique is fraught with obfuscation and the too-easy elision, often, of the particular and the general, as well as the arbitrariness (masked as theory) of interpretation and analysis” (1999: 11). Due to the complexly nuanced positions produced in the last sixty years of feminism in the West, what I sketch here may appear similarly limited. It is difficult to speak of or attempt to analyse – let alone theorize – feminist discourses in a general sense without appearing to reductively overlook important differences in theory and praxis, and I do not want to suggest that all utterances made by feminists fall into my analysis. I want to introduce Lacan’s work on the subject’s discourse, however, to consider the unconscious dimensions of (some) digital feminist discourses in the hope that these insights might be useful in understanding the ways in which digital communications more generally can be both productive and unproductive when the speaker inhabits or speaks from differently motivated subject positions.

## 2. The Four Discourses

Lacan’s seminar XVII (1969-1970) develops a formula for thinking about the subject and their relation to discourse that “goes much further than actual utterances” (2007: 13) to try and understand the relationship between the subject and language (symbolic meaning and the world of shared knowledge), between the subject and their unconscious and, consequently, between the subject and their unique mode of (unconscious) enjoyment. Notably, Lacan’s articulation of the four discourses is framed within his critique of science (Themi, 2014: 108) where it illuminates the limits of Enlightenment thinking that informs both feminist discourses and much media and communication theory. Both discourses assume, at the very least, that a subject (of media texts and producers of texts) is cognizant of their enjoyment and rationally invested in communication. Yet, paraphrasing Lacan, Susan Barnard reminds us that, as “knowledge and *jouissance* are inextricably” linked even in “ideal communication (e.g., a ‘complete’ text or an ‘entire’ oeuvre), interpretation confronts the

limits constituted by the particularity of the subject’s *jouissance* – the way in which a given subject ‘gets off’ on (in this case) a text” (2002: 3). Lacan’s understanding of the ways in which particular subject positions enjoy or “gets off” on different types of texts – though seemingly an “obvious point that readers come to any text with very different interests, motivations, and strategies of reading” (Barnard, 2002: 3) – is particularly useful in contemplating digital feminist discourses because feminist discourses produce both a field of discursive *knowledge* that one may be drawn to on the basis of a certain enjoyment and, when this knowledge is identified with, a speaking *position* related to a particular mode of enjoyment. The modes of enjoyment implicated in this speaking position offer an insight, I suggest, into the conflicts produced in digital feminist discourses.

In articulating something of the relationship between the subject and language – knowledge, the unconscious, and modes of enjoyment – Lacan’s work also formulates something of “the social bonds we form with each other” (Themi, 2014: 108). The four discourses are thus useful because, as Mark Bracher puts it, they “offer the means, respectively, of understanding four key social phenomena” that correlate to the four positions of the university, master, hysteric, and analyst: that of “educating, governing, protesting, and revolutionizing” (1994b: 107). These four positions and phenomena have the effect of “mobilizing” “ordering” and “repressing”, in turn, “four key psychological factors – knowledge/belief, values/ideals, self-division/alienation, and *jouissance*/enjoyment” (Bracher, 1994b: 109). Lacan uses a “*matheme*” to represent the four discourses (see Figure 1), while the underlying schema of each discourse – the functions of each position regardless of which discourse is in play – are outlined in Figure 2.

Discourse of the master	Discourse of the university	Discourse of the hysteric	Discourse of the analyst
$S_1 \rightarrow S_2$	$S_2 \rightarrow a$	$\$ \rightarrow S_1$	$a \rightarrow \$$
<hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0; margin-right: 10px;"/>	<hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0; margin-right: 10px;"/>	<hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0; margin-right: 10px;"/>	<hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0; margin-right: 10px;"/>
$\$ \quad a$	$S_1 \quad \$$	$a \quad S_2$	$S_2 \quad S_1$

Figure 1: *The four discourses* (Lacan, 2007: 69)

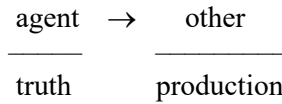


Figure 2: *The formula of discourse* (Lacan, 1999: 17)

In the top left position is the operative “agent” of the discourse (Lacan, 2007: 169), which, in the master’s discourse is identified as  $S_1$  (see Figure 1), the signifier that stands in for the subject who has entered into language and the symbolic realm of meaning (the Symbolic in Lacan’s tripartite register of experience, Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic). Tim Themi notes that while this agent might be likened to the subject’s “conscious mind or ego” (2014: 109), Lacan also refers to this position as a site of *desire* (see Figure 4), and thus denotes the operative function of the unconscious in the agent’s actions and discourse for, in Lacan’s terms, “the agent” is “someone who is *caused* to act” (2007: 169: my emphasis). Beneath the agent, or as Lacan puts it, “beneath the bar” that separates what is known from what is unknown to the subject, is the site of truth, that which is relinquished upon entering into language and the Symbolic order of symbolization that “defines” one “as a subject” (see Themi, 2014: 109). In other words, though the subject is realized through a signifier ( $S_1$ ) that “represents a subject, and nothing but a subject, for another signifier” (Lacan, 2007: 47–8), it is incomplete: the signifier is not reducible to the “subject of knowledge” because “there is something underneath” (Lacan, 2007: 48). This something underneath, Themi notes, is not necessarily something the agent is aware of (2014: 109) but, significantly for feminist discourses (as I will elaborate later) it constitutes “sexual knowledge” or knowledge of the drives (Lacan 2007: 93) – in Freudian terms id or libido. This “truth” beneath the bar of the agent in the bottom left position (see Figure 2) is what the subject knows without knowing (Lacan 2007: 93) and denotes the subject “divided” by language, which Lacan represents through the symbol  $\$$  (see Figure 3).

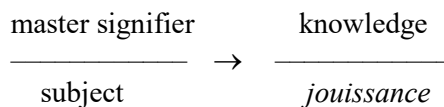


Figure 3: *Formula for the subject of discourse* (Lacan, 2007: 92)



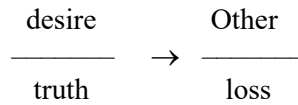


Figure 4: *The effects of each position in the formula* (Lacan, 2007: 93)

In the top right position of the underlying schema is the role of the Symbolic order, the field or network of signifiers that constitute the socio-symbolic realm (see Figure 3): language and its production of knowledge, what is “already there” prior to the subject’s being (Lacan, 2007: 13) represented as  $S_2$ . One of the practical advantages of Lacan’s schema is its ability to identify what each of the four discourses *produces* for, relative to whichever discourse is in the position of agent, the bottom right position denotes the product of that speaking subject’s discourse (see Figure 2).

In the master’s discourse (see Figure 1), the agent looks towards  $S_2$ , the position most associated with work (see Lacan, 2007: 169), but the product or result of this discourse is object *a*, or *jouissance*, an excess of enjoyment or pleasure beyond normal limits. That is, the price of being situated as an agent, as a master, is the loss of *jouissance*. One labours towards the field of  $S_2$ , but must relinquish certain parts of one’s desire to do so; this is what Lacan identifies as “symbolic” castration, which separates our pure being in the world from the mediated experience enabled through the acquisition of language. Such a process requires letting go of being (unmediated existence), in order to *mean* something in symbolic terms, which effectively creates a divided subject (\$). What is useful in understanding the structure of the master’s discourse then, as Lacan puts it, is that the master is an illusion because any master is symbolically castrated (2007: 128). Themí notes that the quality of lost *jouissance* in the bottom right position (see Figures 3 and 4), can “contain anything pertaining to a loosening of the means required to sustain a masterly position” (2014: 109) and, moreover, might be seen as potentially destructive to the order of things (from work, for instance), because this *jouissance*

“signals what remains of, and what can lead to, the most intense or anguished type of desire we have, luring us back beyond the usual limits of the pleasure principle to repeat some kind of “ruinous,” nonproductive, nonutilitarian “loss”—to the point of “masochism,” Lacan adds, or maybe even “death.” (Themí, 2014: 110)

The danger associated with this mysterious *jouissance* in the form of object *a*, the cause of our desire, is animated in many *noir* films, for example, where the lure of the enigmatic  *fatale* figure can see the hero – or heroine in the case of *neo-noir* – risk all for the possibility of attaining lost enjoyment. The discourse of the hysteric, however, has a different relationship with enjoyment.

### 3. The Discourse of the Hysteric & its Product

As a discourse of protest equated with challenging social, political, and epistemological norms, feminist discourse correlates to the hysteric's discourse in Lacan's theory (see Figure 1), where its "industrious" product (the bottom right position) is knowledge:  $S_2$  (Lacan, 2007: 33). I want to canvas some of the ways we might gain a new appreciation of the mechanisms of feminist discourses where they operate through the hysterical structure, before considering how these discourses operate in digitally mediated spaces. For it is the knowledge product of digital feminist discourses that exacerbates conflict in online spaces because it addresses the Other with a response that is symptomatic of a problem – sexual difference and what Lacan calls the "no sexual relation" – rather than a solution. Sexuation for Lacanians designates the process of situating oneself in relation to sexual difference, but does not follow a strictly essentialist or reductive process of establishing gendered identities upon biological differences that might aim or result in complimentary couplings. Psychoanalysts identify masculine and feminine subject positions distinct from the sexed bodies that inhabit these positions, but these terms do not correlate with commonly understood notions of 'gender' in feminist and queer theory. As Barnard puts it, in Western discourses gender and sex are largely "framed in terms of either natural science, phenomenology, or forms of sociohistorical analysis and cultural studies" where the emphasis is on the symbolic rendering of the body and experiences of embodiment that are "socially constructed" (2002: 4). In contrast, masculine and feminine positions in Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse refer to "one's position vis-à-vis the Other, and the type of *jouissance* one is able to obtain" (Barnard, 2002: 5), the process of which – sexuation – may include (but is not limited to) identifications with sexed bodies and social positions. Lacan's famous statement that there is "no sexual relation" (see 1999: 63) more aptly refers to this dynamic, in that masculine and feminine subjects (psychical structures) strive towards different forms of *jouissance*: there is no correlation or complementary

symmetry in their aims. Simply put, they “do not relate to what their partners relate to in them” (Barnard, 2002: 8).

This non-relation is at the crux of the discourse of the hysteric. The agent of this discourse (\$) speaks *as* a divided subject above the bar, where the “discordance between Symbolic and Real” of experience is never adequately resolved through language, but is expressed “openly and painfully” (Bracher, 1994a: 7). The product of this structure,  $S_2$  (the bottom right position), is unconscious – it is a discourse that signifies beneath the bar. As Julien Quackelbeen et al. note, “the hysteric has a relation to truth that is quite unique” because their speech produces “the unconscious truth of the subject” which is “not a question of the truth of facts [...] but of *the truth that determines motives*, that defines *what torments the subject*” (1994: 134; my emphasis). For the hysteric is one who has, however tentatively or temporarily, refused to identify with the available master signifiers – one who has refused symbolic castration – and instead speaks their “suffering” from the position of the divided subject where, as Alicia Arenas et al. put it, language “tears up” the “body” (1994: 148). Bracher observes that the hysteric’s discourse takes its name from cases of hysterical neurosis in the clinic, denoted in symptoms that speak to “the subject’s refusal to embody – literally, to give his or her body over to – the master signifiers that constitute the subject positions that society, through language, makes available to individuals” (1993: 66). In speaking from the position of division, the hysteric’s discourse is subsequently structured as a question – a demand to the Other in the form of the master signifier ( $S_1$ ) occupying the top right position (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 133): “what is a woman?” (Lacan, 2000: 175). For Lacan, the speech of the hysteric “assumes its sense only as a function of a response that has to be formulated concerning this fundamentally symbolic relation” (2000: 170), between the Real of the body (its partial drives, impulses, and desires), and the representative possibilities of this body in the Symbolic.

In speaking as agent from the position of a divided subject, the hysteric thus draws attention to the tenuous agency of the subject of discourse for the hysteric “speaks, as agent, from the lack and gaps in knowledge, language, and being” (Ragland-Sullivan, 1992: 164). The hysteric’s discourse subsequently exposes “the no sexual relation”: that one’s personal mode of *jouissance* does not necessarily find its counterpart in the Other. Yet this (unconscious) knowledge, and the problem of representing Woman in the universal (capital W) within

the Symbolic, can lead to the “cult of Woman” where, as with much feminist discourse from the second wave, the hysteric “unceasingly look[s] for this non-existent signifier” (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 132). As Lacan reminds us, Sigmund Freud’s famous question “what does a woman want” denotes a definite article; it is not Woman in the universal but “[a] woman” which “locate[s] the question at the level of desire” (2007: 129).

The association of feminism with the discourse of the hysteric is not uncontroversial given that many (if not most) feminist discourses reject Sigmund Freud’s work on hysteria. As Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester observe, the “first wave of feminist historiography painted the hysteric as a victim” of male institutional power at a time when social structures were undergoing significant upheaval such that the hysteric was situated as “a front line casualty of the intensified war of men on their womenfolk’s aspirations and protests” towards equality (2000: 68). Elaine Showalter (1987: 160) thus describes the hysteric’s protest as “protofeminism” where, similarly, as a response to the restrictions imposed on women within nineteenth century bourgeois circles, hysteria has been described as “feminism lacking a social network in the outer world” (Hunter, 1983: 485). One might assume, then, that there are no more antiquated hysterics given the loosening of restrictions on women resulting from the widespread impact of feminism and other social upheavals in the West. Indeed, some might argue that feminism is the *solution* to the nineteenth-century woman’s problems, if not contemporary problems regarding sexual difference.

Yet the links between feminism and hysteria continue to manifest in their mutual interests – interests that speak to the ways in which (some) feminist discourses, as hysterical discourses, are cathected to conflicts regarding social and symbolic values surrounding sexuate positions. That is, some feminist discourses speak (protest) in symptom form and thus perpetuate rather than resolve the individual’s unconscious conflicts. Appignanesi and Forrester point out (2000: 68–9), for example, that many first wave feminists were caught up in “temperance and social purity movements” effecting a protest towards male sexual immorality in much the same way as the hysteric, who, *identifying* with the morality of bourgeois values, protests sexual immorality cannot be “avowed” in their own being (see also Goldstein, 1982: 325). That is to say, the hysteric’s discourse is “caught up in conflicts between ideals and desire – in Lacanian terms, between  $S_1$  and  $a$ ” (Bracher, 1993: 66). This conflict is evident

in contemporary forms of feminist in-fighting over appropriate sexual ethics in sex-work and pornography; here morality is leveraged against desire because desire is often only attributed to men (see Horbury, 2015: 52, 130–1), mirroring the hysteric's relation to the master. For where the hysteric has refused the process of symbolic castration, the master has accepted it in order to occupy the position of master and has thus accepted (to some extent) their humility as a subject of discourse (to be motivated by unconscious desire), while the hysteric refuses, "attempt[ing] to cover up the humiliation that the symbolic finally brings", via their Imaginary (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 131). Arguably, where a feminist discourse appears overly puritanical towards sex and sex-work, they might be said to be speaking from this hysterical structure that refuses to be humiliated by desire, and builds a moral defence against it in their imaginary. But the Imaginary register is not necessarily shared or recognized by others – it does not directly equate to the Symbolic. For while the signifiers of language belong to the Symbolic, what is *signified* is situated in the subject's "imaginary order" (Evans, 1996: 83). Any solution to impasses between Real and Symbolic forged in one's Imaginary, then, are sutured to one's idiosyncratic experience as a subject and the modes of enjoyment structured therein. The Imaginary realms of feminist discourses where they inhabit the hysteric's structure consequently become significant sites of discord.

#### 4. Feminist Discourses in Digitally Mediated Spaces

In feminist discourses from the second wave onwards, the equivalence with hysterical discourse continues in that the hysteric's resistance to the status quo forms "common feminist practice" (Leavy, 2006: 31). Moreover, like Freud's hysterical patients, feminist discourse addresses the status quo (the Symbolic order or Other) with a question regarding its ability to represent, symbolically, their being. As Bracher puts it (1993: 67), "feminist criticism protests with verbal discourse what Freud's hysterical patients (most of them women) protested through the physiological discourse of their bodily symptoms". And where feminism has drawn on psychoanalysis is precisely to question the status of the position 'woman' and its construction through language (for example, Butler, 2011; Grosz, 1990). Within digitally mediated feminist discourses, the problem of sexual difference continues to be the subject of protest and debate. Much of this discourse is composed of slippages and equivocations between the rejection

of sexual difference in pursuit of equality in terms of power (status and financial recompense) and the reassertion of difference in claims of special victimhood. Yet repressing difference for power can be counterproductive because beneath the bar of this discourse is the question of equality as regards desire and enjoyment (pleasure). For example, much feminist discourse has been generated in digitally mediated spaces in response to Instagram's censorship policy on female breasts, menstrual blood, and pubic hair. *The Guardian's* feminist columnist Jessica Valenti articulates a common feminist protest in response to this inequality of representation (2015), arguing that the visibility of female anatomy and bodily functions is only censored when they break with representations of 'woman' *vis-à-vis* feminine masquerade. Different social taboos placed on the visibility of breasts/chests, menstrual blood/semen/excrement, body hair and pubic hair are all subject to intense scrutiny and debate within the online comments on this article (see Valenti, 2015), while the rebellious female body (the excessive, leaking, hairy, un-groomed body of feminist cliché) is promoted as a more authentic embodiment of Woman. This assertion of Woman is nevertheless still a victim of inequality for, as Valenti rhetorically laments: "[w]hen will society accept women's bodies?" (2015). Here, the function of taboo and its relation to desire is eschewed in pursuit of a sexual equality that does not exist, while, as Lacan puts it, for the hysteric "what is in sexual knowledge is entirely yielded up as foreign to the subject" (2007: 93). That is, the tenor of this debate assumes the structure of the hysteric's discourse that interprets feminine masquerade as an identification point offered by man (the patriarchy, the master, social media) that is rejected – 'no, that's not [Woman]' – while the lack of a universal signifier for Woman is attributed to someone else: it's not my problem, it's society's. Valenti expresses this, for example, by pinning her own and other women's discord to the one who must take responsibility (men), in her claim that "[s]ocial media is protecting men from periods, breast milk and body hair" (2015). Here, the "truth" of the "hysteric's complaint" – her symptom – manifests in an address "to the Other" (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 134), where the hysteric, "dominated by her question" nevertheless "makes of the master the slave of the work" concerning that question (133).

Consequently, a large part of feminist discourse in digitally mediated communication where it aligns with the hysteric's structure is addressed to the master signifiers occupying  $S_1$  in the top right position in an address that openly

challenges the *status* of  $S_1$  and nominates the hysteric's particular mode of *jouissance* in this social bond. These addresses offer a challenge to the presumed mastery embodied in  $S_1$  – produced through the deconstruction of subjects inhabiting this place: that is, 'the patriarchy', 'white male privilege', and 'toxic masculinity'. Online feminist columnist Ellena Savage succinctly states that, "[p]atriarchy isn't other men: it's you" (2015), because "to a greater or lesser extent" misogynistic behaviour is something "that every male friend of mine has at some point been guilty of" (2015). As such, Savage demonstrates how feminist discourses refuse to be "enthralled" by "master signifiers and systems of knowledge" and respond with a show of "\$, the experience of alienation, suppression, exclusion" (Bracher, 1993: 67). This address to patriarchy exposes the enjoyment structured in the hysteric's discourse as it relates to the master, where the hysteric seeks "castration of the idealized father, who yields the master's secret" the flip side of which is an enjoyment in "privation", that is, "the *jouissance* of being deprived" (Lacan, 2007: 99), because the hysteric's discourse is "a matter of knowing ... what? Of knowing at what price she herself is this person who speaks" (Lacan, 2007: 34).

Yet this is where the master comes into being as a product of the hysteric's discourse, as a fantasy that there is one subject who is not divided – "so much so" Lacan suggests, "that you have to wonder whether this isn't where the invention of the master began" (2007: 129). For the master's supposed knowledge (of sexual difference) allows the hysteric to cherish (however unconsciously) a belief in Woman. Because if no signifier for Woman exists, how can "equality with regard to the signifier of sexuality" exist (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 135)? For Quackelbeen et al. (1994: 134), the discursive production of the hysteric "becomes a teaching about the object and the fundamental fantasy". The "unconscious truth" beneath the bar of the hysteric's discourse is a fantasy "that a sexual rapport can exist" (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 134). Indeed, the fact that "the sexual for a human being is in principle without relation" in no way stops the hysteric from "dreaming of the contrary" that "there is no sexual relation, but *there should be one*" (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 134; my emphasis).

We can observe this *fantasy* of  $S_1$ , where patriarchy stands in for the master that the hysteric creates, in popular second wave feminist theory taken up in digital feminist discourses. Jane Gallop (1982) has noted, for instance, that within some second wave uses of psychoanalysis there is an effort to master the theory explaining woman's privation while the emphasis is on identifying the

master of this theory to castrate because, as Lacan suggests, the hysteric's desire is ultimately for a master who "know[s] lots of things", but not "so much that he does not believe she is the supreme price of all his knowledge" because "she wants a master she can reign over" so that "he does not govern" (Lacan, 2007: 129). The *jouissance* in mobilizing psychoanalysis in this way – enjoyment in the fantasy of a master and in castrating him – manifests in some digital feminist film criticisms that draw on Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory (1989), to reiterate how the structural fantasy of woman-as-object of the gaze in film and screen media secures the masculine subject in his privilege. Feminist blogger film reviews, for instance, often revel in "lambasting" male directors who perpetuate this structural fantasy, and detail (with an intensity of *jouissance*) the actress's embodiment of it (see Leab, 2011), simultaneously exposing the fragility of the master's position while ensuring that Woman – actress or blogger – "is the supreme price."

The hysteric's discourse thus sets a "trap" for the Other (the master) where what signifies in the hysteric's speech (beneath the bar) calls out the Other's impotence (Arenas et al., 1994: 148), which is observable in digital feminist discourses encouraging masters to realize their castration and identify with the hysteric. A blog post in *Scum Mag* entitled, "so your dick isn't perpetually hard" (Muscat 2013), for example, invites men to accept their castration, rather than invest in the fantasy of themselves as masters. But in this, as Bracher suggests, "receivers of the hysterical message are also alienated by being summoned to produce master signifiers and knowledge in response to the other's division (\$) rather than in response to their own want-of-being (*a*)" (1993: 68).

The underlying conflict between public ideals and personal (unconscious) desire in the hysteric's discourse effectively (re)emerges in digitally mediated (public) feminist discourses speaking from this position. As Colette Soler observes, as a consequence of feminist ideals sexual difference is "repressed" in efforts towards making public spaces "unisexual", while the hysteric's "question is played out elsewhere, in the closed field of the sexual relationship" where sexual difference "remains irreducible" (2002: 53). That is, the unconscious (personal) mode of the hysteric's discourse regarding the signifier Woman conflicts with the public pursuit of equality at the level of (feminist) ideals because this requires the suppression of sexual difference. Digitally mediated communication makes this schism more immediately problematic because digitally mediated interfaces erode the distinctions between public and private discourses.



## 5. Making the Personal Political

This conflict between ideals and desires plays out in digital feminist discourses where the pedagogical structure of digital feminisms creates conflicts of difference that result in internal policing over the shared territory of feminist knowledge, because this knowledge production is grounded in the immediacy of the personal. Insofar as the affordances of digitally mediated technologies make personal storytelling more widely available to those without access to commercial media production, digital forms of “storytelling” have been widely credited with “emancipating” under-represented identities (Vivienne, 2016: 3). Equally, the “thorny issue long affecting feminist politics” of internal differences and conflict is, according to Urszula Pruchniewska, overcome through the shareability of information and archive functions that “allow women to work together across their differences” (2016: 739). Yet, where digital feminisms produce a greater volume of content and erode the differences between amateur, professional, scholarly, and celebrity voices they create greater and seemingly more vicious moments of conflict. Indeed, the affordances of this space promote a personal discourse that, where it seeks to be political, is nevertheless not accountable. Susan Greenberg notes, for example, that within debates theorizing digital Web 2.0 discourses, “[t]he perception that personal feelings are ‘true’ and real because they are unmediated remains a popular and persistent one, and overlaps with the popular understanding of ‘authenticity’ as trueness to the self” (2001: 166).<sup>3</sup> Within this frame of blogging culture, feminist discourses can more easily slip into hysterical structures that speak in symptom form because much blogging approximates a process of “thinking out loud” that borders on a stream of consciousness (Greenberg, 2011: 157), and is particularly pertinent to the production of truth in the hysteric’s discourse.

Where the emphasis on emotion and personal experience constitutes a particular feature of blogging practice, it opens the way for the affective production of the hysteric’s discourse to be taken for *truth*. Soler (2016: 61) points out that where language and the signifier intervene into one’s being to produce the subject, they come to “define that status of the jouissance” for that speaking being, including the production of affects “that are particular to him” as well as those produced through the socially bonded discursive positions (61) such

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<sup>3</sup> As Krüger suggests (2016), documenting one’s affective experience is often an implicit requisite of participation in digitally mediated social platforms.

as the hysteric and master. The power of affects, Soler notes, is that they are so immediately felt that they are very “convincing” (2016: 2) to the point that they bring a “hue of reality” in which the subject “recognizes” themselves (105). Nevertheless, affects are not direct signifiers carrying meaning or information; rather, they work through metonymy and displacement, sliding “from representation to representation” and, as such, do not carry “any epistemological value” but designate “[a] false obviousness” (Soler, 2016: 9–11). Because to the one “who is affected, [affects] are plainly obvious”, it is easy to “(mis)take” affect as one’s “own truth” (Soler, 2016: 105). While critical affect theory examines a wide range of affective states, for Lacan, anxiety – *angoisse* or anguish – is one of the most important affects for the hysteric, because in its signalling of an encounter with the Real (see Lacan, 2014), it can denote “a failure in the field of discourse” (Soler, 2016: 25). This failure of discourse can, I suggest, play a motivating role in the feminist incitement to discourse, which is evident in female traditions of diary-writing.

Where feminist blogging recalls traditional forms of diary-writing particular to women and girls (see Keller, 2016), we can see the ways in which some digital feminist discourses adopt feminism as a signifier that nominates their affective experience. This signifier *legitimizes* the subject’s affect and seemingly produces a truth about experience. Where digital feminisms provide a “feminist toolkit” for young women (see Keller, 2016; Seidman, 2013: 553; Thelanderson, 2014: 528), for example, they offer a means – a vocabulary and structure – to name and express their experience. The pedagogical and public aspect of this toolkit equates with feminist pedagogy as a “protest [hysterical] pedagogy” that seeks, as Bracher puts it, “recognition” from the other regarding their division as a subject (2006: 96). For instance, in her study of girls’ blogging, Jessalynn Keller quotes a young blogger’s “coming out” as a feminist: “I want to write about life from my perspective – a feminist teen just trying to make sense of the world – and hopefully appeal to others who feel the same way ... – Renee, Sunday June 27, 2010, blog post” (see 2016: 18). Greenberg suggests that “the increasing role of emotion and subjectivity in the public sphere ... typically work[s] to connect facts and feelings” and the “manipulation of the reader to respond in a prescribed fashion” (2001: 152–4). As Renee’s quote attests, then, “the personal, confessional element found in much feminist teaching and writing” (Bracher, 2006: 96) is a sign of authenticity but one where affect structures

logic. For it is not that drawing on “private emotions” in public spheres is an unstructured discourse but, rather, that forms of “confessional journalism” deliberately “craft” feelings to “communicate” them “in a controlled and deliberate way”, so as to “connect those feelings to argument and thought” (Greenberg, 2011: 155–6). The slippage made possible then, when personal affect becomes political discourse, leads to considerable internal conflict in digital feminisms.

### 5.1. Affective Discourse: Diversity, Conflict, & Policing

An outcome of making the personal political would seem to be distinguished above all else by the conflicts and in-wars between different feminist fractions, built upon different feminist affective knowledge, literature, and pedagogic exchange, all of which is amplified in digitally mediated communication where there are few gatekeepers to the discursive production of feminist knowledge. For instance, Fredrika Thelandersson notes that on Tumblr

“feminist debates often turn into seemingly never-ending processes of calling out and blaming users for offensive terminology and ignorance of various groups. [...] Much of the discussion is based around ‘policing’ other participants about what they’re doing wrong instead of encouraging them for what is being done right.” (2014: 528)

Equally, “toxic-twitter wars” between feminist commentators, activists, and scholars tend “to be overtly hostile and insular”, reflecting “feminist arguing in general” (Thelandersson, 2014: 527). The hysterical structure of some digital feminist discourses might account for this, in that the hysteric’s discourse is a symptomatic demand to the other, the master, who is “called, obliged, summoned to produce the response” (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 133). When the address is intercepted by another hysteric, however, a problem emerges; as Bracher notes, where feminist discourses are structured as protest (hysterical) discourses, they “can support socially destructive forms of identity politics that pit different groups against each other in a competition for recognition as the greatest victim” (2006: 97). That is, the affective quality of feminist knowledge invites individuals to perceive their own affective truth as the most legitimately and painfully alienating, denoting, as Soler observes, the “dissident” affect of discourse where enjoyment produced in the social bond (such as shared feminist values) can be discordant from the enjoyment “characteristic” of each

individual in their relation to language, their unconscious, and the symptoms and fantasies that follow (2016: 104). Subsequently, “the disparity between one person and another”, in terms of the Imaginary, “explains the ‘absence of true dialogue’ that befalls us despite all our ideals of communication” (Soler, 2016: 104–5).

The intensity of discord in digital feminist discourses might thus be understood to stem, at least in some instances, from the discordance between individual discursive affects where, as Soler puts it, “the other’s affects” “seem strange” and sometimes “unbearable” because they conflict with one’s own affective truth (2016: 105). The hashtag “#YesAllWomen”, is a good example: it seeks to anchor women’s collective experiences (Cole, 2015: 356–7) in a social bond but does so in a way that, as with other feminist hashtagging, “assimilates” differences of class, race, and history into “already-circulating discourses” about girls and women (Khoja-Moolji, 2015: 348–9; see, also, Pruchniewska, 2016: 1). The resulting conflicts see feminists hailing other feminists who appear as masters (by contrast), demanding to have their victim status – their painful division as a subject, and refusal of master signifiers – recognized by the other. For a feminist to be “subject to the Other’s discourse”, then – even that of another feminist – can generate or even reproduce certain affects “such as indignation, protest, anger” (Soler, 2016: 26). Such disparities also elucidate how in some instances *feminist* discourse can appear to other feminists as an external antagonist if not master obfuscating the search for Woman (Quackelbeen et al., 1994: 132).

Consequently, the pedagogical structure of digital feminist discourses – the invitation to identify with alienated subjectivities, the “toolkit” for naming affect and hailing masters – can have damaging effects on both other feminists and the masters addressed. As Bracher suggests, the “inherent danger” of protest pedagogies is that one is asked to identify with the “teacher’s desire for a new master signifier” such that one is effectively “coerced” to “identify with someone else’s S1” (2006: 97). In this, we see that where digital feminist discourses invite one to participate in the deconstruction and “exposure” of “the deficiencies of the master or the master signifiers”, they tend to encourage, the “repression” of one’s “own feelings, impulses, or qualities” (Bracher, 2006: 97). The sentiments of the “Women Against Feminism” tumblr denote a resistance to such identification, the tenor of which might be summarized as: ‘I don’t

necessarily want to be included in claims of (all/current/past) feminisms on the basis that I identify as woman because such claims do not match my affective experience'. The hysteric's cutting down of masters thus includes other women who, in rejecting feminism, identify with feminine masquerade, as well as other *feminists* who, by invoking dissident forms of feminist knowledge, undermine the individual's affective truth, as toxic feminist twitter wars attest.

## 5.2. The Hysteric's Knowledge: A Revolution in Discourse?

The hysteric's discourse is considered vital to the production of knowledge in the analytic situation as the subject is required to pass through it in analysis to produce "the desire to know" (Lacan, 2007: 34). Yet, though this discourse produces knowledge, it does so beneath the bar. Therefore, though feminist discourses have transformed some aspects of the public and private spheres in the West, these changes do not necessarily satisfy; object *a* – the truth of what motivates, what torments the subject – remains beneath the bar and the hysteric's *product* is largely un-analysed. In addition, because the hysteric's discourse is a desire for an unsatisfied desire, no response from the Other (in either public or private reform) will ever match the enjoyment produced in the hysterical structure (privation). As a result, the hysteric's discourse does not produce a (personal) revolution or transformation of discourse (a positional turn in the *matheme*) – that occurs through the discourse of the analyst (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Where digital feminist discourses take feminism as an identity bearing signifier, moreover, there is a slippage between the personal and the public/political product of this discourse. The hysteric's (socially bonded) discourse produces knowledge excluded from the symbolic, while in the *private* analytic scenario this knowledge is recognized as that which the hysteric has excluded or not found a way to include in their  $S_1$ : object *a*.

Despite this unresolved schism, the discursive product of feminism where it is taken as truth denotes, as Bracher suggests, the production of "a new canon, a new tradition to be taught", which effectively functions as an "authoritarian and establishment pedagogy" (Bracher, 2006: 97). Feminism's knowledge product – published and disseminated through various public institutions such as the university – is now amplified through the critical mass of digital feminisms

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Soler argues that "psychoanalysis is really what the hysteric needed, because it agrees to recognize the enigma of sex and assumes responsibility for it" (2002: 53).

where it sustains the authority of personal experience. In other words, the industrious product of feminist discourse creates the foundation of a new  $S_2$ : the discourse of the university.

## 6. The Discourse of the University: Feminism as $S_2$ & the Split Subject

What distinguishes the discourse of the university from that of the hysteric is that, where the hysteric's discourse poses a question, the discourse of the university presumes an answer: knowledge. The subject occupying this discourse speaks from a position of authority, invoking knowledge in a way that might be likened to Michel Foucault's theorizing of discourse, where certain utterances are regulated by a field of ideas and practices that "determine" the "conditions of existence" for this utterance (2005: 30). As Renata Salecl puts it, in the discourse of the university "utterances always refer to some field of knowledge; they purport to be justified by proofs and arguments" (1994: 163). In digital feminist discourses, then, we often see the subject *assume* answers via reference to the production of feminist knowledge ( $S_2$ ) gleaned from feminism's institutionalization and increasing prominence in digitally mediated spaces. The affordances of digital technology allow such knowledge to be appropriated, re/produced, and distributed without, necessarily, going through formal processes of fact-checking or critical evaluation. In terms of sheer numbers, this re/production and distribution of feminist discourses/knowledge is given a symbolic weight. Where it takes on the status of  $S_2$ , it is taken as knowledge that gives its speaker *authority*. The "Who Needs Feminism?" tumblr, for example, not only reasserts and produces feminist discourse, but also functions (in part) to school others on feminist knowledge and praxis with an authority grounded in its university setting (see Siedman, 2013: 557). Similarly, Shenila Khoja-Moolji notes that some digitally mediated feminist practices offer a sense of "collectivity" within a knowledge space that presumes a "certainty about the lives of girls" (2015: 348). In effect, digital feminist discourses slip from the hysteric's discourse into the discourse of the university where 'feminism' not only becomes a signifier of identity (a new  $S_1$ ) from which the subject speaks, but also a signifier that bears the weight of knowledge,  $S_2$ , enabling the subject to speak with tacit authority.

The discourse of the university is, in Lacan's schema, largely associated with the discourse of science, which offers the grantee of the big Other formerly held by religion. David Corfield observes that science, in taking the place of God, provides a limit of authority for the subject – one they would willingly cross significant ethical lines for (2002: 196–200) – such that, when the authority of science goes unquestioned it can become equated with or “approach” the “super-egoical effects of the installation of the paternal metaphor” (2002: 199).<sup>5</sup> The problem, as Lacan puts it, is that “the discourse of science leaves no place for man” (2007: 147) – it leaves no place for the subject constituted in language with unconscious fantasies, libidinal drives, or desire. Where feminist knowledge-as- $S_2$  becomes the ideal-ego of the agent's online identity, the agent of this structure is, according to Lacan's schema, a “split” subject (2007: 104, 148), cut-off from the “subjective truth” of their experience because both  $S_1$  and the divided subject (\$) are beneath the bar. For when speaking in the discourse of the university, Bracher notes, one relays “personal history, and reflections on that history” through reference to external “knowledge” that promotes an ideal-ego considered “worthy” of attention from others (1993: 69).

A good example of feminist discourse speaking from the position of  $S_2$  on digitally mediated platforms is Lena Dunham's pronouncements about her experience at the Met Gala across her e-newsletter, Twitter, and Instagram account. On the basis of feminist knowledge Dunham reported that Odell Beckham Jr. (seated at her dinner table) was not interested in talking to her because she failed to embody a form of feminine masquerade or present herself as an object for (his) male gaze (Dunham, 2016, 02 September). In this, Dunham invoked feminist knowledge-as- $S_2$  to relay a personal experience with the assurance she knew what Beckham was thinking as he looked at her: “Do I want to fuck *it*? Is *it* wearing a ... yep, *it's* wearing a tuxedo” (Dunham, 2016, 02 September; my emphasis), positioning herself as an (unworthy) object for the gaze but a worthy subject of feminist discourse. Dunham's subsequent apology further shows us how feminist knowledge-as- $S_2$  allowed her to be split-off from her own subjective truth. As she put it, she used feminist knowledge as a screen for her personal “insecurities and made totally narcissistic assumptions about

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<sup>5</sup> Corfield (2002: 196–200) refers here to Milgram's experiment, where one subject is asked to inflict a lethal electric volt on another in the name of scientific research, comparing it to God's demand that Abraham kill his only son.

what he was thinking, then presented those assumptions as facts” (Dunham, 2016, 04 September).

Dunham’s discourse also demonstrates how, where feminism-as- $S_2$  comes to constitute an onscreen identity that provides super-ego ideals for the subject, it seemingly guarantees a subject that can be exempt from critique. Yet this signifier is unstable, not simply because it leaves the subject in ignorance of their particular enjoyment through which they experience themselves as a subject, but also because the product of the hysteric’s discourse is a *symptom*. This slippage perpetuates the symptom in an effort to confront and resolve a phenomenon, for with a new authoritarian pedagogy (pedagogy of the master), one is “inculcated” into the discourse based on the “assumption that the best way to understand a phenomenon or solve a problem is to devote oneself to reading and interpreting the writings of the master” (Bracher, 2006: 88). In addition, Dunham’s response illustrates how “knowledge” is “contained in different ways and in different ‘layers’ within the subject, [such that] it easily produces conflict” (Alcorn, 1994: 41). The hysterical structure, for instance, is the product of an internal conflict between the subject’s ideals and their partial drives and unconscious desires. But when the product of this discourse is identified with – as in the case of feminism-as- $S_2$  – one identifies with a symptom and takes it for truth. As such, though “mastering a field of knowledge” can feel empowering, identifying with knowledge valued for its “social currency” rather than its ability to “solve problems” in the subject’s private realm (Bracher, 2006: 91) can result in a restricted relation to self-knowledge and, ultimately, a breakdown in communication.

It is here that challenges to this signifier in the form of other feminist discourses or external trolling can act as a challenge to the subject’s stability: an attack on the super-ego ideals that support the on-screen fantasy of the agent’s symbolic existence.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, where trolls challenge feminist knowledge, they expose the “dissident affects” in the subject speaking from feminism-as- $S_2$ ; the gap between the subject’s idiosyncratic mode of enjoyment that may already be in conflict with the super-ego ideals of feminist thought. For where feminism is a product of the hysteric’s discourse, ‘feminist knowledge’ signifies what is inassimilable within the hysteric subject, what remains steadfastly unconscious

<sup>6</sup> This could, perhaps, be likened to the structure of the ‘mirror phase’ in Lacan’s work, where the subject’s relation to a specular mirror (in this case screen) image offers a sense of mastery counter to the reality of one’s alienated being (for a concise summary of Lacan’s mirror phase, see Evans, 1996: 115–116).



in the symptom of the hysteric's speech: sexual difference. Consequently, one can observe the unstable ground the subject occupies when speaking from the discourse of the feminism-as- $S_2$ , and can perhaps explain the quick and often violent – that is, emotionally *affective* – discourse whenever this  $S_2$  is subject to criticism.

### 6.1. The Enjoyment of the Other

Although not exhaustive of all digital feminist discursive practices, these formulations might explain some of the frustrations felt in forms of digital feminist communication, and I want to finish this paper by briefly considering how the addressee of feminism-as- $S_2$  is important to the effects of this communicative exchange. In the discourse of the university, the agent addresses object *a*, the vessel to be educated in the knowledge of  $S_2$ ; however, in digital spheres in particular, the Other is not necessarily acquiescent to this social bond. Bracher notes that we begin life in the position of object *a*, a “yet unassimilated piece of the Real that is an object for the desires of those around us, particularly our parents” (1993: 562) who can be “tyrannical” in their imposing of knowledge values or beliefs on us. In digitally mediated spaces, however, the subject occupying this place would have already assumed an identity in the Symbolic, and would not always be receptive to the knowledge values addressed to them. Put in context, where the addressee of those speaking from feminism-as- $S_2$  questions feminist knowledge discourse – irrespective of motivation – they attack the imaginary solution produced in the hysteric's discourse: the suppression of sexual difference and symbolic castration.

Lacan suggests that the neurotic (in this case, hysteric) assumes that “the Other demands his castration” (Lacan, 2006: 700), such that the neurotic maintains a defence against castration particularly where it might “serve” the *jouissance* of the Other. As the Dunham example suggests, much digital feminist discourse reflects this preoccupation with the Other's enjoyment particularly where the question of sexual difference and feminine masquerade is invoked. The self-portrait by artist Rupri Kaur (2016) in which menstrual blood is visible, for example, protests the image of feminine masquerade in social media that offers enjoyment to the Other, and celebrates her refusal to feed “the ego and pride of misogynist society” (quoted in Valenti, 2015: para. 4–5). Where the agent of digital feminist discourses speaks from  $S_2$  then, they are alienated from

truth in the bottom left position (of themselves as a subject, their division, and desire), such that object *a* appears to belong to the addressed Other. In this, the Other – embodiments of patriarchy, masters, or figures of toxic masculinity – constitute the feminist subject's object *a*, lost, or in this case, seemingly stolen enjoyment. That is, what torments and motivates the subject appears in the enjoyment of the Other. Dunham's comments about Beckham Jr., for instance, are preoccupied with male enjoyment in feminine masquerade, admitting in her apology that "surrounded by models and swan-like actresses it's hard not to feel like a sack of flaming garbage" (Dunham, 2016, 04 September). However humbly phrased here, it is the *imagined* enjoyment of the Other that torments.

The short-circuit from the protest discourse of the hysteric to that of the university is by no-means exclusive to digital feminisms, but where a protest discourse bypasses the analyst, no genuine revolution in their discourse can occur; rather, the short-circuit perpetuates a politics of the symptom *as* a solution. Therefore, where the affordances of digital communications – the immediacy of affective discourse, the relative accessibility and shareability of content – facilitate if not exacerbate the process, digital communication merely contributes to a pre-existing problem. In adopting an ideal-ego built upon another's affective discourse, the subject remains split-off from what motivates them, their desire, and their enjoyment.

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