

## **INTRODUCTION: From Testimony to Desire**

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What do we ask for when we ask to be believed? When it comes to traumatic experience, such a request looks for something beyond belief itself. Because a trauma occurs too suddenly for the subject to integrate it into her experience, what she really needs to know is not that she is believed but that the event truly happened *to her*. When her testimony is met with denial, she relives her absence; her reality is once again thrown into question. The possibility of corroboration sustains hope for the liberation of what dwells in the unconscious and wreaks its havoc upon the body. And yet, what one receives with the declaration of belief is not necessarily the validation of a verifiable truth, but another evasion of the reality, which is this: the impossibility of a witness who could confirm what has escaped the survivor.

Following the cascade of sexual abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein in 2017, women began to recount their experiences of harassment and assault in the hope of compelling recognition of an emerging truth: such experiences are far more pervasive than the cultural milieu had ever been willing to acknowledge. The veracity of these accounts was often impugned because of the long time that had passed since the event. But the lapse of time is precisely what bespeaks the traumatic impact of the experience. Paradoxically, the experience is too direct to have been experienced, leaving its victim suspended in temporal limbo, searching out some sense of order that would line it all up and file it away. The inability to experience an event at the moment of its occurrence deprives it of a place in language. Even when it falls short of an accurate transmission, the act of testimony offers the survivor an opportunity to make their own experience possible for the first time.

For this reason, the testimony of women is foundational to the development of psychoanalytic theory. In the process of treating his patients, Freud discovered that their symptoms were related to memories of

having been sexually assaulted, often at the hands of fathers. He famously proceeded to renounce this theory of seduction, reducing his patients' memories to fantasy and repressed Oedipal desire. On the one hand, it is difficult to deny that Freud thereby minimizes the reality and prevalence of sexual violence. On the other hand, we wonder: is Freud's move truly an act of denial, or does it point to a different kind of truth?

This question provides an opportunity to consider how the work of the psychoanalytic clinic deviates from the work of political movements. The act of testimony is central both to the clinic and to politics, but in each instance it has different ends. #MeToo aims to rethink the discourse around consent as well as legal and social responsibilities. The clinic embarks upon an excavation of the unconscious and what it conceals within discourse. A political movement always concerns the collective. The work of analysis privileges the desire of the individual who risks surrendering herself to the force of political events. In "Let Cold Fires Burn," Jamieson Webster articulates the nature of this loss:

Hysteria, in a sense, means to disappear behind speech whose function is a rejection of reality. Of course, trauma makes us disappear behind our speech and memories as a kind of reminiscing, but holding fast to the question of abuse is also a kind of disappearance, a kind of rejection. Public testimony, the media blitz that often surrounds it, the chorus of affirmation, also forces the subject to disappear. So many exits.

The exchange involved in the demand for and reception of affirmation pushes the subject to retreat further beneath language which distorts the very substance of what she needs to communicate. Without having been present during an event, no one, including the analyst, can proclaim to know with certainty that something happened. We also cannot claim to know that it did not happen. To fixate upon the factual nature of an event is to miss entirely what the survivor's testimony endeavors to communicate and what operates on the level of the unconscious.

The survivor will not be able to give authentic testimony knowing that this testimony will be reduced to the facts it does or doesn't contain. She struggles to provide what society deems necessary to validate her experience: a linear account of her trauma. This is because she contends with a reality that is not necessarily that of the event itself, but a confrontation

with the Real, and the problematic of her own desire, too often obscured by the juridical focus of movements such as #MeToo. While the movement offers women an unheard-of chance to speak and to resist, it risks objectifying them anew by enlisting this speech in a game of recognition from the Other—at the cost of desire.

And their trauma is not only that of violence, but of having thus far been confined to the role of object. Sexual assault forces upon a woman the reality of her status in society which is always at odds with her own experience as a desiring subject. “The Montreal Conversation” ponders the extent to which #MeToo can prove effective in challenging our cultural construction of femininity:

Yet while this movement offers a reaction against the cultural construction or montage of sexuality—its violence, and its oppression—we wonder about whether it may or may not provide an exit from the fantasies that this construction sustains. Psychoanalysis points toward an aesthetics of femininity beyond the montage, and in which a masculine ethics in any of us may support the feminine, rather than erasing it. With this in mind, we would like to ask, in which ways might the movement be powerful or limited? What is the reach of its relevant protest against the cultural construction?

The very misunderstanding of feminine subjectivity, wherein woman is conceived as object of man’s desire, is what allows for these unspeakable acts of violence. There are aspects of #MeToo which contribute to protecting this status of women by centering the issue of consent and propagating the fantasy of a legal structure that could redirect cultural attitudes and fulfill a misplaced need for validation. Meanwhile, the subject vanishes beneath the discourse of those who claim she is heard.

Such affirmation prevents the emergence of an unconscious knowledge: that we are alone in our most harrowing moments, that the traumatic event is for the survivor and her alone to confront. When a survivor asks us to believe her, we may not be able to offer an incontestable corroboration that would restore her confidence in her own knowledge, but we can accept the responsibility intrinsic to the role of witness. As long as emphasis is placed on factuality, there remains something of the survivor’s experience that she cannot access. Affirmation or denial keeps her from

accessing that “something of experience” which remains irreducible to the observable.

When what is at stake concerns suffering of the human subject at the core of its most impenetrable crypts, we must ask what has been left unsaid in order to determine what can be done. While psychoanalysis impels us to reconsider why certain events bore such profound psychic impact, #MeToo prompts us to reconsider the definition of sexual violence. In the clinic we find that seemingly innocuous moments in memory are more pivotal than previously thought—that there is a subject beneath the construct of the ego who carries more pain than we are able to comprehend. Each subject’s discourse calls upon us to redefine what it means to be traumatized. The aim is not to affirm or deny reality, but rather to dismantle the ego, which remains in service to the other, and carve a path for the subject of desire to emerge.