HETEROPESSIMISM AND THE PLEASURE OF SAYING "NO."

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ABSTRACT

Using Lauren Berlant's keynote at the 2019 Duke Feminist Theory Workshop as a starting point, this article offers a comparative reading of feminism's "heteropessimistic turn" and the involuntarily celibate (i.e., incel) movement. In doing so, I demonstrate that both groups are saying "no" to certain elements of what Berlant refers to as "the pleasure regimes of sexual normativity." I focus on the affective function of heteropessimism—what Asa Seresin identifies as its "anesthetic feeling"—arguing that it affectively soothes but politically stultifies the feminist movement. Framing the incel movement in a heteropessimistic light, I dispute the common perception of incels as 'merely' misogynistic and argue that their totalizing sexual nihilism indicates a broader hatred of, and disidentification with, the politics of heterosexual desire. Introducing the example of "Black Pill Feminists," I take the heteropessimistic connections between feminism and incel to their logical conclusion, showing that feminist heteropessimism's inherent essentialism affectively cements the incongruous ideological positions of feminism to incel's sexual nihilism. I conclude with an argument for the naturalization of negativity as part of a broader move toward accepting the ambiguities of heterosexual desire and the antagonism(s) that drive it.

KEYWORDS

affect, Lauren Berlant, feminism, heteropessimism, heterosexuality, incel

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What do incels and sex-negative feminists have in common?

This question sounds like the opening line of a misogynistic joke (the punchline being "no one wants to have sex with either of them"), but it is a question I have been asking myself for some time. In researching and writing on misogynistic, masculinist online subcultures, as I have done since 2014, I would occasionally get a fleeting sense of an uncanny resemblance between these two seemingly disparate ideological (and exceptionally affective) social movements. However, this impression on my part lacked form until I attended the 2019 Duke Feminist Theory Workshop, where the late, queer, feminist scholar Lauren Berlant explicitly identified a string of shared sentiments between sex-negative feminists and incels during her/their keynote, "Sex in the Event of Happiness," (2019) saying[1]:

> When privilege unravels, it goes out kicking and screaming and people lose confidence in how to be together, uncertain about how to read each other, incompetent even to their own desire, wanting everything to be "post" already, with few skills for bearing this transition—as the incels [...] and many new sex negative feminists exemplify.

I felt the room tense at the mention of incels and sex-negative feminists in the same sentence. During the Q & A, I asked Berlant to expand on the connection she/they made between these two groups. She/they responded, "There is a lot of pleasure in saying no to the pleasure regimes of sexual normativity. And that's what links the incels […] to #MeToo: they're all saying 'no.'" A skeptical audience member interjected, "But they're not saying 'no' to the same thing!" Berlant (2019) responded: "They're not saying 'no' to the same thing, but they are saying no to the pleasure economy that is not interpreting [them] in the way that [they] want. [They're] saying no to that. And they both produce a politics. They both produce a public sphere."

As I thought about this exchange in the pandemic-distorted years since, I began to ruminate on the content and significance of that "no." Feminism and incels' shared "no" indicate that they are both engaged in a politics of refusal. Incels are saying "no" to the normative pleasure regimes of heterosexuality because heterosexuality has, for them, failed to deliver on its heteropatriarchal promise of categorical male domination and unqualified female submission. The feminists

whom Berlant identifies as "sex-negative" are saying "no" to the normative pleasure regimes of heterosexuality because *feminism* has failed in its aim to reform not just heterosexuality, but heterorelationality as such—to make it less oppressive, less dangerous, more egalitarian, and more pleasurable.

Six months after Berlant's talk, *The New Inquiry* published an essay by Asa Seresin (2019) titled "On Heteropessimism." In it, Seresin (2019) describes a phenomenon wherein straight women habitually bemoan their heterosexuality, often to their queer friends or to the broader public via the internet. Seresin calls this phenomenon "heteropessimism," defining it as "performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality" that are often expressed by straight women "in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about the straight experience" (n.p.). [2] Seresin (2019) writes that heteropessimistic expressions are "rarely accompanied by the actual abandonment of heterosexuality" (2019). In fact, "most [people] stick with heterosexuality even as they judge it to be irredeemable. Even incels, overflowing with heteropessimism, stress the involuntary nature of their condition" (Seresin 2019, n.p.). However, Seresin (2019)writes, "men's heteropessimist claims tend to be neither ethically nor logically equivalent to those made by women. Instead, they are a kind of funhouse distortion of feminist complaint" (n.p.).

Updated interpretations of heteropessimism have focused less on heteropessimism's "performative" element and more on the inherent affectivity of the term. Jennifer Hamilton (2022), literary scholar and co-founder of the collaborative media project, *The Heteropessimists*, defines heteropessimism as "a pervasive disappointment, ambivalence, if not doubt, about the quality of the lived heterosexual experience" (Allen, et al. 2022). In her book *Rethinking Sex*, Christine Embe (2022) writes that heteropessimism is "meant to help distance its mostly female adherents from really feeling a sense of sorrow for their lack of control and repeated disappointments, or from fully acknowledging the pervasive awfulness of a culture that's not suited to their happiness" (24–25). While each of these descriptions stress the affectivity of heteropessimism, Seresin (2019) argues that these affects come together to produce an "anesthetic feeling": "a feeling that aims to protect against overintensity of feeling and an attachment that can survive detachment" (Berlant & Edelman 2014, 17). Heteropessimism's "structure is anticipatory, designed to preemptively anesthetize the heart against the pervasive awfulness of heterosexual culture as well as the sharp plunge of quotidian romantic pain" (Seresin 2019, n.p.). What is crucial is that the anesthetizing function of heteropessimism puts it in tension with feminism's political ends, producing an affective quagmire within which there is no meaningful movement.

While much of the feminist literature on incels focuses on articulations of misogyny and anti-feminist viewpoints within the incel community, I want to do something a bit different in this essay. I offer a comparative reading of feminism's "heteropessimistic turn" and a particular ideology within incel called "The Black Pill" to demonstrate that the affective content of their shared "no" is heteropessimistic in nature. Using the example of "Black Pill Feminists," I argue that the heteropessimistic overlaps between feminism and incel reveal reactionary inclinations within feminism that problematically reinscribe uncritical beliefs about the rigidity of gender and (hetero)sex. I also argue that heteropessimism's "anesthetic feeling" not only stultifies feminist praxis, as Seresin suggests, but risks casting feminism back into the confusion of postfeminist identity.

This essay proceeds from the observation that heteropessimism is comprised of social affects that both reflect and shape these ideological movements. To do this, I read for highly emotive language within what Raymond Williams (1961) termed "structures of feeling": the unarticulated material that fills the gaps between official discourse, popular discourse, and cultural texts (Buchanan 2010). For feminists, this means looking at all forms of feminist discourse—the field of cultural, political, and social commentary that is generated in the gap between feeling and organizing—from essays produced by the feminist commentariat to academic texts to empirical work, for incels, it means reading for affect in their purportedly 'rational' ideology. As a theoretical structure, I am drawn to the capaciousness of affect theory, particularly how it attends to the ways in which affect stimulates, strengthens, and maintains relations through discursive practices, and how these discursive practices themselves are wielded to affect politics and culture; as Ben Anderson (2010) writes, "[A]ffects are an inescapable element within an expanded definition of the political" (164). I am also drawn to affect theory because it offers new modes of conceptualizing normative regimes that diverge from queer theory's anti-normative doctrine (Wiegman & Wilson 2015). Thus, affect theory allows theorists (and especially feminist theorists) to probe our attachments to heterosexuality that seem to—but do not actually—exceed the political (Ahmed 2017). Reading for shared affect(s) among disparate groups, as this paper does, has the potential to provide new insights with regard to how the affects that drive feminist praxis and feminist discourse are operating simultaneously, albeit toward very different ends, within anti-feminist groups.

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I begin by situating heteropessimism within the broader theoretical tradition of queer theory, demonstrating that heteropessimism is itself comprised of a double movement: toward queerness as an aspirational fantasy and back towards heterosexuality as a disappointing/embarrassing reality. I contextualize the emergence of heteropessimism within feminist discourse by offering an overview of feminism's reinventions over the last thirty years and where we find ourselves today. Building on the work of Seresin (2019) and Andrea Long Chu (2019), I argue that heteropessimism's "anesthetic feeling" allows feminists to displace some of the disappointment they feel toward feminism onto normative heterosexuality. I then move into a discussion of incel. After offering a condensed explainer of incel's origins and beliefs, I demonstrate that an ideology within incel called "The Black Pill" represents a broadened escalation of a heteropessimistic position. I then discuss "Black Pill Feminism," an emerging ideology that combines a degraded form of feminism with the nihilistic, biological determinism of The Black Pill. I conclude with a discussion of how we can move beyond the quagmire produced in the tension between heterosexuality, heteropessimism, and feminism's political motivations.

Feminism's Heteropessimistic Turn

Since the "Sex Wars" of the 1980s, the most impactful critiques of heterosexuality have largely emerged from queer theory. Unlike feminist theory's structuralist critiques of the patriarchy, which focus on issues such as systemic inequality, exploitation, and violence *within* heterosexuality, queer theory's post-structuralist, anti-normative sensibilities trouble the foundations of heterosexuality itself, revealing that heterosexuality is not a natural state but rather a complex normative framework (Weigman and Wilson 2015; Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1990). For example, in their widely influential 1998 essay "Sex in Public," Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that heterosexuality is best understood as a set of inchoate and aspirational fantasies that are stimulated and codified by regulatory institutions; moreover, the coherence of heterosexuality is a façade managed by heteronormativity, as is the privilege it confers (548–552). Heterosexual privilege can take several different forms: "unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment" (Berlant & Warner 1998, 548). Logically, these privileges are inherently contradictory—how, for example, can something be construed as moral

accomplishment if it is a supposedly 'natural state?'— but in practice, the idealistic, moral coherence of heterosexuality becomes even murkier. Berlant and Warner (1998) use the following example to demonstrate this:

> The proliferation of evidence for heterosexuality failings has produced a backlash against talk-show therapy. It has even brought [conservative politician and media personality] William Bennett to the podium; […] we find him calling for boycotts and for the suppression of heterosexual therapy culture all together. Recognition of heterosexuality's daily failures agitates him as much as queerness. "*We've forgotten that civilization depends on keeping some of this stuff under wraps*," he said. […] Every day, even the talk-show hosts are newly astonished to find that people who are committed to hetero intimacy are unhappy. After all is said and done, the prospects and promises of heterosexual culture still represent the optimism for optimism, a hope to which people apparently have already pledged their consent—at least in public (emphasis mine, 556).

Twenty-five years later, it is safe to say that the failures of heterosexuality are no longer "under wraps." As it turns out, heterosexual culture's "optimism for optimism" has proven to be rather ineffective in maintaining the central myth on which heterosexuality and heteronormativity rely: heterosexuality is not only normal but *good*, in that it serves as a path to "the good life" and that it can and will make one "happy" (Berlant 2011; Ahmed 2010). But what happens when heterosexuality fails, again and again, often in very public ways, to reflect and manifest its supposed "goodness" in the lives of its adherents?

In a podcast interview for *The Heteropessimists*, Hamilton asks Seresin, "Why heteropessimism? Why now?" Seresin replies, "Heteropessimism has always existed. It may in some ways have been even more intense at times in the past. But it's also very 'of the moment.' […] We're living in a moment where our culture is influenced by both feminism and its failures" (Allen, et al. 2022). Seresin is right: straight women are struggling to manage the tension between pervasive heteronormative (and mainstream feminist) messaging that tells them that heterosexual desire is natural and good against relentless reminders about the inescapabilty of sexual violence and romantic incompatibility (Ruti 2018; Ward 2020; Embe 2022; Allen, et al. 2022; Giovannitti 2020; Lewis 2020). Heteropessimism describes the forced resignedness of this position, conceptualizing heterosexuality as a "prison within which [women] are confined against their will" (2019). This

analogy is already common within reparatively-minded queer discourse, wherein queerness is presented as the liberatory escape hatch within the joyless prison of heterosexuality (Sedgwick 2002). Examples of queer heteropessimism on social media are easy to find: Twitter user Tyler Wood (2017) writes, "Yes, I'm bisexual: I'm attracted to women because women are incredible and I'm attracted to men because I love making bad choices." A more recent example is a 2022 TikTok by queer comedian Sam Sferrazza applies the oft-shared career advice, "if you can do anything else, do it," to straight cis-women: "If you can be anything else but straight, do it—because it's too hard for you. […] Straight women are going through life on hard mode" (2022). Seresin (2019), Jane Ward (2020) and Shannon Keating (2019) have all described encountering heteropessimism in the form of straight women stating their lives would be "so much easier" if they were gay. Such scenes reveal the contradictory kernel at the center of heteropessimism. Heteropessimistic proclamations from straight people are a move toward queerness (or, less frequently, celibacy) as a fantasy of liberation but also *back toward heterosexuality* as an aspirational fantasy undone by a disappointing reality.

Beyond this central contradiction, another issue with heteropessimism is that it is predicated on essentialist views of sex and gender (Yang 2020). Sophia Giovannitti (2020) critiques this aspect of heteropessimism by linking it to club promotions that ban cis-men from entering, writing:

> Our popular discourse around men—the final gendered category we allow ourselves to treat as both *fixed* and *bad*, marked as a collective scapegoat for all things narcissistic, obtuse, and disappointing—is an expression of maintaining our fidelity to the world of distinction, or refusing to break with the conditions of the struggle we observe. In this way, we are simply repeating the belief that a binary gender *can be a stable category„even* as we simultaneously fight against the conditions of the gender binary foisting stable and unwanted categories upon us. We cannot champion a non-biologically essentialist, trans-inclusive feminism *and* champion No Cis Men; we cannot have it both ways (2020).

In addition to reifying these problematic categories, heteropessimism has the consequence of reinscribing heteronormative notions of 'the good life' by presenting heterosexuality as something one strives for despite its many obstacles (Holzberg & Lehtonen 2021). Heterosexuality thus becomes the site of a conspicuous kind of cruel optimism: a relation produced when an object one desires also poses an obstacle to one's flourishing (Berlant 2011). Blythe Roberson's cheekily titled, post-#MeToo dating-strategy book, *How to Date Men When You Hate Men* (2019), exemplifies this phenomenon: for women to pursue heterosexual relationships de-

spite largely finding the objects necessary to complete that relationship (i.e., men) intolerable certainly implies a problematic attachment. Given the contradictory double movement that characterizes heteropessimism, one might argue that it is not heterosexuality itself that is a "prison," but rather one's optimistic attachment toward *the promise of heterosexuality* (e.g., romance, happiness, reproduction, contentment, etc.) that causes suffering. Heteropessimism could be thought of as *a negative affective orientation toward* and *disaffiliation with* one's own attachment to heterosexuality, informed by the view that heterosexuality is, at the very least, incommensurable with feminist sexual politics or, in a wider sense, irreparably broken. Of course, feminists have long felt and expressed ambivalence about their personal attachments to heterosexuality (Firestone 1970; Rich 1980). Feminist psychologists Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkson (1993) manage to capture some surprisingly straight-forward examples of early 1990s heteropessimism in the introduction to their edited volume, *Heterosexuality: A Feminism and Psychology Reader* (1993). The authors outline their opening observations very plainly: "it seems that on the rare occasions when heterosexual feminists are challenged about their heterosexuality, they tend to describe how miserable they are, compared with the (presumed) happiness of lesbians" (Kitzinger & Wilkson1993, 12-13).

Prompted by #MeToo, feminism became deeply involved in an interrogation of what Moira Donegan (2019) would eventually call "strident and incurious" sex-positivity, which unsurprisingly reinvigorated interest in sex-negativity (Berlant 2019; Lewis 2020; Srinivasan 2021b). At DFTW 2019, Berlant said:

> Feminism, historically viewed, has involved more than the documentation of harms and the ordinariness of brokenness, not just adding resilience to post-traumatic recovery, not just being utopian, but getting into the weeds of what to do with the creative energies that become released from a life that had been bound up in surviving supremacy.

Berlant's nostalgic view of feminism's reparative ideals indirectly reveals the recursive properties of feminist discourse. Within this particular return we have, on the one hand, what Berlant (2019) refers to later in their talk as "the embrace of erotophobia," signified by the revitalized interest in sex-negativity and heteropessimism (n.p.); on the other, we have the vestiges of what one might call post-postfeminism—capitalistic, neoliberal, mainstream, and sex-positive—with which many feminists are disenchanted (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). Neither of

these discursive trends are particularly generative (Gonzalez 2022; Hood 2022). The problem, as I see it, is that there remains very little of what Berlant (2019) refers to as "creative energy" within feminism's political and affective reserves. This shortage can be partially attributed to the pandemic, the affective fatigue brought about by #MeToo and other monumental feminist losses, such as the Supreme Court's Dobbs decision. But on a more general level, I suspect that today's feminists are not necessarily experiencing their creative energies as "released" from "a life that had been bound up in surviving [white male capitalist] supremacy" (Berlant 2019). This feeling of being trapped has produced an affective tenor within feminist and queer thought that contributes to what Berlant (2019) calls the valorization "of erotophobia as the ground zero of realism about sex and power."

The heteropessimistic turn in feminist discourse reveals that feminism is in the process of being rearticulated through an ambivalently-coded, negative lens, resulting in an increased awareness that feminism *cannot* just be about 'feel good' confidence and empowerment because feminism demands a negative affective apprehension of one's own situation or, at the very least, empathy for the struggles of others (Ahmed 2004, 2016). In my view, this turn is good: political organizing of all kinds necessitates an antagonistic relation to structures of oppression and the agents of those structures (Ngai 2005; Ahmed 2016). The tractability of heteropessimism as an idea demonstrates its indispensability as a concept for understanding the unique ways these negative sentiments are expressed in today's political and discursive context. Though it does not produce action itself, heteropessimism has the potential to connect feminist sexual politics to a sphere of collective affectivity from which political momentum can be generated.

The problem is that, at this particular moment, there's plenty of fuel, but no fire. Worse of all: the matches are wet. While negativity *can* provide the necessary foundation for meaningful organizing (see, for example, the consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s) it also has the potential to contribute to a dissociative/nihilistic mire which stymies political movement. Today, one sees very little direct action and an excess of what Elisa Gonzalez (2022) diagnoses as "discourse feminism": a version of feminism that is currently fashioned, maintained, and policed by feminist critics on sites such as *The Baffler* and *The Cut*. For some time, discourse feminism has, according to Jess Bergman (2022), been "trapped in a loop of disavowal," with much of feminist criticism focused on "patrolling the movement's border for interlopers" and defining twenty-first century feminism by what it *isn't*, rather than what it is (n.p.). "While feminist dissensus is as old as feminism itself," Bergman (2022) writes, "it can feel like we're living

through a particularly degraded form of this disagreement" (n.p.). It is from within this negatively charged discursive crucible that new feminist identifications are emerging: the resurrected postfeminist "anti-woke cool girl" (Hood 2022), the Fleabag-inspired "dissociative feminist" (Clein 2019; Peyer 2022), and, finally, the anesthetized, heteropessimistic feminist (Seresin 2019).

In her 2019 article, "The Impossibility of Feminism," Andrea Long Chu taps into this developing feeling, arguing that the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s "accidentally proved feminism impossible" by failing to "deliver on its promise to radically restructure not just material institutions but relationality as such" (63). Our implicit recognition of feminism's failures has produced pervasive feminist disappointment. "In fact," Chu (2019) writes, "disappointment is the governing affect of feminism as a political imaginary. […] most feminists are mostly disappointed in feminism most of the time" (63). Chu connects this disappointment to heterosexuality through the example of the notorious *Babe.net* story published at the height of #MeToo. The piece recounts the story of a woman named "Grace" and her discomfiting date with comedian and outspoken male-feminist Aziz Ansari. Grace came to view her encounter with Ansari, in which he rode roughshod over her attempts to place boundaries, as sexual assault. While it is clear that Ansari was inconsiderate, selfish, and perhaps even coercive, Chu (2019) writes that Grace had chosen, over and over, to stay for a simple reason: "she wanted to" (76): "The surprising durability of [Grace's] optimism" manifested as an unspoken plea: "Let me believe that heterosexuality isn't a lost cause. Let me believe that feminism is possible" (Chu 2019, 78).

For Chu, the promise of feminism is that it will change the nature of heterorelationality for the better; but #MeToo and the repeal of Roe v. Wade have demonstrated over and over that the field of heterosexual politics is defined by interminable strife and that even our chosen intimate relations are fraught by their very nature. Is it any wonder that the inability to escape this reality produces heteropessimism? When heteropessimism collides with feminist disappointment, its anesthetizing effect intensifies. It doesn't just numb the pain; it incapacitates as well, hindering feminism from moving toward a radically inclusive sexual politics that productively blends feminism's inherent negativity with its positive direction. If we attempt to refashion heteropessimism into a kind of feminist politics, we risk regressing back into the discursive loop and taking a quasi-feminist/qua-

si-anti-feminist position that fails to integrate the hard-learned lessons of the Sex Wars and therefore comes to resemble a tattered version of 1990s postfeminism. In fact, this regression is already happening, as the emergence of the "anti-woke cool girl" (Hood 2022) and the pseudo-ironic "tradwife" (Cooksey 2021) demonstrate.

Yet feminism does not reject heteropessimism because, in the same way that it functions as a queer-identificatory/hetero-aspirational double movement for the individual expressing it, it serves a very particular and crucial function for feminism as an ideological apparatus. It displaces the disappointment one feels about feminism's failure to affect material change in heterorelationality onto heterosexuality itself, thereby naturalizing heteronormative inequality and protecting feminism from critiques of its impossibility (Chu 2019). This trade off comes at a steep cost: in aestheticizing ourselves against the awfulness of heterosexual culture, we have tacitly accepted its awfulness. We have traded pain—which builds resilience, solidarity, and passion for change—for numbness and, in extreme cases, nihilism.

The Black Pill

> Erotophobia is not just the fear and hatred of sex, after all. It is projected onto anybody said to bear a kind of body deemed at once incompetent to life and too powerful in its appetites to control (Berlant 2019).

The sexual politics that defined 1990s-2000s postfeminism paralleled the emergence of a related cultural phenomenon that was gradually integrated into U.S. mainstream culture: Pick Up Artists (PUA). Popularized by journalist Neill Strauss in his best-selling 2005 book, *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pick Up Artists*, PUA is an ideology based on cherry-picked and misconstrued evolutionary psychology that essentializes gender differences in order to "gamify" sex. Jacob Johanssen (2022) writes that PUA "sells some straight men the illusion that they can 'crack' any woman," by presenting women as "machines" for whom "all it takes is the right male 'algorithm' to get access to them" (11-12). The gamification of sex and the objectification of women is consistent with the fact that PUA's ideology is dependent on uninterrogated principles of capitalistic consumerism and neoliberal ideas of self-determination. By the late 2000s, PUAs views on sex and gender began to modulate in ways that track with global shifts "within the wider arc of [...] neoliberal practice" (Bratich & Banet-Wiser 2019, 5005). As neoliberalism became even more precarious during the 2008 global recession, so was PUA, opening up rifts that allowed other masculinist sexual frameworks to

emerge. Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Wiser (2019) write, "In the years between 2007 and 2014, the PUA community […] increasingly shared cultural space with a different online community, that of 'incels,' who create homosocial bonds over the *inability* to become a PUA" (5004). Mirroring the attitude that many held toward neoliberal economics post-2008, incels began to (hetero)pessimistically declare that "the game [i.e., the politics of heterosexual desire] was rigged from the start" (Beau 2018, n.p.).[3]

While incels are often presented by the media one-dimensionally as hateful misogynists, eternal virgins, and hopeless losers, incels have co-constructed a complicated, totalizing ideology online that, in many ways, is feminism's antithesis.[4] If feminists understand the world to be shaped by male domination, incels view the world as shaped by biologically innate sex hierarchies which are skewed to benefit women and attractive men. Incels generally feel that politics of heterosexual desire, i.e., what traits are both desirable and attractive to others within a particular heteronormative schema, are unfair and exclusionary (Srinivasan 2021a). When examined, however, exclusion is often produced by incels' own rigid views on and entitlement toward unfettered sexual gratification, love, and affection from attractive, "unspoiled" women or "Stacys" (i.e., "model-tier" women), who allegedly only want "Chads" (i.e., ideal males). On the subreddit r/trufemcels, a support group for *women* who want long-term relationships but find themselves chronically single, a frequent topic of conversation is the hypocrisy of incel men, who have constructed an entire subculture around being too ugly or too socially awkward to find love or sex but are simultaneously "explicitly uninterested in conventionally unattractive or socially awkward women" (Srinivasan 2021a, 115-116).The politics of heterosexual desire are incompatible with incel's entitlement and expectations; in short, if she's not a "Stacy," she's worthless. Amia Srinivasan (2021a) recounts that "on one incel forum, as members address the question of why incels aren't interested in non-high-status women, someone posts: 'You're upset because people don't want to fuck actual filth?'" (116).[5]

While incels' entitlement is certainly consequential, most analyses or discussions of incel ideology bottom out at this issue and therefore fail to consider the ways in which incels' entitlement (and the reportedly involuntary nature of their celibacy) is complicated by a strong disgust response toward the female body, a deep suspicion of intimacy, and despondency regarding the biologically innate aspects of sexuality. For example (*figure 1*):

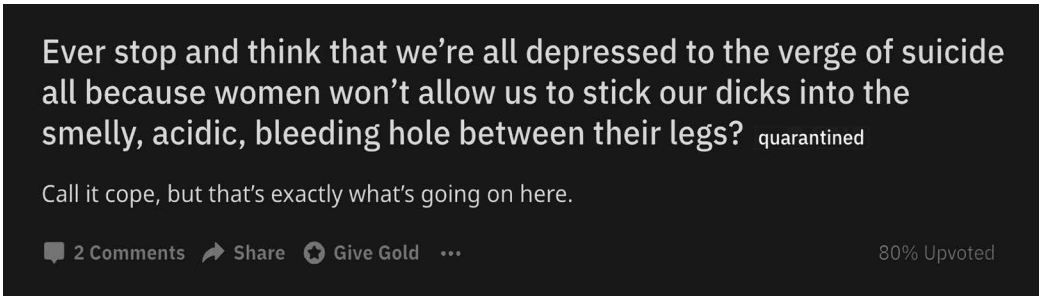

Figure 1

A central problematic for those who study both misogynist movements and misogyny more generally is the ambivalent nature of misogyny (Wrisley 2021). As the above example demonstrates, incels simultaneously occupy an affective space of desire and disgust, adoration and contempt. Johanssen (2002) writes that these contradictory thoughts go beyond misogyny and reveal that the men of the manosphere, including incels, are "structured by states of dis/inhibition: apathy and toxic symbolic power, contradictions of desire, affective forces and the push and pull of the unconscious. Their egos are fragile, and they feel threatened by women, female sexuality and the (alleged) power women hold today" (4). This contradictory state is especially present in communities that are focused on the inequity of the politics of sexual desire such as incel.

Misogynist statements like the one featured above are also emblematic of the post-ironic deployment of memes and offensive language that epitomize Right-wing internet spaces (Dafaure 2020). Post-irony simply describes a state in which sincerity and irony become muddled, making it a useful tool for those who want to say hateful things and avoid consequences. When self-identified incel Jack Peterson (2018) was thrust into the spotlight as the "semi-official spokesman" of the incel movement after the Toronto Van Killings in 2018, he attempted to frame incel's overt expressions of misogyny as "venting" and "darkly ironic" (Ling 2018). "The response I got [from fellow incels]" he says, was: "'You're misrepresenting us: we really do hate women. We're not joking'" (Ling 2018). "I always viewed it as very dark humor, and people being sarcastic," Peterson says, "Not as ironic as I imagined" (Ling 2018).

In light of this context, I tend to read incel texts like the one above from the perspective of a feminist close reader, recognizing the post-irony for what it is—a semi-real performance of shock speech. In my view, expressions that employ descriptive, visceral terminology go beyond what Donald Trump so famously

referred to as "locker-room talk" (Nelson 2017; Ward 2020): such statements are abject expressions meant to generate a kind of social power (Kay 2022). Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond (2021) write that "appearing to be socially abject, although strongly undesirable in daily life, can generate widespread sympathy and even institutional redress […] Being abject (or performing self-abjection) often carries significant political capital" (4). Building on this observation, Jilly Boyce Kay (2021) adds that incels' performance of self-abjection positions "the figure of the incel […] in contemporary culture as an emblem of the injustices of the zeitgeist, about which *something must be done*" (29).

However, the impetus to "do" something about the abjection of the incels does not seem to extend to the incels themselves. While some incels openly ponder and seek feedback on the extent to which their sexual status can be improved by "lookmaxxing" or "gymceling" (incel terms for improving one's looks) (Hines 2019), many reject potential solutions to their loneliness and, instead, dump affective energy into fantasies about what the world would look like if the politics of heterosexual desire were "fair" (see *figure 2*).

While such fantasies are often held up by watch-dogs as paradigmatic of incels' politics, incels derisively label such fantasies as "cope" – a process by which one "rejects a harsh truth and adopts a less disturbing belief instead" (Incel Wiki: Cope 2021). Incels' rejection of "copes" is often communicated succinctly in a two-word phrase: "it's over." That is, there is no point in changing yourself or continuing to pursue dating; things are completely hopeless; your lot in life is to suffer; you should just LDAR (lay down and rot) (Johannsen 2022, xxiii).

This heteropessimistic nihilism functions as the foundation of "The Black Pill," a designation meant to signal a shift from the "Red Pill" approach to inceldom put forth by PUA. While Red Pilled men attempt to change their sexual status through sexual strategy, working out, or achieving wealth, incels who have "swallowed the Black Pill" accept that heterosexuality is the domain of attractive, neurotypical individuals and that one's status within heterosexuality is genetically predetermined and therefore impossible to change. The Incel Wiki (a surprisingly useful source of ascertaining consensus as it is collectively authored) defines The Black Pill as follows: "[The Black Pill] is a pessimistic, nihilistic or defeatist version of the redpill [*sic*], where one accepts the fate nature has bestowed

people make is sound as if the "Incel Rebellion" is a laughing matter and that people don't understand problem.

The Incels are not the problem, but rather they are a symptom that something is very wrong in our society - and unless their legitimate grievances are addressed this could very soon spiral out of control just like what happened in Iraq, Libya and Syria when their respective governments refused to address and deal with the legitimate grievances a portion of their popolation had.

Calling the Incels a bunch of "virgins and frustrated losers with communication skills equal to that of an autistic potato" is oversimplifying the problem. Yes, they are all that. But why are they frustrated virgins?

The real issue is that with the advancement of makeup, healthy at any size bullshit, feminism and through social engineering a lot of women have become detached from reality. The reason these incels arn't getting laid is because women with a sexual market value equal to theirs use makeup to go from a 3/10 - 7/10 (false marketing, in my opinion, and should be a punishable offense) to fuck with men above their league.

So I propose that rather than making Incels look bad, we look at the reasons they've become this way and what steps we can take to deconflict and reverse things. Because let's be real, calling them names, labeling them a terrorist organization etc isn't going to make the problem go away.

There are several ways I propose we do this:

1) Women are no longer allowed to wear makeup, i.e falsely advertise "their" beauty and hence stop them from banging guys above their league.

2) Women are ONLY allowed to date men with equal sexual market value to them. State-mandated tests should be made and everyone get a sexual-market value card, ranging from 1/10 to 10/10, like an ID card.

3) Every time a woman sleeps with a new man she lose one (1) rank on her sexual-market value card, until she reach the lowest rank (1/10).

4) There's no way to rise through the ranks, other than through excercise.

5) Women with more than 9 sexual partners and single moms should be forced by the state to date and have sex with incels that can't get any women despite the above changes.

This would deal with the problem, not the symptom, and is the way we deal with everything from counter-piracy to counter-terrorism. The Incel threat is real and should be treated the same way.

Figure 2

upon them, and resigns themselves to the fact that the world is naturally unfair and will always remain so" (Incel Wiki: Blackpill 2021). As with other offensive internet subcultures, incels use post-irony and humor to "defensively shut down any possible form of change, transformation or agency—as well as debate" (Johanssen 2022, 103).

Incel heteropessimism goes deeper than accepting that the politics of heterosexual desire are irreparably broken and therefore unfair: incels believe that sex is the mechanism by which one accesses full-subject status, arguing that incels are "*de facto* not considered as humans by normies [i.e., non-incels]" and that "incels are denied the same human rights as others" (Incel Wiki: Subhuman 2021). In taking a heteropessimistic position, Black Pill incels conceptualize themselves as consciously rejecting this ontological paradigm, therefore rejecting the mode of achievement (i.e., normative heterosexuality), and accepting their status as non-subjects or, in their terms, "subhuman" (Incel Wiki: Subhuman 2021). The adoption of this radical position is, of course, where incels and feminist heteropessimists diverge significantly.

The Black Pill creates a philosophical dilemma for many incels: if "hope" (i.e., optimism about one's future in the schema of heterosexuality) is excluded as a possibility, then the only other options are "cope" (i.e., engage self-deluded mental gymnastics) or "rope." "Rope" is presented as the inevitable end point to one's inceldom, as suicide is viewed as the only means by which one can escape one's biologically predetermined incel status (Incel Wiki: Roping 2021). While hope, cope, and rope are presented as a neat, rhyming tri-set, there is a fourth option—one that is often enthusiastically encouraged within some incel communities: to take revenge; to kill.

As a queer/feminist theorist whose primary focuses are heterosexuality and misogyny, I have hesitated to write on incels for a long time, partially because incel's misogyny has always felt a bit overdetermined. I sensed that their hatred of women was almost beside the point. I see now that I felt this way because the object of incel hatred is not straightforwardly women. For incels, women merely serve (as they often do) as convenient receptacles for bad feelings, including hate, disgust, desire, and fear. This general sense on my part became even clearer as I considered the targets/objects of the typical incel mass shooter (because there are,

unfortunately, enough of them now to form a type). The targets of these attacks are rarely only women. Elliot Rodger, whom many identify as the ur-incel mass killer, killed more men than women during his spree on the campus of UC Santa Barbara, despite setting out to kill "every spoiled, stuck-up blonde slut" he saw (Garvey 2014). Inspired by Rodger, Alek Minassian drove a rented van down a busy sidewalk in Toronto, explicitly targeting both women *and* men. A few hours earlier, he wrote on Facebook, "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger" (Kassam and Cecco 2018). Nikolas Cruz, who, in a YouTube comment, vowed that "Elliot Rodger will not be forgotten," targeted his classmates and teachers at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School on *Valentine's Day*.

What is more interesting to me is how The Black Pill seems to actually comfort incels. As with the feminist heteropessimists, the heteropessimistic nature of The Black Pill seems to function as an "anesthetic feeling," succinctly captured in the idea that "the game was rigged from the start." If one's sexuality and desirability is purely determined by genetics and biology, as The Black Pill says, then Black Pilled incels are shielded from the harsh reality that 1) their desires and reality are grossly mismatched and 2) one's success within the schema of heterosexuality (and life in general) at least partially hinges on one's ability to negotiate one's own desires within said schema. Acknowledging these realities would force Black Pilled incels to integrate their legitimate complaints about the politics of heterosexual desire (for example, how heterosexuality is shaped by lookism) with recognizable deficits in their personalities (Johanssen 2022, 104). The Black Pill is an anesthetizing tool of avoidance; it allows these incels to tuck their desire for love and sex away and maladaptively sublimate and rationalize those desires by adopting a heteropessimistic outlook that completely rejects the politics of heterosexual desire. Of course, this means that adoption of the Black Pill is, in essence, a cope of its own. As it turns out, there is no outside inceldom.

While The Black Pill has drawn some attention due to its connection with acts of mass violence, little has been said on the heteropessimistic nihilism inherent to this kind of inceldom beyond the fact that it portends further violence. Nothing has been said of the fact that The Black Pill's heteropessimistic nihilism has transformed and broadened incel identity, from an identity centered around one's (presumably temporary) sexlessness to an identity that also signifies a contempt for and disgust with the normative structure and pleasure regimes of heterosexuality. Black Pilled incels have moved beyond being concerned with the fact that women do not find them sexually appealing. If this was still their primary concern, incel ideology would be more about self-improvement and less about wallowing in

the implicit superiority that comes with being a sexual nihilist. Incels feel as if they are sexually (and therefore ontologically) below *but intellectually above* the "normies," who are apparently unaware of how they are being manipulated by the twisted and unfair politics of heterosexual desirability peddled by manipulative "foids."[6] They therefore adopt the heteropessimistic Black Pill position even if it means accepting that they will never be happy in a heteronormative society, even if this pessimistic nihilism is telling them they should just go ahead and kill themselves (and, while you're at it, take some Chads and Stacys with you). Those incels who are still trying to shoehorn themselves into the pleasure regimes of heterosexuality? That's just "cope."

At the heart of things, it is not women—who fail to fuck, validate, and love on command—but heterosexuality's politics of desirability that is the primary object of the Black Pilled incels' hatred. While they would love nothing more than to be brought into the fold as proper heterosexual subjects, they reject heterosexuality as it exists because they perceive it as fundamentally broken and unfair. This move preempts their inevitable failure to be integrated into the norm. The hatred they feel toward heterosexuality's politics of desirability is projected onto the Chads and Stacys of the world who, in incels' two-dimensional mythos, are successfully navigating what Berlant (2019) calls "the pleasure regimes of sexual normativity." Black Pilled incels embrace heteropessimism because heterosexuality has failed to deliver on what they interpret as its patriarchal promise: undeniable male domination and unqualified female submission. To minimize their own responsibility, they turn toward a view which states that nothing can change the politics of desire except for a radical, systemic upheaval and the elimination of female autonomy. In this sense, Black Pilled incels have taken on the mantel of perhaps the purest version of heteropessimism.

Black Pill Feminism

At this point, the overlaps between feminist heteropessimism and incel might seem largely incidental: both groups are ultimately struggling with the changing landscape of heterosexual politics. But what happens when elements of incels' deterministic gender ideology leak into the heteropessimistic feminist consciousness?

In April 2020, an anonymous Reddit user established the subreddit r/BlackPill-Feminism. The introduction reads as follows:

> FEMALE (XX) ONLY
>
> Misogyny, male violence and female pick-me behaviour are biology. Equality is a lie. Feminism is a scam and failed movement. We are heading towards a misogynist dystopia and there is nothing we can do about it. Take the Black Pill, sit back and enjoy the ride to hell (r/BlackPillFeminism, Reddit, 2020).

The subreddit was banned by Reddit administrators within two months, but in that short amount of time r/BlackPillFeminism had accumulated over 3100 subscribers.[7] In 2021, new Black Pill Femimism (BPF) forums began appearing elsewhere online on Reddit knock-off sites such as "Saidit." These sites are less censorious than Reddit and have therefore attracted many of Reddit's ousted communities.

Discussions on these BPF forums include misreadings of studies that suggest that up to "90%" of men are pedophiles (LaQueSabe 2021), polemics instructing true feminists to stop loving their fathers (Trueblackpillfeminism 2021), and the supposedly proto-Black Pill philosophy of Shulamith Firestone (Fuckitall 2021). BPFs express identification with other notable feminist works. User OasisReverie writes, "I would say that I agree with many of the points Valerie Solanas made in the SCUM Manifesto. I'm just that *out there* when it comes to my disdain for men" (2020). User green_olive responds, "Willingly dating an XWhy as a woman in 2020 has to be one of the dumbest decisions you can make. There's no faster way to bring danger, stress, and trouble in your life than allowing scrotes into it" (2020).

BPF represents a merging of an intensified feminist heteropessimism and incel's nihilistic and deterministic gender ideology. The mechanism of this merger is symbolic but meaningful. Despite their apolitical nihilism and up-front disavowal of feminism as a "failed movement," it seems that BPFs have chosen to preserve their "feminist" identification as a way of alluding to the group belief that women are inherently ethically and morally superior to men. By wielding determinism to explain gendered violence and inequality, by accepting that "women are fucked and things will keep getting worse and worse," BPFs turn their back on the possibilities of feminism and reserve their energy for incel-like tirades against the outsized yet amorphous idea of the all-powerful male.

Needless to say, the affinity that some so-called feminists share with a nihilistic ideology that thrives on the dehumanization of others along the lines of hardline biological essentialism/determinism is concerning. Viewed alongside other feminist essentialisms such as trans-exclusionary radical feminism, BPF's ideology suggests a strong reactionary reflex within feminism along the lines of heterosexual relationality. One can see watered-down versions of it in provocative but shallow essays like Pauline Harmange's *I Hate Men* (2020), which unconvincingly argues that hating men is a useful response to sexism because it fosters female (yes, *female*) solidarity. It is this reactionary reflex that can be traced back to the "valorization of erotophobia as the ground-zero of realism about sex and power" (Berlant 2019). While such reflexes are understandable—particularly when every day seems to reveal America's Next Top Sex Pest—but they must be interrogated when they arise.

Conclusion

The heteropessimistic turn in feminist discourse is a turn away from the unfulfilled promises by postfeminist sex-positivity and the empty representation and consumerism that defined mid-2010s mainstream feminism. What has yet to be defined, however, is what heteropessimism is turning toward. As the Black Pill Feminists demonstrate, there are serious costs to sliding into the misandrist essentialism that germinates in the shallow soil of mainstream, "empowerment" feminism. Entertaining and promulgating such essentialisms not only obscures the quiet optimism many professed heteropessimists still privately hold, but also the manifold, ambivalent realities of the heterosexual experience and the recognition that heterosexuality is often shaped by antagonism-driven desire, the pleasure to be found in oppositeness, and the playful manipulation of gendered power differentials (Allen, et al. 2022; Ward 2020; Wypijewski 2020).

The fact is that heterosexuality has a lot of problems, but it is not *the* problem. Rather than making heterosexuality the receptacle for all of our bad feelings about the state of sexual politics, which obviously exceed heterosex, feminism needs to acknowledge negative affects as part of the fabric of ambiguity that cloaks sexual politics. Leaning into feminist negativity and uncertainty is a tall order, for doing so means making peace with what Maggie Nelson (2021) summarizes as "the

fact that everything is *not* going to be OK, that no one or nothing is coming to save us, and that this is both searingly difficult and also fine" (126). But let's not mistake this position for a nihilism or a different form of pessimism; it is, instead, a capacious view of the intricacies of desire, the tensions that define it, and the conflicts that give it life. I will resist going so far as to call it an embracing of hetero-optimism, but it is a move in that direction. May we discover the requisite "skills for bearing this transition," as Lauren Berlant said in 2019, and rebuild our "confidence in how to be together."

Endnotes

1. Since her/their death, Lauren Berlant's estate has offered the following guidance regarding her/their pronouns: "Lauren's pronoun practice was mixed—knowingly, we trust. Faced with queries as to 'which' pronoun Lauren used and 'which' should now be used, the position of Lauren's estate (Ian Horswill, executor; Laurie Shannon, literary executor) is that Lauren's pronoun(s) can best be described as 'she/they.' 'She/they' captures the actual scope of Lauren's pronoun archive, and it honors Lauren's signature commitment to multivalence and complexity. It also leaves thinkers free to adopt either pronoun, or both of them, as seems most fitting in their own writing about *her/them*."

2. After his essay's publication, Seresin (2020) wrote in a blog post that he was stepping away from the term "heteropessimism" in favor of the terms "heterofatalism" or "heteronegativity" in order "to make totally clear that there is no parallel between heteropessimism and Afropessimism" ("Pretty Straight, Pretty Conventional"). I am holding onto the word "heteropessimism" as I believe it, unlike "heterofatalism" (which narrowly implies "accepting of one's fate") and "heteronegativity" (which is too affectively general), captures the affective complexities of the concept.

3. After the 2016 American Presidential election, the social media site Reddit faced increasing criticism for hosting groups that encouraged violence. Reddit administrators executed the first round of bans targeting misogynist hate groups on November 7, 2017, which eliminated the original r/incel subreddit. Incels responded by creating a new subreddit, called "r/braincels," which was subsequently banned in April 2018.

4. The selections I use to illustrate various aspects of incel were based on both their relevance to this article and their (admittedly subjective) representativeness of larger discursive trends within the group over the last five years. I was not aware of Black Pill Feminism until after the subreddit was banned by Reddit administrators. Thus, examples from BPF's subreddit are based on the random screengrabs collected by internet archiving tool "The Way Back Machine" before the subreddit's deletion. Examples from "Saidit" and "The Pink Pill" were selected based on both relevance and their prominence on the forum at the time of writing (see bibliography).

5. For more on "femcels," see Kay (2021) and Tiffany (2022).

6. "Foid" is an incel term for women that merges the words "female" and "humanoid."

7. While this number is significant, it is worth saying that, by the time Reddit banned r/incel and r/braincels, r/incel had over 40,000 subscribers and r/braincels—which was only 10 `

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