

“I WOULD DO ANYTHING TO NOT CALL THIS PLACE HOME”: THE BLACK PILL,  
INVOLUNTARY CELIBACY, AND THE NEOLIBERAL MALE GRASP IN DIGITAL INCEL  
COMMUNITIES

by

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Honours Bachelor of Arts, Victoria College in the University of Toronto, 2017

A thesis presented to Ryerson University and York University

in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in the joint program of  
Communication and Culture

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

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**Title:** “I would do anything to not call this place home”: The black pill, involuntary celibacy, and the neoliberal male grasp in digital incel communities

**Degree:** Master of Arts

**Program:** Communication and Culture

**University:** Ryerson University and York University

**Year:** 2020

## **Abstract**

Drawing from gender studies, critical theory, media studies, and anthropology, this thesis examines “involuntary celibacy” and the links between neoliberalism, masculinity, digital community, and misogyny. Based on an analysis of the webforum incels.co, it chronicles the development of the “incel” identity, situating it as a reaction to contemporary social hierarchies and cultural norms, including the infringement of neoliberal market logic onto social relations and gender stereotypes. The “incel identity” is framed as a site wherein these norms meet and contradict each other, leading to the construction of a group epistemology that attempts to explain the incel’s oppression. This group knowledge, dubbed the “black pill”, is an alternative set of norms, behaviours, and social truths rooted in masculine supremacy and supported through the usage of positivist, scientific claims. This project explores the rationality and sentiments of the black pill, especially as they relate to expressive traits of the body. At its core, this thesis argues that “incel” ideology exposes a contradiction between the neoliberal marketization of the self and contemporary masculinity, and it draws upon this contradiction to formulate a way of understanding the process and practice of digitized community.

## **Key words**

incel, masculinity, blackpill, involuntary celibacy, forum, phenotype, program, ideology, neoliberalism, gender, red pill, platform

## Acknowledgements

People often tell you that a master's degree is all about learning from others; despite this, I'm sometimes in disbelief about the amount of help and support that I've received from the people in my life while working on this project. My supervisor, Dr. Greg Elmer, has been the single most important influence on me through my Master's studies, and I owe much of my own achievements to his dedication, mentorship, sharp knowledge and even sharper wit. And deepest thanks to my thesis committee: Dr. Ganaele Langlois, whose extensive library both mental and physical provided me with the ability and the means to say what I wanted to; and Dr. Rob Heynen, for our first meeting where what I wanted out of this really took shape, and for catalyzing a lot of this project by suggesting Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*. Sam Shaftoe was beside me every step of this project, much before, and for much ahead. Sabrina Ward-Kimola gave me the type of feedback only she can on many draft versions of this thesis, and kept me afloat of the murky water that divides writing for oneself and writing for others.

## **Dedication**

For Lisa DiRocco-Burton, Paul Burton, and Jack Burton, my family.

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## 1. One pill, two pill, red pill, blue pill: introduction

*We need to talk about taking the ‘black pill’, meaning to reconcile that there are no personal solutions to systemic problems.*

*Paragon, coiner of the “black pill.”*

Women and those who identify as femme experience structural abuses, harassment, and sexual violence far more often than men, and this violence is deeply tied to the colonial history of patriarchal authority upheld by Judeo-Christian, Western values (Narayan 2013, 99). Patriarchy maintains itself differently according to the hegemonic practices of a given historical moment, leading to what Walby calls “historically differentiated patriarchies” (1990). So while in one moment, patriarchal authority may have been maintained through “traditional” gender roles that confine women to domestic labour (Gardiner 1975), the proliferation of social networking technologies has shifted the terrain of social practice into the digital. Alongside this shift in terrain, the last decade has seen the emergence of an explicitly-antagonistic form of conservatism that calls itself the “alt-right”.<sup>1</sup> Associated with subcultural internet communities that make up the “deep vernacular web” (Tuters 2019, 39), this new conservatism rejects the classical liberalism associated with traditional conservative ideology.

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1. I use “calls itself” because, while the term has come to identify the movement within cultural discourses, there is ample evidence (including boasts by the movement’s originators; see Florido, 2016) that the term was created by the movement as a cultural strategy to rhetorically distance themselves from the white supremacism, ethnonationalism, and antifeminism that characterizes their politics (for detail, see O’Connor, 2016).

Its loose collection of sub-movements share a common disdain for contemporary politics of equality in the name of protectionism and racial self-preservation. Members of the movement variously call for a white ethno-state, a halt to all immigration, and a return to traditional patriarchal order (Nagle 2017). What distinguishes them from historical conservatism is that formed through, and existing on, digital platforms as opposed to the organizations of movement conservatism, their lack of access to state power (at least until the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America) has lead to a populist politics of the digital commons, highly vernacular and dismissive of the decorum that has characterized the post-WWII international order.

Despite the fact that members identify themselves as part of the “alt-right”, the vagueness of the term has lead to any practice of vernacular conservatism online to association with the movement. Distinguishing between groups that share a similar discursive style and are often juggling presences on multiple platforms is a difficult task. But one useful way to characterize the alt-right is their general belief in the “red pill”, an epistemological frame and set of political practices associated with seeing the “truth” behind the controlling, somatic illusion of contemporary liberal culture (Ludemann 2018, 94). Originally used by alt-right forefather Andrew Breitbart in 2012, the red pill has grown into a common memetic trope (Lewis 2019). As a cultural object of the alt-right, it represents a process of *becoming*: when one takes the red pill, they see that contemporary liberal society is ruled by the interests of elites, and progressive movements such as third-wave feminism, Black Lives Matter, liberal multiculturalism, and anything else that goes against the alt-right's atavistic traditionalism is an attempt to brainwash the masses into serving the elite agenda. To be red pillled, one must only carry this reflexive antagonism towards mainstream liberal culture. And many of these

movements ground their own agendas in this common antagonism: a core belief of many red pill movements is that, just as their adherents once did, exposing the lies of liberal hegemony is the first step towards overthrowing this hegemony and gaining cultural and political power.

My project begins with the distinctions between communities commonly grouped under the “alt-right”. One such subgroup, referred to as the “manosphere,” is an umbrella of men’s rights groups associated with the alt-right in the public imagination. However, many have been around long before the “alt-right” took shape (such as the pick-up artist movement, “A Voice for Men”, and “Men Going Their Own Way”), while others (such as the Proud Boys or Gamergate) have temporal, and in some instances direct, ties to the “alt-right” through figureheads or political participation. Where the groups within the manosphere differ is in their particular approaches to dealing with what they view as society’s oppression of men. While the Proud Boys and MGTOW advocate for a high degree of self-reliance and sustainability against the wanton and ruinous desires of carnal masculinity, Gamergaters claim to be primarily concerned with the effect of feminism on video games. While my thesis is in conversation with those who have undertaken prior research on the red pill, I break down its movements, especially the manosphere, to focus on a group that is commonly lumped in with red pill ideology yet claims its own regimen for awakening: the involuntary celibacy community. Incels, as they refer to themselves, believe that mainstream culture is brainwashed by feminism to serve the elite. Yet they also believe that the red pill’s identification of cultural brainwashing does not go far enough in acknowledging the grip that liberalism’s rhetorics of equality have on society, to the point that any attempt to do so is wasted effort. As one poster on the webforum incels.co puts it: the black pill is the “redpill + fatalism”. Taking the black pill reveals a rigid, unmoving and unforgiving social world wherein the incel’s celibacy is not a

passing state, but a permanent fate. While acts of misogynist violence have been committed in the name of involuntary celibacy,<sup>2</sup> they differ from other modes of harassment and violence of the manosphere: while the Proud Boys often participate in right-wing rallies and violently clash against protesters (Wilson 2018), and Gamergate's core mission was to lead harassment campaigns against feminist videogame journalists like Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn (Urquhart 2019), incel violence is disavowed by the extant community: upon news in May 2020 that a Toronto murder had been classified as "incel terrorism", for example, members on the forum incels.co took no credit for the attack, nor did they celebrate it. The forum's common claim is, instead, that their mission is to deduce the reasons for their supposed oppression. This claim goes against the common cultural understanding of incel, especially as filtered through media coverage of related violence; the spectacular nature of acts of incel violence are closer to eruptions against the sentiment of oppression than a practice embedded within the community.

I aim to explore the differences between the red pill as a political project and the black pill as an extension beyond the red pill. With similar vernacular conservative politics, what makes one take the black pill after the red pill? Whither the black pill's nihilism, as distinct from the red pill's revolutionary itch? And more broadly speaking, what motivates the actions and behaviour of this group? What are the intersections between digital community and this profound masculine isolation?

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2. Some higher-profile acts include Alek Minassian's 2018 murder of 10 people in Toronto, Canada; Eliot Rodger's murder of six people in 2014 in his town of Isla Vista, California; Armando Hernandez Jr.'s 2020 shooting spree in Westgate, Arizona that left three injured; and a minor's attack at a Toronto spa that left one woman dead. Over 40 deaths in Canada and the United States have been linked to incel violence (Bell et. al, 2020).

## Relation to the field

Incels are but one manifestation of a new landscape of contemporary masculinity. Much work so far on involuntary celibacy comes through journalism coverage of self-identified incel Alek Minassian's 2018 attack in Toronto<sup>3</sup> that left 10 dead (see, for example, Zimmer 2018; Schallhorn 2018; and Baele, Brace, and Coan 2019), spurring a cottage industry of writing about self-identified incels (see Beauchamp 2019; Reeve 2018; Doyle 2019; and Jeltsen 2018). Over the course of two years of research for this project, I encountered less than five academic, peer-reviewed papers devoted explicitly to the study of incels. Almost all these works deal with incels as a particular subset of the "manosphere", and attempt to map the latter through considering digital misogyny writ broadly. As opposed to this macro approach, the length of my project allows for a closer reading of what distinguishes incels from the "diverse assemblages" (Ging 2019, 638) that make up those who adhere to the "red pill", and can support further inductive examinations of the role that misogyny plays in online community and contemporary politics.

The Southern Poverty Law Centre defines contemporary "male supremacy" movements as those that take the political positions of the alt-right and apply them to social positions regarding sex and gender relations (2019). While there are ideological and geographic similarities between incels and the SPLC's definition, the former are never mentioned by name nor is their ontologically digital nature discussed—all manifestations of contemporary

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3. Similar to their reaction to Rodger, the Incel Wiki attempts to dissociate themselves from Minassian, from a banner across the top of the article that states "This article is about a criminal. The Incel Wiki does not support or condone this person's actions" to a section titled "Forums" that states "There is no evidence that any forum incited Alek to commit the heinous act, nor is there any evidence Alek used any self-identified incel forums as 4chan is not an incel forum and Foreveralone is not self-identified (though it is geared toward involuntary celibates)".

antifeminism are placed under this same umbrella. But we can find some context for the development of antifeminist rhetoric on digital platforms by examining literature surrounding the 2015 “Gamergate” controversy (Bezio 2018), the ways in which these ideas spread on platforms such as 4chan and Reddit (Massanari 2017), and conspiracies about liberal feminist hegemony that incels find themselves pitted against (Chess and Shaw 2015). In addition, work that links Gamergate to the development of the broader online alt-right (Salter 2018) investigates the role that platforms play in not only the hosting of ideas and communities, but the ways that these ideas spread within platforms and beyond: from the kernel of an idea or a single actor into a germ that spans platforms, geographies, and temporalities (Matamoros-Fernández 2017; Natale and Ballatore 2014).

The literature on virtual communities is rich and informative, beginning with Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* (2000), an investigation of his time on the early network system “The WELL”. Scholars such as Richard Barbrook took up this tradition of investigating networked communications through the “virtual community” metaphor (2006; Barbrook & Cameron 1995) before exploding with the dawn of social media websites (Parks 2014; Fuchs 2014). As social media platforms have become the norm for the creation and maintenance of these “virtual communities”, scholars such as Tarleton Gillespie have attempted to understand the particular affordances of these platforms and the mutual effects they have on shaping user participation (Gillespie 2017, 2014). There is also an increasing amount of literature on ‘dark web’ platforms and their specific infrastructural affordances, from anonymity to a lack of censorship controls (Gehl 2016; Zannettou et al. 2018). My investigation of the black pill as a collective project of epistemological construction adds to this literature and explores the affordances of these virtual communities. In undertaking this project I propose that these two

phenomena are not separate objects of study, but, in line with Gillespie's idea that online platforms face a constant tension between "cultivating community" and their own particular survival as commodity infrastructures (Gillespie 2010, 348), there exists a dialectic between platform affordances and the discursive possibilities of the communities that they host. The vernacular language of incels.co, for example, has close ties to the memetic irony that characterizes a wide swath of digital subcultures that are hosted on associated platforms, especially those opposed or antagonistic to the hegemonic order. In investigating the relationship between this memetic discourse and hegemony, I extend the work of Slavoj Žižek (1989) and Kristen Kennedy (1999); in addition, my work takes up Foucault's framework of the "discourse" as both a linguistic construction and a social ordering logic (2006).

## **Limitations**

The paucity of preexisting literature on digital involuntary celibacy positions my study as an opportunity to both investigate this phenomenon and set out an initial road-map for future related studies. However, this also means that I am unable to cover the wide range of methodological approaches and perspectives that allow for the study of communities. While using publicly-available forum posts as a data set means no researcher interference in observing behaviours and discourses, this approach is not without its own questions: what is the effect of treating fluid and dynamic communications as a series of texts to be read? The nature of forum posts as traces of conversation are important to the theoretical approach that I take, as the posts constitute the forum as an unintentional archive and allows me to investigate questions of epistemology, ideology, and their intersection on the platform. But a method that treats these communications as dynamic exchanges, such as participatory ethnography, would

have its own strengths: when I attempt to read an affective experience from these posts, I have to acknowledge and account for the performative biases on display, and thus the answers to my research questions require “reading” through the texts. Traditional qualitative ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and interviews, would both allow for the in-depth investigation of particular research questions and a centring of the lived experiences of research subjects.

The questions that motivate my research do not have a single answer. Of course, it would be very useful if this were the case: an answer would be a diagnosis of the root cause and a straightforward starting point for policy, social, and political change. But the route to get to that point involves structuring the research subjects and their ideological and behavioural motivations into data points for analysis, which would mean we lose one of the key points of investigation: the ways that these “data points” are mutually, iteratively, and necessarily constituted by the ways that they interact with each other. Because of this, I frame my research within a philosophy of pragmatism (Dewey 1997) as opposed to the post-positivism of quantitative analysis. The qualitative component of my methodology is an attempt to accommodate for the failures of quantitative approaches, but I recognize the inability for any form of social research to compress its subject into an analytical framework while maintaining their integrity as subject.

In addition to this, the research is limited by my attempts to map what is commonly understood by its adherents as an identity onto a particular forum space. While incels.co remains, at the time of this writing, by far the primary digital gathering space for those who identify as incel, the nature of digital communications means that it is certainly not the only



place wherein these people can be located. Communities such as the subreddit r/foreveralone, r/incels, r/braincels, 4chan's /r9k/ and /b/ boards as well as forums such as Lookism.net are also identified, and discussed on incels.co, as places the incel identity either developed or maintains a presence. A study of the development of the black pill could incorporate these various board-specific communities in a "cross-platform" analysis by taking the "boundary objects"—linguistic codes, vocabularies, memes, and behavioural patterns—that demarcate the community's presence and tracing them across platformed communities (Acker & Donovan 2019). This would allow for a deeper investigation of the interactions between this identity and platformed communities that are not solely dedicated to the discussion of the black pill and involuntary celibacy. However, this would require a working definition of the black pill, one that does not currently exist in the literature. One aim of my thesis is to create this working definition, and thus open up the possibility for further research to use this analytic in a cross-platform investigation—but such is outside the scope of my project.

Another limitation of this project is that I do not apply a disability studies lens to my subject. In the later stages of this research, I discovered that a significant affective theme in the incel community is a sense that they are denied participation in mainstream society. This denial is attributed to a confluence of individual physical appearance, neurotypicality, and how individuals are valued and devalued within society. The question of carrying characteristics that negate the possibility of quote-unquote "normalcy" is explored at length in the field of disability studies. This project does not engage with literature in disability studies for two reasons. The first is my own failings as a researcher, wherein I only encountered the field while writing the final chapter of this thesis. The second is the vastly different discourses between disability activists and the involuntarily celibate. Disability studies generally

incorporates two models of thought: the biological model, which considers disability as a medical deficiency to be “corrected”; and the social model, which views disability as imposed by a society unable to incorporate the way of living of a person with a disability (Mould 2020, 66). The latter perspective, often taken up by disability advocates, contrasts with the emphasis on phenotype and immutable traits of the involuntary celibacy community. While my research itself examines the phenotypic approach as *itself* a contingency of the social, incels do not place themselves within disability discourses. Incorporating the lens of disability studies would require me to construct a reading of masculine phenotypicity through the social disability lens. I don’t have the space to do so in a project of this length, but further research would benefit from taking up theories of the social model of disability against the oppression detailed by the involuntarily celibate.

## **Ethical considerations**

Susan Bordo, drawing from Foucault’s history of sexuality in her writings on women’s experiences with anorexia, claims that the “anomalies and aberrations” within a culture are not indications of a deviation from the norm, but instead the “crystallization” of a culture’s negative, oppressive effects. My goal in undertaking this project is to allow the incels.co community to speak in its own language, reconstructing the discursive field in which this community’s desire, repulsion, deep misogyny, and oppression are articulated. I thus take up Barratt and Maddox’s call for the ethnographer to explain what appears irrational to both myself and society at large, through “translat[ing] or interpret[ing] the cultural logics” of the black pill and the ways in which they make sense to this group (Northcote and Moore 2010, 704).

I think that the social views and ideology of this particular community are personally and politically abhorrent, and they're strongly at odds with my own worldview and moral values. My own position as a white male in studying the violent behaviour and language of men who do *not* target me raises the question of whether I am piggybacking on decades of feminist academic labour devoted to articulating the effects and impact of the patriarchy to study a phenomenon that has received a fair share of media attention over the past two years (or, to put it glibly, is currently "sexy"). I want to both acknowledge and centre the intellectual and social labour of femmes before me that has allowed me to approach this issue without the blinders of some agendered "objectivity," and instead leverage my positionality to, as Haraway puts it, "know *effectively*" the issue at hand (1988, 577). Part of this positionality is a personal motivation: as an impressionable pre-teen in the mid-2000s, I read some of the pick-up artistry literature (most notably Neil Strauss' *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of pick-up Artists*) that indirectly lead to the development of contemporary incelism. Its main upshot is that the social world is little more than a market rife with inefficiencies to be exploited, especially when it comes to sexual intimacy. Being surrounded by strong role models and a group of people who loved and supported me prevented me from taking this literature to heart, but in watching pick-up artistry branch off into the contemporary digital incel identity, I have often wondered whether I, as a stereotypically frustrated, hormonal and angsty preteen, could have ended up in this position. My goal in conducting this research is to revisit this experience a decade later and leverage it in order to explore and, hopefully, answer pressing questions about the spread of misogyny and its new digital configurations that extend far beyond subcultural spaces.

The ethics of analyzing user-generated content remains an active debate among social researchers, especially when such content deals with communities that express bigoted or

problematic views (Sormanen & Lauk 2016; Askanius 2019). Due to the total lack of intervention on my part as a researcher, as well as the publicly-available nature of all the posts analyzed, my process is more akin to a discourse analysis on documents than using interview text or other actively-gathered data. The outward nature of these posts, their political and epistemological expressions, and the underlying goal of the construction of the black pill to interpellate users into these communities leaves it unreasonable to expect that these affordances of publicity are suitable to be taken advantage of by users but not researchers. This view is shared by contemporary studies in the ethics of researching digital content on social media and forums, as dictated in Townsend and Wallace (2018) and Woodfield (2017). Despite this, I mitigated any violation of anonymity by changing usernames to random strings of characters before doing anything with my data set. I also did all of my qualitative analysis based on this anonymized data set, not visiting incels.co in any capacity after I began my data scrape. For moments in the text where I refer to a user more than once, I have taken care to replace any identifying factors with third-person pronouns and language that could not identify them in any way.

## **Overview**

In a sentence, this thesis is a mixed-methods study of the community of users found on incels.co, a webforum for people who identify as “involuntary celibate”. I begin the thesis by constructing a history of the term and the development of “incel” as an identity, from its origins in the mid 1990s as a politically-neutral support community through the “pick-up artist” movement and subsequent backlash towards it, leading to the development of incels.co. Chapter three is a review of the literature dealing with these communities, as well as

contemporary manifestations of masculinity and digital vernacular subcultures that adhere to new modes of misogynistic, racist, bigoted right-wing thought that collectively fall under the “red pill”. I also articulate the concept of the “male grasp”, which exists parallel to the male gaze to describe the means through which historical capitalist frameworks intersect with patriarchal thinking to incentivize men to view the world as something to be “acquired” and “held”. In chapter four, I discuss my methodology and findings. I describe my data collection protocol, walking through archiving the entirety of the forum into a database using a custom web scraping software written in the Python scripting language. From this database, I collect posts on which I perform a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2015). By analyzing threads tagged with “[Blackpill]” in their title, I investigate the construction of what is colloquially known as the “black pill”, a creation of the community that takes up many of the individualizing frameworks of the “red pill” yet imbues them with an unwavering nihilism about male sexual and romantic success. The black pill contains the epistemological principles articulated by the community, and is also used to comprehend and justify their own social oppression as well as the abusive and discriminatory rhetoric used across the board. I use my data to articulate what it means to have taken the black pill, as expressed through their discourses surrounding oppression, sexuality, and social relations. Chapter five is a discussion of the findings of this critical discourse analysis, examining the discursive modes through which incels construct the black pill, the relationship between masculinity and these discursive modes, and how the construction of the black pill acts as an attempt to mediate this oppression yet remains trapped within the atomistic social configurations and dictates to perform the “male grasp” that ends up perpetuating the bases of perceived oppression. I conclude in a final chapter by summarizing my argument and findings and exploring the ways to move forward

with the knowledge of how contemporary masculinity intersects with neoliberal hierarchies and its manifestations on digital platforms.

## 2. The “yoke” of involuntary celibacy: a history

*Because he seems weak and inferior in the company of others, and cannot maintain his self-respect, the creep is pressed into isolation. There, the creep doesn't have the pressure of other people's presence to make him feel inferior, to make him feel that he must be like them in order not to be inferior. The creep can develop the morale required to differ.*

*Henry Flynt, Blueprint for a Higher Civilization*

There isn't much academic literature about the history of involuntary celibacy. What we do know about male involuntary celibacy in the networked age stems from contemporary journalistic accounts, which skyrocketed after self-proclaimed incel Alek Minassian's 2018 attack in Toronto, Canada that left 10 dead. I take the time here to trace the cultural currents that lead to the development of the contemporary incel identity in order to properly define the contours of my subject. I discuss possible historical origins of the term “involuntary celibacy” before exploring the first instance of community formed around the identity, a website named the “Involuntary Celibacy project” whose aim was to provide resources and community forums

for those who identified as incel. It's noteworthy that the first appearance of the term "involuntary celibacy" in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a women's issue; further, the originator of the "Involuntary Celibacy Project" identified as femme when the initiative began. But if we take the project as an example, there are marked differences between involuntary celibacy as experienced by women and as an identity taken up by men: contemporary incel communities don't focus their energies inward, but instead focus on the objectification and acquisition of female attention as a parallel to social capital. This move is more in-line with the development of pick-up artistry than the Involuntary Celibacy Project, and as I explore in this chapter, pick-up artistry has a direct lineage to contemporary incel communities. Pick-up artistry offered a highly-programmatic view of the social world and sexual conquest that offered men a way out of incelism (although not defined as such) based on the misogynist objectification of women and the social world. Yet in its entrepreneurial bent and wild promises of sexual fantasy fulfillment, it bit off more than it could chew, and left a group of scorned customers in its wake who eventually took up the banner of contemporary incelism. I trace this development in order to illustrate the misogynist, programmatic and communal roots of contemporary incel communities, and shed light on the sociocultural development of the black pill.

In the wake of Alek Minassian's attack, news organizations credited a former Carleton University student by the name of Alana and their website, the "Involuntary Celibacy project", with coining the term "involuntary celibacy" in 1996 (Schallhorn 2018; Baker 2016; Ling 2018; Zimmer 2018). However, it makes appearances in Western letters far earlier. The first appearance of the phrase "involuntary celibacy" can be traced back to L'Abbé Antoine Banier's *Explication Historique des fables, ou l'on decouvre leur origine et leur conformité avec l'histoire ancienne*, a 1711 book that innovatively read Greek mythology as historical rather than



allegorical. The second printing of Banier's book, which recast Banier's writing from descriptive prose to dialogic acts, is the printing from which the 1940 English translation by an unnamed author takes as its source (Feldman and Richardson 2000; for the edition and translation, see Banier 1715 and 1740). The original French is below, followed by the English translation:

Homere & plusieurs autres Auteurs nous parlent de cet usage dans leurs écrits, & plût à Dieu qu'il durât encore à present; que de filles qui gemissent fous les loix austeres d'un célibat involontaire, trouveroient des époux qui les rendroient heureuses ! à moins que leur avarice ne les précipitât dans les mal heurs où tomba Ixion. (Banier 1715, 3e:78)

Homer and several others, mention this Custom, and would to God it were still in Fashion : How many young Women who groan under the Yoke of involuntary Celibacy, would find Husbands to make them happy, did not the Avarice of those Husbands reduce them to the Calamities wherein Ixion was involved. (Banier 1740, 3:527)

The translator takes some liberties with Banier's original text—the literal translation of the phrase of interest, “filles qui gemissent fous les loix austeres d'un célibat involontaire”, would be “women who groan crazily at the austere laws of involuntary celibacy”. But the phrase “involuntary celibacy” makes its way through the translation.

We don't know whether the conceptual artist and nihilist philosopher Henry Flynt drew his knowledge of the Greeks from Banier. What we do know is that he took up Banier's reading of female involuntary celibacy and applied it to the plight of men in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He developed a working concept of male involuntary celibacy as early as 1961, which he would deliver as lectures entitled "Theory of the Creep" (Flynt 1975). Reflecting on this theory in the essay "Creep" from his 1975 collection *Blueprint for a Higher Civilization*, he investigates the problem of "involuntary celibacy" much like Alana and successors would:

When Helen Lefkowitz said I was "such a creep" at Interlochen in 1956, her remark epitomized the feeling that females have always had about me. My attempts to understand why females rejected me and to decide what to do about it resulted in years of confusion. In 1961-1962, I tried to develop a theory of the creep problem. This theory took involuntary celibacy as the defining characteristic of the creep ... The creep is awkward and has an unstylish appearance. He seems sexless and childish. (1975, 182).

While beginning with this state of social rejection, Flynt attempts to reclaim the positive values of being the "creep" through the following taxonomy. Pages 182-183:

1. Because of his isolation, the creep has a qualitatively higher sense of identity. He has a sense of the boundaries of his personality, and a control of what goes on in those boundaries.
2. The creep is emotionally autonomous, independent, or self-contained ... he does not develop emotional attachments to other people.

3. ... the creep lives in a sexually neutral world and a child's world throughout his life. He is thus able to play like a child. He retains the child's capacity for make-believe.

4. The creep can devote himself to thought, fantasy, imagination, imagining, variegated mental states, dreams, internal emotions, and feelings towards inanimate objects.

This radical isolation—the idea of the creep's positive traits centering around an ability to be completely self-sustainable in social, imaginative, and sexual realms—can only really be read as positive with a wholesale rejection of the need for the nourishment of others in living one's life.

Later in the essay, however, he reneges on “cast[ing] off the surface traits of the creep” and revisits his time in the art world in the 1960s as a lens to examine his own “creep” status. By the late 1960s, Flynt was known for his writing on nihilism and a controversial pamphlet called “Down With Art”. According to Flynt, “all the females who have seen this pamphlet reacted negatively” (1975, 184). Such negative reactions from women proved to Flynt the need for him to conform to social expectations in order to attract female attention, to “conceal or suspend [his] activities [and] to adopt a facade of conformity” (1975, 185). By extension, the question of female attention becomes a question of participating in society at all: “Females can be counted on to represent the most ‘social, human’ point of view, a point of view which, as I have explained, is distant from my own” (1975, 185).

There are two themes of note from Flynt's writing that are important to note. To be a sexual creature, Flynt would have it, is automatically to give up on one's values. It is a sacrifice of the isolated, imaginative realm of the creep's inner life. In their incompatibility with social being, the positive values of the creep cannot flourish in society without giving up these

values. This is an ideology in itself: in Flynt's creep theory, it is values that make a person, not their social makeup or situation, and he acknowledges the ideological divide that this sentiment promotes in the final paragraph of the essay as "an absolute dividing line between [himself] and humanity" (1975, 186). The second theme of this theory directly arises from the first: to Flynt, the social is the feminine. Women carry the values of the broader social sphere against which the creep is incompatible, and yet from the creep's perspective of radical isolation, that is all they seem to do. In Flynt's view, escaping involuntary celibacy is suicide: through the incompatibility of the creep's values and the social world, conforming means giving up those values that constitute the entirety of selfhood.

## **The Involuntary Celibacy project**

We don't know if Flynt read Banier; it seems pretty unlikely that Alana, the creator of the "Involuntary Celibacy Project" in 1993, wasn't familiar with Flynt's writing. In 1993, Alana was studying at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, and created a simple text website on the university's FreeNet server titled "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project" (Baker 2016).<sup>4</sup> The website contains an article, authored by Alana, sketching the outline of "a problem nobody talks about": the problem of "involuntary celibacy" (Alana 1997). The article opens with a "tall, handsome stranger" walking into Alana's office on campus and announcing that he is 27 years old, and has never been on a date. Alana uses this moment to discuss the "problem nobody talks about" with this 27 year old man. For both, being "involuntarily celibate" is not primarily about sex or virginity. It is a question of intimacy, self-worth, and social expectations. And, as Alana would have it, this has deep effects on those who identify with their situation:

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4. While news articles identify the site's first appearance in 1996, the oldest copy available on the internet archive's Wayback Machine dates back to 1993.

“Our society now lets us talk about who we are: an immigrant, a person with a disability, a religious believer... We can talk about our problems: being poor, having an addiction, or a history of abuse... By sharing, we can learn that others are in the same situation... So I am speaking up about being involuntary celibate.” (Alana 1997)

Alana tells us that at the time of their writing, they had publicly acknowledged their own queer identity. They had been in romantic relationships and had sexual experiences. The question of involuntary celibacy had little to do with the material facts of sex or intimacy: it was a combination of “problems with self-esteem, body image, and intimacy” whose traumas are not sexual, but social. Alana ends the article by describing how they came to terms with their self and their body through psychotherapy, self-help books, and feminist theory, and they found a relationship once they realized that they are a “likeable, attractive person.” They trace this self-discovery and improvement to the tall handsome stranger who, by sharing his own woes in an act of community, forced Alana to confront the disappointment they faced with their own lack of partnership.

This article is one of approximately 10 outbound resources listed on the “Involuntary Celibacy project” landing page. In 2003, Alana shut down the website in favour of a link to a LiveJournal account, with a note directing users interested in the Involuntary Celibacy project to visit [incelsite.com](http://incelsite.com) (Alana 2005, 2006). By this point the project had matured into a support community with sections for identifying if one is an incel, a discussion of synonyms for involuntary celibacy such as “long term celibacy, frigidity, shyness, sexual dormancy, coyness,

inexperience,” and more. The offshoot website did not last very long: the last trace of incelsite.com can be found on the Wayback Machine in May 2012 (Alana 2012).

In interviews that crown them as the creator of “incel”, Alana has publicly renounced what they see as the deep streak of misogyny in contemporary incel cultures (Baker 2016). Yet the “Involuntary Celibacy project” provides the first example of framing involuntary celibacy as a problem that stems from isolation, as well as a blueprint for community as a curative for these ills. The project’s forums, Q&A sections, guide pages, and recommendations for self-help reading made up a community resource that provides us with a picture of what overcoming this isolation through community support could look like.

### **Pick-up artistry, community dialects, and “social value”**

While Alana’s project was running out of steam, another community with the aim of solving the “involuntary celibacy” problem was developing: the pick-up artist community. PUAs, as they call themselves, face the same lack of access to sexual intimacy as the involuntary celibates for whom Alana designed their website. But instead of commiserating or forming community over this lack, as Alana’s project aimed to do, PUAs focused on creating and cultivating a set of practices and frameworks to gain sexual or intimate partnership from heterosexual women. pick-up artistry relies on a set of principles (referred to as “game”) anchored around the belief that the possession and display of social value garners female attention. “Game” refers to techniques designed to cultivate self-confidence and practices designed to convey this confidence. Where these techniques differ from Alana’s proffered solutions is their target. Instead of cultivating the self from within, PUA practice aims outward, its focus the display and performance of confidence and value in order to seduce a particular

person. For example, three techniques taught in the PUA playbook are “peacocking”, “negging”, and “displaying higher value” (known as DHVing). Peacocking is the practice of dressing in outlandish clothing in order to project confidence—the famous PUA guru Mystery, for example, would often wear top hats, multiple wristwatches, garish earrings, and flamboyant clothing (“Peacocking (Original Posts by Mystery)” 2015). In contrast to peacocking and its focus on personal dress, negging and DHVing are social manipulation techniques. To “neg” someone is to, essentially, give them a backhanded compliment: ranging from “You look amazing, what have you done?” to “You have a great body. Are you bulimic?” (Woolf 2012), negs are designed to lower a “target”’s defense barriers, and project what PUAs call a “cocky-funny” personality that is supposedly seduction’s secret ingredient. “DHVing” is a blanket term referring to any action or statement where the PUA “displays a skill or attribute that raises his worth or appeal in the estimation of a woman or a group,” with the intention to “stand out from the other, less interesting men in the club” (Strauss 2005, 456).

The final quote above is from *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of pick-up Artists* by former *Rolling Stone* journalist Neil Strauss. The book opens with Strauss receiving a call from a book editor with whom he’d worked in the past. The editor has stumbled across an internet document: the *How-to-Lay-Girls Guide*, a compilation of a decade of Usenet newsgroup musings by pick-up artists working “to turn the art of seduction into an exact science” (Strauss 2005, 9). Hesitant at first, Strauss dives into the world of these pseudonymous seduction scientists with names like Mystery, Juggler, Tyler Durden, and David X. His motivation is twofold: as a journalist, he wants the story; as an “AFC” (average frustrated chump), unlucky in love and unhappy with his appearance, he falls quickly into the movement.

Strauss' entry into the PUA movement furnishes him with a new vocabulary, a new hobby, and a new community. He begins reading pick-up artist newsgroups every day, where users post their stories, rife with lingo like "OEQ" (open-ended question), "SUAL" (shut up and lead), "AMOG" (Alpha male of the group), and "sarging" (going to a location to seduce women). Users dissect each others experiences and offer advice, like what to do if a woman has a boyfriend—the answer given in Strauss' example is to use a "boyfriend-destroyer pattern" (2005, 12). Strauss' book shows that the practice of pick-up both constructs and is the construction of a community. Just as Alana's goal was to provide a resource and community for those with a shared, isolating problem, the PUA community formed with similar aims. The difference between the two is that Alana's solution lies in coming to terms with oneself, while the PUA solution takes this perceived lack and gamifies its acquisition.

Strauss hints at an understanding of the broader gender issues that plague such an approach. The book's first part opens with the following epigraph from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*:

Men weren't really the enemy—they were fellow victims suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill.

However, beyond the epigraphs, he stops short of making any attempt to place pick-up artistry within the confluence of any social forces. Instead, he frames his own issues just as Alana did ten years prior: as one of a lack of self-love, claiming he would never have met his wife were it not for the pick-up artist community teaching him how to "put [his] best foot forward... and discover what was me to begin with" (2005, 434).



## Unhappy customers

While Strauss' victory over the state of involuntary celibacy is a neat fairy tale of self-love and acceptance, his outgrowing of the rituals and vocabulary of the pick-up artist community does not reflect the movement's ultimate aim. Yet there is a similarity between Strauss and his former peers when we speak in economic terms: in the same way that he commercialized his experiences into a *New York Times* bestseller, his peers were busy transforming pick-up science into a service to be bought and sold through seminars, mentoring programs, literature, and more. This commercialization of seduction left a group of angry customers in its wake. The world that pick-up artists sold—where attractiveness is a puzzle to solve, where sex with heterosexual women is a program of inputs and outputs—was such a rigidly seductive worldview in of itself that it could not be unseen. Yet when the sales pitch involves selling this worldview, and there remain customers who cannot put it into practice—for whom the program does not function—not only are those customers scorned, but they are confused, and attempt to salvage the programmatic output of pick-up artistry with a set of working inputs. Thinking through the marketization of pick-up artistry and this economic lens, we begin to unfold the cultural origins of the black pill's nihilistic, programmatic view of the world.

In 2007, the American television network VH1 gave Mystery his own reality television show, where he taught 8 men the “Mystery Method” with the hopes of overcoming their own sexual and romantic frustrations (Kray 2018). In the show, Mystery acts as player-coach, teaching his clients the “tricks of the trade” before taking them out to the “field” (which are, in the VH1 show, usually just surprisingly well-lit nightclubs) to practice what they learned (Roth

2007). By 2007, Mystery was no stranger to marketing his own method: when we first meet him in Strauss' book, he is holding a class to teach the techniques of pick-up artistry to a group of men. Yet the technique of seduction don't seem to be the only lesson that many former pupils took away: as Strauss details, Mystery's seminars inspired a rash of students to become seduction entrepreneurs themselves. From ebooks to their own classes, the method blossomed into a market.<sup>5</sup>

Just as Strauss concludes that the ultimate benefit of joining the pick-up artist community was self-reflection, Mystery's show pitches his method as the construction of self-confidence (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019, 5004). But as with any new business, there were unintended consequences of the commercialization of self-confidence: unhappy customers. While Mystery, Strauss, and other "methodologists" were quick to apply their crowd-manipulation skills in selling their product, not everyone who took a class, bought an e-book, dedicated themselves to the forums and newsgroup, or donned an elaborate top hat ended up like Strauss—or even one of the "sarging" cowboys of the scene. Instead, they found themselves with empty wallets and the humiliating experience of trying to enact these routines on "HB10s" without success.<sup>6</sup> Despite this commercialized pedagogy failing them, these men had borne witness to a world where the effectiveness of these routines and the deep, systematic social engineering they represent was clear. The concept of women as a "code to be broken"

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5. One former student of Mystery's, "Grimble" netted 15,000 USD from the sale of his own seduction method e-book. Another, named "Badboy", started classes in his native Zagreb, Croatia under the moniker "Playboy Lifestyle" and charged an admission price of \$850 USD—twice the average monthly salary in Croatia. Exercises included having students punch him as hard as they can in the stomach and yelling "fuck you, Badboy" to increase their testosterone levels. For detailed anecdotes, see Strauss 254-256.

6. PUA terminology for "hot babe" with looks that rank "10/10" on a scale.

(Ricard 2018) remained; the inability to break this code with the toolkits provided meant that there must be some deeper flaw with its wielder. Enter: PUAHate.com.

PUAHate was started sometime around 2010 or 2011 by a user named Nicholaus, a frequent guest on the podcast of pick-up artist Extramask (real name Barry Kirkey) and a former customer of the “Real Social Dynamics” PUA program (svall, n.d.; Donovan 2008). PUAHate was a webforum designed for men who felt that the seduction industry and companies like RSD had tricked them out of their money (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019, 5014). And while the communities in this history so far were consciously created as an attempt to overcome an individualized problem, PUAHate had a baked-in sociality: they were a group of scorned customers, already exposed to the concept of trading in and discussing the alternative social epistemology introduced by PUA practice yet swindled by something missing. It was the Better Business Bureau of the seduction industry’s social value theory.

The website’s stated aim was to expose “the scams, deception, and misleading marketing techniques used by dating gurus and the seduction community to deceive men and profit from them” (Grieg 2014). But PUAHate’s ire was not entirely directed at these seduction coaches; the anger scaled onto social life itself, and the social epistemology of the PUA scene informed the community’s critiques. One poster, quoted in Katie J.M. Baker’s investigation of the website, complains that “A HB5 with gonorrhea is still higher value than a male 9 in western society” (Baker 2012). At its core, the issue for members of PUAHate is not that the techniques of pick-up artistry don’t work—it’s that men must resort to them in the first place because of the rigid social hierarchies whose transcendence requires a seduction science.

Eliot Rodger, who murdered six people before committing suicide on May 23, 2014, was a frequent poster on PUAHate.com (Woolf 2014).<sup>7</sup> In a video posted to YouTube shortly before the attack, he claimed that his motivation was to punish both those women who rejected him and the sexually-active men he believed were taking these opportunities away from him (Rodger 2014). The day after Rodger's shooting, a thread appeared on PUAHate's home page titled "Puahate is about to get a massive amount of press" (Wilstein 2014); hours later, the site closed, with users migrating to the newly-minted Sluthate.com (Smits 2018).

### **Sluthate, looks science, and knowledge production**

This migration was not a simple change in location. The change in moniker is no coincidence, but it paralleled a shift in the community's object of ire: critiques of the seduction industry became critiques of society and its standards for masculinity, beauty, and social value, decided upon—and upheld—by women. No longer was it the fault of pick-up artists that the PUA program did not work; its truths remained incontrovertible, each moment a confirmation of its hard sell on the programmatic nature of social life. And the answer to why this program sometimes failed was not necessarily because of the wielder: it was the very fact that it must be undertaken in the first place. Blaming the pick-up gurus was no longer a satisfactory explanation. They may be swindlers and snake-oil salesmen, but they accomplished the unenviable goal of revealing the substratum of how the social world works. To the members of Sluthate, all the masculine energy and manoeuvring in the world doesn't change the fact that

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7. According to Woolf, Rodger was also a frequent poster on the subreddit r/foreveralone, where users often used the term "incel" to refer to their condition. While Woolf claims that Rodger used this term, he does not cite this claim. It also does not appear in the 141-page manifesto that Rodger released alongside his YouTube video. However, posts captured by Mediaite's Matt Wilstein show Rodger using the word and counting himself as part of the "incel" population (Wilstein 2014); in sum, the term had grown in usage by then but identity-based communities had not yet developed.

women call the shots—a stark revelation after a life of trusting in masculinity’s will to power. Woman—the original object of desire—becomes the object of ire.

Sluthate’s organizational structure hints at this shift in the paradigm of oppression. The website’s initial subforums were “Shitty Advice”, “Looks Theory”, “White Knighting (Slut Love)”, and “PUA/Anti-PUA Discussion”, alongside an off-topic space (“SlutHate.Com Index Page” 2014). “Shitty Advice” continued the PUA newsgroup practice of users discussing situations and events amongst each other. “White Knighting (Slut Love)” held discussions and pictures of women known to members of Sluthate through other forums and social media websites—essentially a fandom board for women with internet fame. But it is “Looks Theory” where we find the direct precursor to the black pill, a space devoted to communally constructing an epistemology to explain perceived male oppression. “Looks Theory” was dedicated to discussing the idea that physical attractiveness is the essential determinant of sexual success, and it is centred around articulating and understanding the phenomenon of male attractiveness. The through-line of what makes a man (un)attractive—from Flynt’s theory of the creep to the pick-up artist’s social value hierarchy—comes to rest here in the body. That which is etched into the body cannot be faked; “looks theory” combined protests of the feminized social with its disadvantages as deeply essentialist, etched onto the body. What Flynt says is simply a question of values, and the pick-up artists say is a question of vocabulary and behaviour, “looks theory” is grounded in the inescapable question of one’s own body. While the “Looks Theory” forum folded into the “Shitty Advice” forum by February 2015, the Wayback Machine’s archived copy of “Shitty Advice”’s rules show us that the project of epistemological construction was an important part of the community (emphasis added):

- Share your success or failure with the opposite sex, and suggest ways to improve it. This is meant to refer to your anecdotal experiences, and contributions to any hypothetical or theoretical scenarios.
- *Analyze female behavior, in real life and in online dating experiments. Female behaviour may be human or animal, philosophical discussion about feminine behaviour in general.*
- *Discuss the science on attractiveness. Philosophical discussions on aesthetics, particularly on human beauty and attractiveness, this includes inner (personality, morals, etc) and outer beauty (face, physique, etc)*
- Exchange health and nutrition tips. Anything pertaining to health and nutrition, which is fitness, etc.

Topics not related to sexual attractiveness or women are allowed on a case-by-case basis. (“Code of Conduct : Shitty Advice” 2015)

Within this lineage of contemporary masculinity, “looks theorists” pioneered the process of basing claims of oppression on something essentialist and inescapable, something that can be proved through positivist deduction. Anecdotal is shared; studies about gender attraction in social psychology are cited; “dating experiments” are conducted; and, most importantly, this information is “analyzed” through a set of assumptions that assume a validating power of women in society. Through this “scientific” process of deducing the operations of male attractiveness, “looks theory” serves not only as a mechanism for commiseration, but an explanation—adopting the precepts of value-neutrality and “purity” associated with science, “looks theory” takes advantage of the post-Enlightenment West’s “mystical belief that science’s

inherent progressiveness resides in the separation of its logic and facts from its social origins” (Harding 1986, 41).

This group deductive process and its attempted construction of a rigid and determinable system of value foreshadows the creation of the “blackpill science” that came a few years later. “Doing science” functions as the practice that ties community together. By instructing users to analyze female behaviour through “experiments” and to discuss the “science” on attractiveness, the creative and productive act of the discursive community is not aimed towards the self but aimed towards the social mass. Dressing up to go “sarging” is no longer the communal ritual; instead, it is the collective construction of a theory based on a positivist interpretation of gendered interactions. Even the sharing of experience has a scientific purpose: as anecdotal, they should contribute to “hypothetical or theoretical scenarios”. The shift of focus from the swindle of pick-up artistry to the swindle of the social world, with an according value hierarchy, indicates an understanding of social existence as a primarily economic existence, what Wendy Brown calls the shift from *homo sapiens* to “*homo economicus*” (Brown 2015, 31). This isn’t to say that the currency of gender relations is money, but a shift in how social relations are approached towards a “relentless and ubiquitous economization” (2015, 31). Acquisition and ownership become the primary motivation of gendered interactions, and one’s physical appearance is a measure of capital. Thus “looks theory” as a community project marks out a community of people whose self-understanding is built in economic terms.

Sluthate.com’s initial moniker was short-lived: the last copy of the website located at this URL available on the Wayback machine is dated May 31, 2017, and the next available copy—

June 18, 2017—redirects to the domain RedPillTalk.net (“SLUTHATE | PUAHATE” 2017; “RedPillTalk.Net” 2017). It’s worth emphasizing that the domains Sluthate.com and RedPillTalk.net directed to the same forum, the same infrastructure and community of users. The change in domain indicates a shift of communal focus from “slut hate” to taking the “red pill”; the same community of scorned PUA customers that then migrated their hatred to women now applied the red pill’s rhetorics of “awakening” to the injustices of society. The final stage in this cultural history before the black pill takes shape is the idea that there exists a comprehensive epistemology that is reflexively defined against liberal hegemony’s process of willed citizen somnambulance.

Early in 1999’s “The Matrix”, directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, the protagonist Neo enters an alternate dimension where he is hurriedly introduced to the elites who are controlling the realities of the masses. After being taken under the wing of Morpheus, a member of the resistance movement, he is offered the choice to consume a red pill or a blue pill. If Neo takes the blue pill, he returns to his cramped apartment as if nothing had happened. If he takes the red pill, he remains in this enlightened state, aware of—and because of this, responsible for overthrowing—the basis of elite, robotic control that is providing this simulated reality to the masses. The situation alludes to artistic explorations of ideology past, from the glasses that allow their wearer to see the subliminal messages behind advertisements in John Carpenter’s *They Live* to *The Wizard of Oz* and its man behind the curtain (Fiennes 2012). The concept shared throughout is that there is some deeper truth than what is available to the naked eye of the social creature: his world is not as it appears, but is instead founded upon illusions that uphold a social fabric that benefits something other than the “Lacanian real” of truths that maintain themselves in all possible universes (Žižek 1994, 30).



A loose and disparate set of political and communal movements that fall under the umbrella of new, digitally-influenced right-wing communities has taken up the “red pill” metaphor (Afsahi 2019; Fielitz and Thurston 2019; Mirrlees 2018; Neiwert 2017; Hawley 2017; Nagle 2017). Its contemporary usage traces back to far-right Libertarian populist Andrew Breitbart writing of a “red pill moment” in 2011 when he discovered the theory of “cultural Marxism” (Breitbart 2011; qtd. in Mirrlees 2018). Breitbart was the creator of Breitbart News and its Editor-in-Chief until his death in 2012. The website is credited with catalyzing online enthusiasm for Donald Trump (Benkler et. al. 2018), with a political agenda that focuses on patriarchal traditionalism, “anti-white racism”, closed borders, and antisemitism-tinged theories about George Soros and moneyed global elites controlling the world (Fuchs 2018; Marantz 2019). In this contemporary new-right manifestation, taking the red pill functions to not only the user the true nature of reality, but also indicates the set of truths that come before the corruption of the real through liberal culture’s ideological interference.

Yet the red pill was not this final articulation of reflexive epistemology within the lineage of the incel; RedPillTalk’s server stopped responding to requests in November 2019 after years of declining usage, and the Wayback machine’s last archived copy is from July 11, 2019, where only two of the website’s six subforums had posts in the previous 30 days (RedPillTalk 2019). This was not a death of the movement, but a death by migration: according to incels.co’s IncelWiki, a user of Sluthate created the forum Lookism.net in 2015 in response to repeated downtime issues with Sluthate’s servers (Wiki 2020a). Many users from Sluthate/RedPillTalk migrated to Lookism.net; as of March 9, 2020 the site had 10,894 members, 456,480 threads and 4,081,007 unique posts (“Lookism.NET- Aesthetics, Red Pill and Masculinity Discussion” 2020). Where Lookism.net differs from Sluthate is a strong focus on the maximization of social value.

While the website's tagline is "Aesthetics, Redpill, and Masculinity discussion", and the "shitty advice" subforum carried over from Sluthate, the remaining subforums are "Looksmaxxing", "Moneymaxxing", and "Rate Me".<sup>8</sup> The White Knight subforum of Sluthate does not make the cut. Neither did a "wiki" link on redpilltalk.com.

Lookism.net remains active today, and members of online incel communities consider it the direct spiritual successor to PUAhate and Sluthate (Wiki 2020a). Its moniker represents its users' interpretation of society's oppression against men: lookism, the idea that physical appearance is the sole determinant of social advantage and value. This configuration sticks to the basic red pill idea that there exists an unspoken substratum of how society orders itself; it differs from other, more political articulations of the red pill in that this substratum is not in service of cultural brainwashing by feminists, minorities, or Jewish peoples, but instead in the service of physical appearance and attractiveness. The prescriptions of lookism contain the same revolutionary potential as the red pill writ broadly, but through a particular pattern: the maximization of physical appearance and attractiveness.

## **The scientific blackpill**

Yet not all those rejects of pick-up artistry have taken the lookism-flavoured red pill. A vast wiki created by the user-base of the webforum incels.co details an alternative: the black pill. Eschewing the physical appearance dictums of lookism, the black pill is, at the time I write this, a 113,007-word ideological program that details the myriad "largely immutable traits

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8. "Maxxing" refers to the process of maximizing whatever element the phrase suffixes in order to increase social value. Those interested in looksmaxxing, for example, often begin with gymmaxxing or steroidmaxxing. Other ideas suggested are jelqing and mewing "(chewing hard foods in order to build up your masseter muscles, said by British orthodontist Mike Mew to augment the jawline)." More manual methods involve skin care regimens and pulling on one's faces to reshape them (Hines 2019).

[involved] in social and sexual exclusion ... [including] physical attractiveness, stature, muscularity, race, personality, ability, health, neurotypicality as well as social and economic status” (Wiki 2020f). This distilled version of the program is found on Incels.wiki, a wiki that describes itself as “an encyclopedia about the manosphere at large” and presents itself as a repository for “academia, folk theories, memes, people, and art” related to involuntary celibacy. In contrast to the memetic vernacular and stated political affiliations of other online wikis such as Encyclopedia Dramatica (Coleman 2014), RationalWiki (Lilly 2016), or Conservapedia (Daniels 2009), IncelWiki positions itself in its front-facing content as a neutral, apolitical, research-based resource in the vein of Wikipedia. The aesthetics of the website reflect this: it uses the exact same colours, font faces, navigational panes, layout, and MediaWiki software as its claimed inspiration. With 1,177 articles and 50,176 edits as of March 9, 2020 (Wiki 2020c), the Wiki’s about page claims it is a response to the over-moderation and censorship of contributions to the English-language Wikipedia’s page on involuntary celibacy (Wiki 2020b). And to show the research and knowledge-creation contained within the space, the About page links to the “Scientific Blackpill” entry as an example of what it calls a “Major Project”.

The “Scientific Blackpill” page summarizes 195 different studies in journalism, economics, psychology, anthropology, biology, and gender studies.<sup>9</sup> The page is the labour of two incels.co forum users, BlackpillScience and Altmark22, building and sourcing the community’s forum discussions into an encyclopedic format (Wiki 2020b). As detailed further in Chapter 4, the black pill is one of the most popular topics of discussion on incels.co. Over 213,520 posts on the

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9. In addition to this page, there is also a “Supplemental” page that describes itself as a “sequel” to the initial Scientific black pill page, focused on “inceldom, but additionally covers societal issues, gender differences, feminism and masculinity with a somewhat broader scope”. It contains 41,605 words on 85 additional studies in 20 categories. The main page’s categories are joined by “Stoicism”, and “Tee-Hee”. The latter contains studies on behavioural patterns of women, including cognitive development, emotional reactivity, and social manipulation (Wiki 2020g).

forum are tagged “Blackpill”, and many are devoted to articulating and deepening the definition of the black pill and its science as collected on the Wiki page. To get a basic idea of the black pill’s fundamental claims about social and sexual exclusion, we can look at the categories used on the Wiki page to demarcate the scientific studies collected from forum discussions:

<b>Personality</b>	<b>Mental</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Looks (Life)</b>	<b>Looks (Love)</b>	<b>Face</b>
<b>Money</b>	<b>Height</b>	<b>Body</b>	<b>Penis</b>	<b>Voice</b>	<b>Age</b>
<b>Hypergamy</b>	<b>Cucks</b>	<b>Sluts</b>	<b>MeToo</b>	<b>Health</b>	<b>ItsOver</b>

*Table 1: Categories of the scientific blackpill as of March 9, 2020. From incels.wiki*

These categories problematize the wiki’s presentation as apolitical. For one, the language is loaded: “Sluts”, long a highly-gendered and misogynist slur, describes the section on female sexual behaviour, and “Cucks” is a derogatory term in red pill spaces for feminized men that originated from racially-charged cuckold pornography (Darmstadt et. al., 2019). The “science”, too, could use some work: one section under the “MeToo” category, which uses data from Statistics Canada and the Victoria, Australia police force, claims that men are equally likely as women to be victims of violent crime. There is no mention of whether these crimes are sexual violence. Nor is the gender balance of perpetrators and victims mentioned. Yet the section concludes that “such data counters the feminist notion that women require ‘special protections’ or ought to be a specially ‘protected class’” (Wiki 2020d).

The redpill provides the belief, which originated with the above-mentioned pick-up artists and online dating coaches, that those who lost the “genetic lottery” can overcome this through “self-improvement, particularly looksmaxxing”. The black pill takes a much bleaker

outlook: it is “the redpill + fatalism” (Wiki 2020e). This fatalism is arrived at through a staunch belief-in and application-of the scientific method as it concerns the ways in which society is structured to oppress men who do not possess particular physical and mental traits (despite the aforementioned flaws in the reasoning process itself). No claim of the black pill comes without a scientific or positivist-induced justification: moving far beyond the “looks theory” trope of measuring looks on a 1 to 10 scale, the black pill dictates that male oppression is the result of a wide range of factors. The key distinction between “looks theory’s” red pill and the black pill is that the former believes that the situation of oppression that it articulates can be overcome: while lookism claims that the improvement of physical appearance can lead to social wealth, the black pill believes that women select men with the best genes, and these genes express themselves in ways that cannot be avoided. The black pill believes that “genetically inferior” men cannot achieve romantic or sexual intimacy with women as presented: biological essentialism is the axiom from which male oppression emerges. General claims about women’s choosiness, preferences about physical appearance, and preference for traditional masculinity carry over from predecessor movements. Yet the black pill’s view of oppression is not only grounded in the idle preferences of outside actors. Supposedly-immutable biological traits like neurotypicality, race, wealth, penis size, virility, voice pitch—bodily traits that cannot be improved by lookism’s prescriptions alone—are part and parcel of the black pill’s oppression framework. And since these traits are outside the typical realms of self-improvement, the structure of male oppression exists on the much deeper level of genetic makeup.

## Conclusion: black pill fatalism

Henry Flynt, the writer who articulated the concept of “involuntary celibacy” as the defining characteristic of the “creep”, gives us a hint as to where the black pill’s nihilism roots itself. To be a “creep” is to live tortured existence outside the margins of society, and the moment the creep conforms is the moment they lose their essential individuality, a form of suicide. To Flynt, selfhood centres not around the body, or the networks which make it immanent, but the ideological values held by its carrier. This deeply cognitive and idealist conception of the self not only paints social integration as destructive process, but it also sees the individual as *a priori* isolated. Social integration is not the path to personal growth, but is instead an iteratively vampiric process: each moment that makes immanent what Heidegger calls the “co-state of mind” (Heidegger 2013, 205) is a moment wherein the self loses its integrity towards the social totality. Instead, growth comes from the crystallization of the self through the cultivation of knowledge and the instrumentalization of this knowledge through rationality. The ability to operationalize truths held by the individual grounds morality and behaviour. Any process—such as social conformity—that violates the integrity of this behaviour is atrophic.

Alana, the Carleton University student who attempted to create a community of support for involuntary celibacy, offers a vision of involuntary celibacy community that raises up its members as opposed to cementing their status. Because of this, their project exists in stark contrast to this fundamental isolation. The problem of involuntary celibacy is pitched as something that “nobody talks about”—and their project’s goal, with testimonials, mailing lists, and resources, is to talk about it. While involuntary celibacy is still, fundamentally, a problem

of isolation, community is pitched as the first step towards its resolution. With dialogue comes collective understanding and, hopefully, a path towards a solution. Yet for those incels who have taken the black pill, fatalism lies at the end of this path. The fatalist view is the final construction of the collective understanding, and the theoretical underpinnings of the pick-up artists and social theories carried into these spaces spur the dialectical construction of the black pill epistemology. Alana's dream of community becomes overdetermined: the endless search for a solution becomes a never-ending process of deduction. The black pill ever remains in the planning stages, preoccupied with establishing the conditions for survival.

### 3. Programming the black pill: a review of the literature

*Conditioned to lose control at the mere sight of desirable products, we can master our desires only by creating rigid defenses against them.*

*Susan Bordo, Reading the Slender Body*

As a contemporary phenomenon, much of the literature on incels comes in journalism as opposed to academia. I placed the above history section before the literature review in order to introduce elements of the history of involuntary celibacy that do not appear in the small body of academic literature that exists on the subject. For this chapter, I rely on journalistic accounts as well as studies of related misogynist “toxic technocultures” (Massanari 2017) in order to contextualize contemporary incel communities. Given that the communities I hope to understand are more in the lineage of these masculine technocultures than the lineage of involuntary celibacy support groups that began with Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Page (1997), I review literature surrounding contemporary expressions of masculine sexuality and the performance of masculinity. I approach these expressions through the reconfiguration of *homo*



*sapien* into *homo economicus*, as understood by Wendy Brown's reading of Michel Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism and biopolitics (2015). I end this chapter by taking up the platformed nature of incels.co and black pill communities as a "digital archive" of utterances that together construct a worldview. Because of the webforum's relative permanence through the saving of posts and identifying characteristics like pseudonymity and user statistics, the forum acts to archive the development of the black pill epistemology—both of its formation and of its continued existence and facticity. It is a repository of the incel's lived experiences with a life of its own. This archival nature catalyzes the black pill as not only an ideology and an epistemology, but a *project* thereof. It is not only a way to live, a way to see, and a way to wake up, but it is the active and iterative generation of these ways of being, encompassing both the Benjaminesque "snapshot" of the incel's historical moment (Benjamin 1974, VI; XVII), but also the logic upon which this history unfolds.

## **The social construction of the incel**

As we saw above, the black-pilled incel and his historical pick-up-artist predecessors developed as a particularly-masculine reaction to a lack of sexual and romantic partnership. One key commonality between these reactions is a rejection of personal responsibility for this lack. Instead, believers are the victims of the way that society has ordered itself, whether that be along the lines of attractiveness, confidence, value, or immutable traits. And the object-language of the word *lack* is key to understanding how this victimhood forms. A lack of respect from society for the perceived difficulties of being male; a lack of respect for that which makes a particular man valuable; a lack of education or mentorship on how to behave attractively. These lacks inform the historical and contemporary cultures of masculinity that

the incel exists within. Their solutions all revolve around the process of what, borrowing from Klaus Theweleit, I call “grasping” as the process of making up for this lack (1987, 62). The “grasped” object comes in many forms, from the female body to political revolution, or skillsets to construct social value. What they all share is that they are object solutions that externalize a problem question, and in their form as objects, they can be possessed, consumed, and ultimately *had* by the male without violating his integrity. By solving a problem through consumption, the masculine agent can forego interrogating the very gendered state that is the locus of his oppression. It’s no coincidence that a pill can be swallowed.

In her article “Alphas, Betas, and Incels”, Debbie Ging draws a connection between contemporary involuntary celibacy communities and the “diverse assemblages” that make up a loose network of contemporary, natively-digital far-right wing political groups (Ging 2019, 638). More specifically, the group falls under the umbrella of the “manosphere”, a term originating in an anonymous Blogspot post (Jane 2017) that scholars have since taken up to describe this loose grouping (Afsahi 2019; Barker and Jurasz 2018; Neiwert 2017; Nagle 2017; Marwick and Caplan 2018; Jones, Trott, and Wright 2019). The manosphere is a primarily ideological constellation, spanning disparate forms and platforms both online and off. Self-identified men’s rights advocacy movements such as “Men Going Their Own Way” and “A Voice for Men” meet “fraternal organizations” of dubious sincerity such as the Proud Boys alongside pick-up artists, 4chan’s *r9k*<sup>10</sup> gaming communities (especially those involved in the #Gamergate coordinated harassment campaign), and particular subreddits (Jones, Trott, and

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10. *r9k* was created in 2008 by 4chan’s then-administrator, Moot, in response to what users complained was a corruption of the website’s *random* board through the reposting of low-quality content. The board was initially governed by an algorithm that would temporarily ban users if they posted a string of text that had been posted on the forum before. This “forced originality”, in the words of the concept’s creator Randall Munroe (author of the *xkcd* webcomic, who has no relation to 4chan) slowly developed into a place for users to vent about social isolation (Petersen 2015).

Wright 2019; Massanari 2017; Ging 2019). The through-line that Ging draws with these groups is the “red-pill philosophy” and discursive misogynist practices: adherents of the manosphere engage in slurs, doxxing, and targeted harassment of women. And while these groups shared a common goal with the “men’s liberation” movements of the 1970s and 1980s who were devoted to critiquing conventional understandings of masculinity, Ging observes that the political paradigm that men’s liberation movements of old borrowed from second-wave feminism has been replaced with a cultural discourse centring around “personal relationships and psychological and emotional pain” (2019, 648).

Mike Crumplar elaborates on these discourses of emotional pain in his analysis of Santa Fe mass murderer and incelsphere figure Elliot Rodger’s video “manifesto” (Crumplar 2020). In Crumplar’s reading, Rodger’s video is not a manifesto but a *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age story into incelism. “Only at the end is there some semblance of a misogynist ‘political program’” Crumplar observes, and “even then it is only a vague, fantastical outline. That it’s called a manifesto itself is only a reflection of the surface, the crime itself, the final act.”<sup>11</sup> While the manifesto does not articulate a political program, it is far from apolitical: Crumplar’s reading unearths a deeply biopolitical relationship between acquisition, self-presentation, social hierarchy, and masculinity. Rodger describes his early life as “blissful” because he had yet to learn about what he calls sex’s “cruel hierarchy”. In his retelling of his childhood, all of his needs are met. He refers throughout to this stage of his life as presenting no trouble in “acquiring” things. Rodger becomes aware that some kids are cooler than others; he believes that they “have a thing” that he doesn’t. His attempts to join the ranks of the cool, then, center

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11. Crumplar notes that this is in opposition to the Unabomber’s manifesto, which in its explicit call for a change in the practice of society can be considered a proper manifesto.

around acquisition, and material objects ground this sense: “skaters are the cool kids, so he asks his parents to give him a skateboard... the skateboard is the object through which he plays with the cool kids” (Crumplar 2020). The skateboard “promises some tangible social reward” in its embodiment of social value, “coolness crystallized into a tangible object”. Sarah Ahmed, in her discussion of idealizing objects, gives us a heuristic through which to understand Rodger’s idealization of the skateboard. Ahmed reads Freud as telling us that the idealization of an object is never about the object, or even directed to the object, but is an ego mechanism. It is an “effect of the ideal image that the subject has of itself, in which it is invested” (2003). In gathering meaning through the projections of the ego, the object encapsulates the ego desires, and the idealization of the object can allow the subject to be itself in or through what it *has*.

Crumplar finds this idealization within Rodger’s relationship with his skateboard, and skater culture more generally. As a subculture, skaters value creativity, risk, and freedom; but despite the fact that Rodger owns a skateboard—one that he manages to ride with skill—he will never be a skater because he is “categorically incapable of internalizing the social structure of the subculture” (Crumplar 2020). His peer group’s interest in skateboarding fades as they move into their teenage years, and he is no longer able to interface with them through these objects. Crumplar reads a simultaneous observation by Rodger: “the hierarchy of coolness in prepubescent children is just a prelude to the hierarchy that emerges with puberty,” the hierarchy of sex and intimacy. In Rodger’s acquisitive perspective, there is a failure to integrate sexual activity as something to share or experience as opposed to “acquire”. He is overly focused on the male grasp, and acquisition “governs his relations to things and people”. But the ephemeral nature of sex complicates the male grasp’s attempts to acquire, The directness of sex as integrated onto the body “disrupts the harmony of his youth... introduc[ing] a conflict

between his desire and what is possible". Sex, the "unattainable, utopian, heavenly" thing at the end of the acquisitive journey, cannot ever be shaped into pure object in the way that the skateboard can, yet the male grasp dictates his behaviour for the rest of his life. "Everything Rodger interacts with is recruited into the task of attaining this unattainable thing... [the objects] offer the opportunity for Rodger to reinvent himself. But they never fulfill this promise" of the ego construction. One consequence of this frustration is Rodger's repeated racist invectives against his Asian mother and his own half-Asian heritage. In carrying her heritage, "he contains the effeminate mark of her exoticism, the intolerable, excessive mark that prevents him from realizing his true white self, the wholesome masculinity that was promised to him, owed to him by his Anglo-aristocratic ancestry."

Crumplar reads Rodger's discussions of his video game habit as articulations of a way out of the "relentless onslaught of unwelcome sexual awareness, one that promises total control and customization of his own 'body'"—a control that, in actually being over the "appearance" of his "body", indicates the Otherness with which he always views it. On incel forums, these attempts to control the body and reach the unattainable object of desire take the form of "extensive inventories". "Incel forums are filled with analyses of the particular ways the incel subjects are deficient and how that means they will never be able to possess the *thing*," Crumplar observes. The alienated body *itself* becomes a collection of (deficient) objects: "bone structures, jawlines, height, shoulders, penis size, and so on."

This rhizomatic relationship between control, embodiment, and acquisition runs throughout journalist documentation of incel communities. In her article "How Many Bones Would You Break to Get Laid?" (2019), journalist Alice Hines interviews a self-identified incel

whose progression began when a friend gifted him a copy of Neil Strauss' book on pick-up artistry. Her anonymous subject skips over the PUA practice because his body dysmorphia prevents him from engaging with the "confidence games" of pick-up artist praxis; he instead quickly finds himself posting on PUAhate. His failed attempts to incorporate common PUA advice included gymmaxxing, steroidmaxxing, jelqing, and mewing.<sup>12</sup> These trends—all of which Hines' subject picked up from PUAhate and the subsequent forums he visited, such as Lookism.net and incels.co—point to the deep systematization of physical appearance as a part of the black pill problematic. But for those for whom these processes fail (and, as Hines' subject tells us, they are plenty), it is because the perceived problem is beyond skin deep: it's on the level of the bones themselves.

### **Women are from Venus, men are from Mars**

These associations between masculinity and control are not mere fancy of the masculine agent. Instead, they are the result of historical social gender scripts that cement and iterate the cultural expectations of masculinity. Gender as a performance of a prescribed set of social norms has been articulated by many scholars, most notably Butler (2006); the cultural lineage of the incel is explicitly characterized by this concept of an ideal role and script for men. To explore the particular performance and reading of masculinity of this lineage requires a more fine-grained reading of masculine assemblages than the "manosphere" analytic allows for. As R.W. Connell tells us, framing particular masculinities exclusively as different expressions of the same core antagonism (in this case, the "anti-feminism" of the manosphere) ignores the

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12. Jelqing refers to the "aggressive massage of the penis in an attempt to lengthen and expand the penis," causing tears that heal and appear to give length when engorged (Sharma, Alom, and Trost 2019). Mewing is the act of "chewing hard foods in order to build up your masseter muscles, said by British orthodontist Mike Mew to augment the jawline" (Hines 2019).

“dynamism of the relationships in which gender is constructed” (Connell 2005, 38). And while a broad framework of patriarchy undergirds the construction of most contemporary masculine experience (Hearn 2004), if we group communities defined by a set of material practices alongside those for whom harassment of women is the sole aim, we miss the opportunity to deconstruct the particular gender conceptions on display within the differing modes of discourse and practice in these hyper-masculine communities.

The incel lineage is characterized precisely by its desire to grasp. In her ethnography of London, England’s pick-up artist scene, for example, Rachel O’Neill finds that the PUA scene is tied together by the belief that attracting women is a skill that can be cultivated through enough training. Despite the implicit misogyny of such beliefs, the pick-up artist is not primarily identified through violating the presence of women, but his adherence to the “knowledge practice” of pick-up artistry and the subsequent community surrounding such a crafting (2016, 262). For O’Neill and others who have studied pick-up artistry, the scene uses such patriarchal, heteronormative conceptions of gender in order to practice self-affirmation. While some communities mentioned above (Gamergate, for example) aimed their vitriol outward, there is an element of pick-up artistry that involves self-contained, homo-social community bonding. For example, in the pick-up artistry forums that Strauss first read in his attempt to join the pick-up artist scene, men relay stories grounded in their own hopes and desires, and the implicit gender hierarchy in these stories means that self-affirmation comes from the power that they express. As C.J. Pascoe discovers in her ethnography of masculinity in high schools, the primary point of relaying sexual interactions to other men is to affirm their subjecthood and personhood, “in which they indicate to themselves and others that they have the ability to work their will upon the world around them” (Pascoe 2007, 86).

Mystery, the famous pick-up artist with a VH1 show, refers to the lessons of pick-up artistry as a sort of curriculum of masculinity: it teaches a set of techniques based off of the axiom of the confidence as the only thing that matters in the realm of being a man for women. The roots of the curriculum's teachings about attractiveness and value are less obscure than we may first think. Susan Bordo tells us of the deep ties between culture, history, and the internalization of this epistemology by identifying what she calls the "hot man" thesis. The thesis goes like this:

If a man is sufficiently rich, handsome, or powerful, he can collect a harem—and is faced with the temptation of doing so all of the time.

The thesis is not hers; Bordo is quoting directly from a piece written by pop-evolutionary biologist Steven Pinker where he attempts to explain American president Bill Clinton's infidelitous behaviour (Bordo 2015, 232). Bordo uses this example to illustrate that while the third-wave feminism of Wolf, Roiphe, and Paglia was busy constructing fluid analytical conceptions of gender, mainstream culture has been busy leaning into the concept that "the new science of the brain is declaring differences between men and women to be hard-wired" (2015, 231). And while Pinker attempts to justify his conclusion by leveraging his background as a biologist (oh, mystical science!), Bordo points out that such ideas have been popular since the marketization of pop psychology. It was rife in the writings of John Gray, dating advice columnist, psychologist, and coiner of the phrase "women are from Venus, men are from Mars" (Bordo 2015, 232). Gray's position not as a scientist or theorist, but a sort of "phenomenologist of sex" (Bordo 2015, 233) means that his observations are cultural—despite how close they are "to what the biologists are saying" (Bordo 2015, 234). This pop-psychology distinction has sunk



its tentacles throughout mainstream Western culture—like, for example, the proliferation of the genre of self-help books grounded in sharing the “secrets” of understanding the opposite sex—and leaves a lasting impact on male behaviour, concepts of sexual desire, and even linguistics (Connell 2005, 30).

What makes a man a Martian? The question has two answers: what makes the Martian as contrasted against the Venusian, and what codifies Martian behaviour as male. Bordo explores this shaping through the idealization of what she calls the “warrior male” (Bordo 2015, 239). The set of cultural depictions that tie masculinity to violence and the transgression of social norms, for example, make us understand the ideal male as one for whom social rules do not apply. “As spectators [of violent sports like boxing, for example] we find ‘displays of masculine aggression’ exciting in the ring *precisely* because they break with the taboos of civilization, act out the (forbidden) aggression in all of us” (Bordo 2015, 236). The effect is to value the ideal male as a “vestigial repository of primal masculinity”, beyond the civilized taboos of violence (Bordo 2015, 236). And as this violence is bred from within, adoration from society is bred from without.

## **Articulating the warrior male**

I focus on the analytic of the warrior male for a few reasons. The first is to locate black pill masculinity’s perception of a culture war, where “SJWs” (social justice warriors) and “feminazis” make up a united front, the black pill the only medicine against the chemical warfare of this ideology and its ideal army a troop of warrior men (Chess and Shaw 2015; Salter 2018). The second is because understanding the history of the “warrior” male opens up a new analytic for understanding the black pill’s conception of masculinity and the antagonisms

of gender: while the black pill incel benefits from male privilege, his own self-codifications preclude this privilege from being hegemonic. Third is that it introduces the idea that cultural antagonisms—economic, gendered, political, epistemological, and social—are part of what motivates contemporary manifestations of masculinity.

Part of the warrior male's definition is its reflexive existence against the mass of men. Bordo quotes psychologist William Pollack's claim that a boy planting a kiss on a girl makes us "respond as if he is a full-fledged aggressor" (Bordo 2015, 239). The quotation is overwrought, but it raises Bordo's point: on one hand, the cultural wisdom is that "to be a 'real male'... *requires* that one be fiercely competitive and aggressive in 'manly arenas' like athletics and have a predatory, promiscuous, get-all-you-can attitude toward girls" while on the other hand, men believe that "if he makes the wrong move with a girl, he may be in deep trouble". And all men pay for the behaviour and expectations of the warrior male. "At the same time as the 'winners' may be getting away with sexual harassment and rape, the 'nerds' and 'queers' [she uses these categories based on the slurs they would be likely to be used against them] are paying the price for the bad reputation *all* boys have been tarred with" (Bordo 2015, 240). This cultural perspective on masculinity—iterated through phenomena from Disney movies to high school football fields to the boardroom—shapes the behaviour of the 'nerds' and 'queers' because they believe both that to be a man is to adopt this hardened 'warrior' stance, and also that the world expects such behaviour from them.

Bordo borrows from the psychologist Gary Bateson to term this the "double bind" of masculinity. This double bind spurs what Alfred Adler calls the "masculine protest", an exaggerated emphasis on the masculine as a response to powerlessness (Adler 2011, 35;

Connell 2005, 43). The “masculine protest” is an overcompensation to the anxiety of existing within this double bind. The difficulties of this double bind are all the more apparent if we accept Bordo’s thesis, articulated in her studies of female anorexia, that the body itself is always “‘in the grip’, as Foucault puts it, of cultural practices” (Bordo 1993, 142). There is no “natural” body, stable and acultural; the body is instead always the product of given “culturally relative and institutional forms.” The “masculine protest”, then, is a result not of the spontaneous needs, basic pleasures, or “fundamental structures of body experience”, but instead a reaction to the ways in which social practices—such as our reverence for the “warrior male”, or the power imbalance of not-being-such—“changes people’s *experience* of their bodies and their possibilities” (Bordo 1993, 142). And while both act to make objective the body as subject to the will, the contrast between female anorexia and the “warrior male” is, naturally, stark: while the former is injurious to the body, the latter is reverent of it. This idea—of the body as tool—is afforded to men through cultural reverence for the “warrior male” type. While Bordo’s double bind splits male behaviour into two, the warrior male comes in many forms.

In the 2005 edition of their *Masculinities*, originally published in 1985, R.W. Connell offers a postscript to the typology of post-Fordist masculinities in the first edition. In the global shift towards market society—spurred, especially, by post-Thatcher economic restructuring—power becomes ordered around the needs of transnational capital. In the competitive affective state spawned from neoliberal economics (Davies 2018, 92), power itself becomes zero-sum (Navarria 2020, 274). And this neoliberal order “has an implicit gender politics,” Connell tells us, “placing strategic power in the hands of particular groups of men—managers and entrepreneurs” (Connell 2005, 24). Dubbing this masculinity “transnational business masculinity”, the man who fits within this type views the body as resource and tool: they “treat

their life as an enterprise,” self-consciously managing their bodies, emotions, and finances (Connell 2005, 25).

In this manifestation, the warrior’s battle is not man versus man, but instead a battle to exercise control over his own body as Other as it acts against his own read of how to best advantage oneself within his contemporary cultural sphere. And through this attempt to understand ourselves as both cognitively articulated through mental activity and culturally articulated through our bodies, the tension resolves into what Foucault calls the “docile body”: the body as tool at the service of the mind and cognitive labour. This splitting of mind and body has its roots in mind-body dualism, articulated differently in Western thought over millennia. Bordo (1993, 144–45) taxonomizes the history of this tension through the thought of Plato, Augustine, Descartes and Aristotle:

1. “The body is experienced as *alien*, as the not-self, the not-me.” It is a “brute material envelope” for the self that exists inside, more essential and grounded within the soul.
2. This enveloping means the experience of the body is one of “confinement and limitation,” a nagging Other who needs constant tending.
3. Augustine describes the body as “enemy”, a source of constant distraction through its own needs. These needs are not chosen, but given.
4. “The body is the locus of all that threatens our attempts at control. It overtakes, it overwhelms, it erupts and disrupts.”

The dualism inherent in Western thought for millennia—and the subsequent act of locating will, power, and the ability to make sense of lived experience in the mind—necessarily leads to the development of a regimen for control of the spontaneous that comes, literally, from without.

These thinkers all begin here in order to prescribe systems that allow for the mind to exert control over the unpredictable and irrational body. On rejecting the body and its impulses, Bordo observes that “Once control has become the central issue for the soul, these are the only possible terms of victory.” And once these terms of control are defined, the body must become machine: “The only way to win this no-win game is to go beyond control, to kill off the body’s spontaneities entirely—that is, to cease to *experience* our hungers and desires” (1993, 145). In her work examining anorexia as a specific example of this control, Bordo finds that “the sense of security derived... appears, first of all, as the pleasure of control and independence” (Bordo 1993, 152). The specific security from this anorexic state is contingent on cultural perceptions of femininity and the idealization of thinness; the armoured body, likewise, stems from reverence for the warrior male. His body armor is not only, as Foucault would phrase our above analysis, an “inscribed surface of events” (Foucault 1984b, 83), but in this move to mechanize the body, it becomes subject to the mental will of its bearer.

## **Weaponizing rationality**

If there is an expressive trait of the incel, like the “sarging” of the pick-up artist, it is a discursive and epistemological obsession with positivist modes of understanding both the individual body and the social body. Christopher Kelty observes in his study of geek culture that the prioritization of mental control has the effect of something akin to ideology: the

particular rationalist frame means that every action is an opportunity to optimize, analyze, and rationalize, and as such to behave under such a dictum “cannot be distinguished from ideas or principles of social or moral order” (Kelty 2005, 186). Geeks are a group constituted by a shared sense of concern for the conditions of their own social being: the application and operationalization of “reason” as a pattern through which one makes sense of being in the world. Seen from within this “social imaginary” (Taylor 2004; Yar 2014), the usage of reason as a decision-making framework is not so much an ontological claim as it is what Kelty calls a “hermeneutic and prescriptive” claim, “focused on maintaining a particular moral order” (Kelty 2005, 200).

The weapons of the warrior male, then, need not be fists and physical violence of Bordo’s archetype. What the fists of Bordo’s warrior male shares alongside the transnational businessman is both culturally-defined power and the ability to shift what defines power within the hegemony. The warrior male enjoys his hegemony through the ability to exercise his will upon whomever he wishes. Connell takes this idea one step further: to identify hegemonic masculinity through physical aggression is to ignore the existence of the Bordean double-bind. Instead, they tell us, hegemonic masculinity exercises its power through its claim to “embody the power of reason, and thus represent the interests of the whole society” (Connell 2005, 199). The representative power of reason comes from its privileged epistemological status as a universal truth mechanism. Or, as Luce Irigaray tells us: the imposition of models on the phenomenon of being is a means to “take possession” of the potential ways of knowing through simultaneously universalizing them and alienating the self from them (1993, 124). These universals separate the subject exercising power—the warrior male—from the object under investigation, “delegating power to something that intervenes

between the universe observed and the observing subject” (Irigaray 1993, 126). It allows the universe itself to become subject to the male grasp. And thus reason, as a tool created and maintained dialectically through the warrior male’s engagement with culture, becomes the mode of manifesting the “masculine imaginary”.

This goes to show that Bordo’s reading of the nerd as the antithesis of toxic masculinity is less about any innate, feminist qualities of marginalized men and more about their status *as-marginalized* against hegemonic masculinity. When we arrive at the counterpublics formed in their opposition, such as what Adrienne Massanari calls the “toxic technocultures” of contemporary “geek masculinity” (2017, 329), Irigaray’s framework becomes manifest. A historically-masculine culture, geek subculture valorizes the possession and acquisition of specialized knowledge grounded in alternative epistemologies and universes, most often those of the media objects they consume. It also embraces the notion of the reasoned, atomized and autonomous individual in a meritocratic world (Turner 2006, 29). The reification of reason within these spheres creates a binary of in-grouping and out-grouping, beyond the traditional geospatial and temporal considerations of community: shared material interests define in-group-ness and out-group-ness alongside a deeper epistemological affinity. But what is the particular moral order that defines the reasoned and reasoning male? It is analogous to the “masculine imaginary” defined above. By enacting through practice the universalization of a rigid rationality-based epistemology, one practices masculinity itself (Theweleit 1987 xvii)—and sublimates all other forms of desire under this framework of both living-within and operationalizing rationality. This “claim to embody the power of reason” is the means through which hegemonic masculinity establishes its hegemony (Connell 2005, 199).

A consequence of this living-by-reason is that becoming the warrior male involves the explicit rejection of *eros*, “a battle against everything that constitutes enjoyment and pleasure” (Theweleit 1987, 8). In locating the “masses” outside the rationality binary, the conception of ideal behaviour—and the asset possessed by the in-group—becomes rationality itself. Theweleit identifies two conceptions of the “mass” in his analysis of the writings of the *Freikorps*, a 1920s German mercenary army with direct lineage to the Nazi *Sturmabteilung*, or Brownshirts: the “strictly formed, poured into a dam” mass that is hard, discrete, and admirable in that it follows the rules of order, and maintains its isolated integrity; and the “flowing, slimy, teeming” corrupted mass, leaderless and leaky (Theweleit 1987, 3–4). To the warrior male, the latter mass is “molecular” in contrast to the “molar” mass of which he is a part, and the molecular mass represents the concept of desire itself—to be leaky is to acknowledge not only room for the Other but also the idea that the self is incomplete. The ideal warrior male is thus “a man with machinelike periphery, whose interior has lost its meaning” (Theweleit 1987, 160). Becoming a desiring being is the ur-fear of the armoured soldier. Desire is what the soldier defines himself against, a slippery void in contrast to the soldier’s armoured, individualized, sovereign body. In the diaries of *Freikorps* soldier Ernst von Salomon, for example, Theweleit finds an articulation of the process of *becoming* part of a new solidity or totality that coheres; i.e., is molar instead of molecular. The troop-machine within which Salomon and the attendees of the *Freikorps* academy are brought into constructs this molar mass as a totality “that places the individual soldier in a new set of relations to other bodies; itself as a combination of innumerable identically polished components” (Theweleit 1987, 155). The ultimate function of the troop is to be the “external boundaries of the person as a front: they are organs of reality-control, of control and defense against the drives” (Theweleit 1987, 162). The abuse that



Salomon experiences at the military academy makes him realize that “for the first time in his life, we were not subject to arbitrary conditions but a single law”, a single epistemology, one grounded in the total personalization of bodily pain and in turn the personalization (and subsumption) of this new totality. Molecular masses leave too much room for pain, too much disorganization in contrast to this. “The cadet never receives instructions; he recognizes his mistakes [and thus how to be] only in the moment of transgression from the reactions of others who already know the score” (Theweleit 1987, 145). The molar totality of the war machine never acquiesces into a moment of fragility or openness; it remains solid, without leaks, and it is up to the individual to integrate into this. Yet this exact leaklessness is where its appeal lies. The exclusively-bodily punishments given in this situation, combined with the denial of pleasure, transformed rituals of bodily pain into “intoxicated consciousness”, replacing his longing for pleasure with the mechanization of the body into a “bundle of muscles and skin, blood and bones and sinews” (Theweleit 1987, 148, 150).

The warrior male identity is thus a flight from the feminine insofar as the feminine embodies ego dissolution; it is a fear of the molecular mass as projected through a fear of the “soft inner body” that constitutes it. Any attempts to control the female body, according to Theweleit, are at once and the same attempts to control the mass *and* the inner erotic drive that is analogous to the mass (Theweleit 1987, 37). The usage of the armoured body provides escape from maternity, the ties to the womb, and in turn, femininity itself: when the troop machine organizes, perpetuates and arranges the armoured body, he becomes its “true child... created without the help of a woman” (Theweleit 1987, 160).

## **Social hierarchies and market logic**

But where does this compulsion to construct the body as tool, to abnegate the feminine, come from? Answering this will not only tell us what function the weaponized rationality serves, but also provides us with the antagonistic configuration of social existence that the black pill makes its own effort to reveal. To answer this, I'll abstract it: where is the battle that summons the weapons? We find it in the zero-sum market configuration of the social world in the neoliberal state. Connell entertains the idea that the cultural reification of the warrior male is, in the neoliberal era, a response to what Habermas calls a "motivation crisis" for capitalism produced by the rationalization of culture (Connell 2005, 207). This crisis occurs as a result of the misalignment of the supposed motivations of the state (in this instance, equality) and its sociocultural siblings (for our purposes, social capital) (Habermas 1975, 79). Jack Bratich and Sarah Benet-Weiser identify this disjuncture as a consequence of neoliberalism's "confidence culture". Neoliberalism, in its ruthless commodification of interpersonal relationships, creates the pick-up artist not as lothario, but as entrepreneur: they are invested in the "traffic of women" as a commodity that leads to the enhancement of affective resources via "sexual availability, meeting needs and feelings of control" (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019, 5008–9). As such, the "gendered motivations" that replace neoliberalism's motivation crisis paint the male "acquisition" of the feminine as its defining heuristic of male success—to be male is to acquire, and to fail to acquire is to have one's masculinity invalidated.

This language of commodification and acquisition—which we saw above in Crumplar's reading of Rodger's manifesto, and is a key element of the male grasp—makes it worth drawing

out an operational definition of neoliberalism. David Harvey, in his aptly-named “Brief History of Neoliberalism”, defines it as such (2005, 2):

Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices ... It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist ... then they must be created, by state action if necessary.

Harvey’s definition illustrates the scale of the neoliberal project: it is not just a heuristic for economic organization, but an ordering mechanism for the cultural and the social. The neoliberal way to reach utopia, Harvey tells us, is the liberation of “individual entrepreneurial freedoms” through a rigid belief-in and support-of the market as an organizing heuristic. Foucault draws neoliberalism’s distinction from liberalism out to be this exact difference in scale, the movement from the market as a tool of economic organization to the market as a mode of government and subjectivity. In a February 7, 1979 lecture to the Collège de France, he traces three distinct movements in the development of liberalism into neoliberalism (Foucault and Senellart 2008, 118–21):

1. The shift from exchange to competition as the underlying function of the market.
2. The shift from the validity of laissez-faire economics to the need for government intervention and nurturing of the market.
3. “The relation between an economy of competition and a state can no longer be one of the reciprocal delimitation of different domains. Since pure competition is the most efficient line of order yet can only be fostered with state intervention, the government’s purpose is to foster and advance this conception of pure competition.”

Wendy Brown reads what Foucault calls this “market veridiction” as the new framework of a state animated by “an ontological, epistemological, and political reformulation of sovereignty, one that not only constrained, but produced a new form of the state and its legitimacy” (Brown 2015, 59). With this prioritization of governing for the market, the governance of political subjects routes through this same market mode. Neoliberalism attempts to model the exercise of political power—and thus the configuration of the political subject—on the principles of a market economy. “It is not a question of freeing an empty space [for the market’s autopoiesis], but of taking the formal principles of a market economy and referring and relating them to ... a general art of government” (Foucault and Senellart 2008, 131). This includes, among other things, the concept of “human capital”. Neoliberalism’s creates a political subject that is no longer primarily *homo sapien*, but *homo economicus*, approaching “everything as a market and [knowing] only market conduct” (Brown 2015, 39). The neoliberal competition among market objects organizes its democracy, as opposed to equal treatment or equal protection—and in turn its citizenship, its *a priori* understanding of social being, works along the same lines

(Brown 2015, 40). Neoliberalism thus throws away the dialectic of political subjectivity not only through its systemic drives toward compulsory commodification and exponential growth, but by its very form of valuation. Social interaction becomes market exchange, and interaction within it a competition among entrepreneurial self/objects: “all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized” (11).

Neoliberal economics are, then, neoliberal subjectivity, which is in turn normative neoliberal reason itself. The government organized for an exchange market places exchange value above all; the government organized for a competitive market places competition above all. The *homo economicus* social sphere is, then, not a shared public but a marketplace, a ground of competitive antagonisms. As many scholars have noted (Brown 2019; Amin and Membrez 2004; Melamed 2006; Han 2017; Bourdieu 1998), this antagonistic mode inevitably leads to the creation of a social hierarchy. The structural rewards provided to those who succeed within the neoliberal competitive frame (financial success, security, attractiveness, ease of acquiring basic social nourishment) create a hierarchy of value, because the basic neoliberal frame assigns value towards these traits—and these traits, mapping onto the endless exponential growth logic inherent in the capital drives that undergird neoliberalism, grant their possessors further access to the fruits of success within the neoliberal state.

This understanding expands on the “entrepreneurial” pick-up artist detailed by Bratich and Benet-Weiser above.<sup>13</sup> The pick-up artist “acquires” women, and succeeds to the degree to

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13. One could, if they wanted to, read into the etymology of the phrase “picking up” women. My own quick reading is that the act of “grabbing” or “picking up” is always performed on an object, and when someone picks something up, they now hold it—it constitutes a part of their external appearance. This external appearance is given weight within neoliberal hierarchies of value.

which he manipulates external perceptions of his social value—DHVing and negging are all about taking control of the distribution of social value within a particular social exchange. This cleaves off the “socialization” of the social—the logic of pick-up artistry creates objects out of those within the social exchange, and prescribes a set of behaviours to follow in order to acquire these objects. As we see in Crumplar’s reading of Eliot Rodger’s manifesto, the incel operates along a similar object logic. Rodger uses objects—and later, women themselves—as an attempt to *acquire* coolness, or sexual appeal. He is similarly embroiled in a pure objectification of the social, understanding the acquisition of personal traits as acquisitions that through a sequence of object-exchange and performances of ownership. Both the pick-up artist and the incel are always trying to grasp things, to have and to hold them. Bodies, things, women: objectification inserts itself as the lens through which both see the world around them.

### **Inputs and outputs: the program of the male grasp**

This drive to mass objectification not only serves to configure the world as something to be grasped; it also splices existence into a clean subject-object relationship. This is not the incel as *subject-to*, although this relationship, as we saw above, is important; it is all the material world as *object-of* the rationalizing grasp of the incel. On the direct level, this facilitates the positivist cognitive approach as weaponry, a means to guard and filter that which is brought in contact with the incel’s subjectivity. But this subject-object relationship, the crystallization of the masculine curriculum into a set of expected trends and results, is best understood as a *program*. As a part of the “general, neoliberal trend to personalize power” (Chun 2013, 13), the program of the masculine grasp acts as a response to the limiting power over potential social interactions that spring out of neoliberal sociality as a competitive framework, a hierarchy

with winners and losers. A program, as Chun defines it, is simply a set of inputs that result in a defined, delimited set of outputs (2013, 131). For example, the pick-up artist's belief in the primacy of aesthetic conventions—and the mewing, jelqing, and maxxng manoeuvres prescribed to overcome the failures of these inputs—is what organizes social (and neoliberal) success, a belief in the social as programmatic.

The subject of Hines' article, Crumplar's reading of Rodger's manifesto, and Ging's investigations into the manosphere all point to isolating senses of material lack. It is no coincidence, then, that these lacks all resolve themselves in some sort of ritual of community that justifies and reflects the validity of these material lacks back onto their subjects. Whether it is a lack of the culturally-defined ideals of masculinity, coolness, or intimacy, these lacks exist on the level of the internal symbolic. Masculine communities ordered by the "male grasp" reify and reflect these back at their subjects. The pick-up artistry forums that Strauss found himself on were repositories of material experience and internal theorizing; Rodger's manifesto circulates regularly within the "deep vernacular web" (Tuters 2019); Hines' subject learns his supposed path to salvation through Sluthate and other websites. The panacea proposed in the red pill and the black pill (or pick-up artistry, or acts of premeditated violence) is that they expose the truth. And this truth itself is an epistemology, constructed iteratively through the mediatization of communal experience that happens through these expressions.

So we arrive at the object of my study: the webforum incels.co. Not solely a discussion forum, but a community unto itself, one with its own set of social positioning, its own understanding of right and wrong, and its own conception of how best to operationalize these mores within this social perspective. Technologically speaking, the fact that it fosters

discussion is inseparable from its permanent, historical status as a repository of the experiences of its community members. The hypothetical naive user looking for community finds it not only in the active discussions, but the archives of experience past written down into the forum and remaining there in perpetuity: a place where users looking for the isolation of their material experience at the bottom of the neoliberal hierarchy to have their material situation reflected back at them and the validity of their situation affirmed by the community at hand.

Žižek tells us “you can’t be a part of a community without getting your hands dirty” (Fiennes 2012). By this he means that to participate in community is to be implicit in the act of world-building for this community, the act of creating the ideological perspective that incorporates a particular configuration of actors, of relationships among others, and how to contextualize and behave within these actions (Laclau 1977, 10). In its attempts to construct a knowledge base of the world, the community on this forum bases itself around the ritual of *archiving* these experiences, which circularly justifies a material experience denied by neoliberal hierarchies of social value. It thus fulfills Derrida’s conception of the archive as not primarily a repository of knowledge, but a repository of memories (Derrida and Prenowitz 2008, 45).

Foucault tells us that in its resurrection and preservation of a particular mode of classifying things, an archive is “a way of introducing... an order of the same type as that which was being established” (Foucault 2006, 143). Archives are, as Regina Kunzel tells us, “historical agents, organized around unwritten logics of inclusion and exclusion, with the power to exalt certain stories, experiences and events” (Arondekar et al. 2015, 214). That which



is holds, and which it does *not* hold, indicates particular epistemological priorities. Access to what does and does not belong in the supposedly apolitical spaces of an archive is a human activity, and thus the archive begins with these same affective, material concerns. Carol Steedman, in her study of the historian Jules Michelet, notes that “nothing starts in the Archive, nothing, ever at all, though things certainly end up there. You find nothing in the Archive but stories caught half way through” (Steedman 2002, 45). Thus we can see the construction of a user-based archive as not only the establishment of particular knowledge norms, but also a performance based within these norms themselves. The act of engaging in the creation of an archive functions to transfigure individual lived experience into the epistemology of a totality. It transforms the memories of the individual, piece by piece, into a worldview that both justifies these memories and sets them up within a particular way of viewing them. Foucault calls this part of an “architectonic unity”, concerned not only with the “descriptions of cultural influences, traditions, and continuities,” but also calling up the question of its own “internal coherences, axioms, deductive connexions and compatibilities” (Foucault 1972, 10). In other words, the participatory archive of the webforum becomes an entire worldview, with explanations for why things happen and particular principles of what is true and what is not, embedded within. It crafts a knowledge base alongside the best way to act within the world—in short, an entire ideological perspective.

## **Conclusion: taking the black pill**

After three plastic surgeries, the subject of Hines’ article moves away from posting on the black pill-related forums because his confidence problems were not solved. She closes her article:

“Sometimes when he notices a woman making eye contact with other men in the street, the entire world seems to narrow to a harsh, suffocating plane of power dynamics, in which sexual attraction determines all. ‘Every time I try to talk myself out of things I used to believe, of the black pill, it feels like I am moving away from the truth.’”

Examining the deeply hierarchical view of the black pill social epistemology, this suffocation becomes a powerful metaphor. When one’s perceived truth is deeply grounded in these power dynamics, to find your own living as contextualized through a social hierarchy leaves little room to breathe and nourish the self perception—the walls of relative, reflexive comparison and location within the social hierarchy close in quickly. The construction and maintenance of a hegemonic masculinity is thus the construction and maintenance of a rigid, rationality-based social order that seeks to explain the simultaneity of this suffocation as well as the Borean “double bind” of masculinity.

While each of the elements that make up the black pill and its incel subject are well-articulated in the literature, they are trains passing through the night. The closest we have is the incel as a part of the “manosphere”, and while the term is a useful analytic for discussing contemporary anti-feminism writ broadly, it collapses under the weight of its “vast assemblages” when used deductively instead of inductively. Crumplar’s deconstruction of Rodger’s manifesto is uniquely enlightening, but as a case study of one individual whose moment of infamy came before black pill entered the subcultural lexicon, it begs whether its conclusions apply to the community that Rodger progenates. Understanding the incel identity and the black pill is thus a process of understanding the intersection of the masculine “double

bind”, neoliberalism’s social value hierarchy, and communities as practice. It is the result of the economization of social interaction leading to a lack of social capital, mobility, and thus the perpetuation of the material lack experienced by those who look to the black pill as a curative. The constituent community, knowledge production practices, and computer-mediated communications intersect in that community, as commiseration, entails knowledge production grounded in the usage of positivist frameworks as a tool to enact the lost “warrior male” imaginary. This knowledge produced exists in the perpetual archive of the forum space, and thus our overarching research question—the construction of the black pill ideology—is one we can investigate through the incels.co forum.

## 4. The male grasp: method and findings

*It's low IQ beyond compare to accept only one element in the totality of social order as being variable. In actual fact, the play of each factor is mutable and mutually-modifying in determining the form taken by human relationships. It's a multivariate calculus of structuring; one must integrate.*

*An incels.co user*

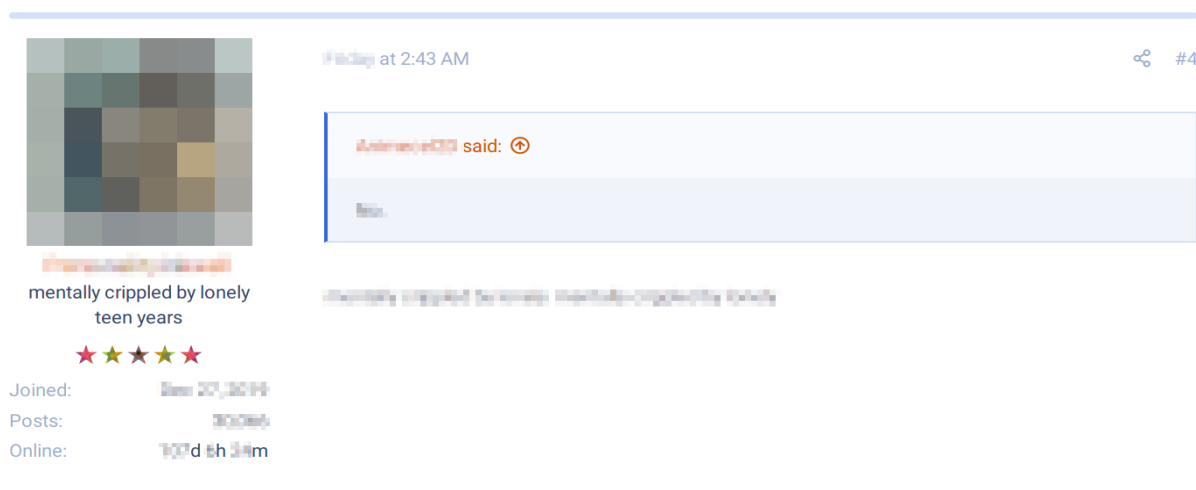
### Data collection

My object of study is the incels.co webforum and the posts made on it. Webforums, as collections of discussion “threads” where users post messages about a particular topic at hand, map naturally onto the concept of a discourse and the examination of expression through speech utterances and conversation. I sought to perform a qualitative analysis of the discourses on display in order to understand how incels view the world and how they construct the black pill. Taking up critical discourse analysis, as articulated by Fairclough (1995, 2013) and grounded in Foucault’s conception of a discourse as the cultural utterances and knowledge that shape behaviour and subjectivity (Foucault 1972), we can see the platform itself as a uniquely

archived discourse. It is a platform that doubly-articulates (Langlois et. al., 2009) the space both as a conversation—and thus the practice of community—and an archive of both anecdotes and procedural notes, promoting the iterative construction of the black pill. More specifically, the affordances of the forum’s “thread” structure allows us to read the platform as a collection of individual discourses that together constitute the discourse of the platform overall. Self-contained within the overarching structure of the forum, threaded discussion structures leverage the platform’s community-based affordances such as usernames that identify actors, hyperlinking of and reference to both internal and external content, and the demarcation of communal and discursive boundaries against the broader public. This discursive examination lines up closely with the idea that the black pill functions as an ideology, in the line of Ernesto Laclau’s tripartite definition of ideology as a “system of articulations”: it defines primary actors, the subject; it contains a social and political context, a theory; and it prescribes how to best act within this context, a praxis (1977, 10). The articulation of the subject acts as an articulation of the phenomenon of experience. The articulation of the theory is a means of making sense of one’s surroundings. The articulation of praxis is the way to act according to this subject position within the world at large.

My search began by finding out what forum software the board ran on—there are many implementations, the most popular of which are vBulletin, a paid software, and phpBB, an open-source software implementation. I inspected the HTML elements of the main forum page for some trace of the software’s name, and found a reference to the XenForo commercial forum software. To grab the posts from the forum, I initially planned to use the “Forum User Post Scraper” software package (Laird 2020). But I had to abandon this idea. Incels.co has a custom appearance, and the only way for FUPS to work with custom skins is to log into the forum, set

my version of the skin to the default XenForo skin, and then run the software. This raises an ethics issue. My ethical argument for a lot of this work is that as a public forum, it is a discussion that is occurring in public, and thus data available to study. The second that I log in to the forum, I become privy to information that is not available to the hypothetical “public” user of the forum, and that introduces ethical quandaries. I perform this study from the perspective of the public, and the public element of the black pill ideology is important for the foundational perspective that my research takes. Logging in would corrupt my role as a removed researcher. I switched to the tool used by the archive.org’s Wayback Machine web crawler and archiving tool, called “grab-site” (“ArchiveTeam/Grab-Site” 2020). It is used by digital archivists to back up entire websites into the standardized .warc format, a compressed file that contains a copy of all the data collected as well as metadata about each object collected. The tool sets up a local server to perform a scraping operation that one can interact with on-the-fly, in order to edit settings that may need changing or to avoid downloading redundant files.



*Figure 1: The structure of a post with a reply on incels.co's custom XenForo forum theme.  
From incels.co*

With the knowledge that I would have to write a program to turn my archived data into a format accessible for analysis, I began my scrape as soon as I understood that grab-site would work for my needs. The scrape took three days to run, and finished November 27, 2019. After this, I took the 10 GB of compressed `.warc` files and used a python library designed to parse `.warc` files to read each `.html` page of a forum thread that they contained into a SQLite database. Each entry in the database is a post, alongside anonymized usernames, the post text, a “job title” flair that is contained underneath each username, the date of the post, and the thread title.<sup>14</sup>

With 2,888,874 posts in my database, I needed to find some way to narrow my findings in order to perform a reasonable qualitative analysis. When starting a thread, posters can choose to assign their thread a “tag” as part of the title; available tags include “Blackpill”, “Serious”, “JBW”, “ragefuel”, “suicidefuel”, and others. “Serious” is the most-frequent tag, with 372,943 posts and 16,376 threads; “Blackpill” is second, with 214,977 posts and 10,228 threads. The “Serious” tag contains a number of threads designed for “general discussion”, such as the “weekly what you doing this weekend thread” and the “Semen Retention Knights Discussion Thread”. Since I am interested in the specific articulation of the black pill, I focused my data collection on threads tagged with “Blackpill”. I took as my sample the top ten threads with this tag as ranked by number of replies, which left me with 1,775 posts. I assembled the post text, the anonymized usernames, the post dates, and the thread title of each of these posts into a table for reading. These conversations ranged from 146 to 215 posts each and averaged 46 different posters per thread—put differently, discussions averaged 3.859 posts from each

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14. All code I used in this thesis can be found at <https://gitlab.com/anthbrtn/pywarcser>. The repository includes a literate iPython notebook that walks through each step of the process.

participant, from a total of 460 unique users, I then read each thread through the lens of a qualitative critical discourse analysis.

## Findings

If one thing is clear from the incels.co community, it is that the black pill is not a curative or a vaccine—but instead a regime, constructed through a process of discovery for which the community members are scientist. Anecdotes are anecdotal; stories are fables; and discourse itself is deduction. Discussions are both a process of being and a process of understanding this being: while communication occurs through language, these communications serve almost always as attempts to articulate what exactly *is* the shape and character of the supposed oppression that incels face. Members of the forum believe that the social world is configured *in its very essence* to marginalize those who identify as incel, and the debates themselves centre around what I’ve decided to split into three separate frames: what it means to be desirable; what makes (and almost just as importantly, what *doesn’t* make) an incel; and what it is about the social sphere that garners these oppressions. These frames each, in turn, help me answer my research questions. By understanding how the community deals with its own self-definition, I can understand what taking the black pill—as the members of incels.co have done—means. After reviewing the literature, we can understand the incel’s motivations as related to the intersection of their masculinity and romance, intimacy, and sexuality. By examining the incels’ definition of desirability, I can identify how desire—and how it is defined—both structures their relations to intimacy and the world at large. We also know that there is a difference between the red pill as previously defined and the “redpill + fatalism” of the black pill. Since both function as explanatory tools for relating and understanding the world at large,



by articulating the shape of this perceived oppression, we can approach the question of the black pill's unique nihilism.

## Constructing the black pill science

The user base's process of constructing the black pill emerges through its discourse, and it's visible even when we look at the titles of my sample threads. These are:

Title of thread	Number of posts
Racial Allegiance is An Extremely Blue Pilled Cope	215
why do wh*tecels get offended when incels call them out for their bullshit?	211
Having to date a non-white woman as a white man is absolutely disgusting and repulsive.	206
its the saxons that are responsible for ethnic self hate	179
MY LANDWHALE GOT 10+ LIKES LESS THAN A MINUTE AFTER SETTING THE ACCOUNT	176
Picture of FiveFourManlet (Everyone GTFIH) (Who In The World Said This Guy Is Chad Are You Blind or Just a Baka?)	168
This totally normal 26 year old man is now an incel in 2019. Inceldom continues to accelerate...	160
The signs of the fakecel	159
Adult men with teenage girls is how things were supposed to be	155
Incel term definition should be expanded (my own incel definition inside)	146

*Table 2: The most active discussion threads on incels.co tagged "Blackpill" as of November 29 2019*

A quick scan of the titles, and three themes emerge: the question of race and its relation to involuntary celibacy, taking up the top four threads; contradictions in perceived attractiveness levels; and the definition of what makes an incel. We can also make some observations that, I'll show later, bear out in the discourses themselves: all threads are either questions or statements

of fact, positivist claims thrown out to either work through or build upon the black pill as an epistemological frame.

Take, for example, the thread about adult men being with teenage girls. At first glance, the thread seems to be a call for pedophilia,<sup>15</sup> but the thread is not focused purely on the permission to engage in sexual relations with teenagers. Instead, reproduction and the biological continuation of the family are the original poster (OP)'s concerns. He bases his argument on (uncited) scientific claims, which goes like this (direct quotes):

- Women's fertility rapidly decreases from 30
- Women mature much faster
- Adult men are in better economical [sic] conditions to start a family than young teenage men
- There's no significant proof that such kinds of relationships are damaging to the teenage girl's mind
- Therefore, teenage-adult relationships should not be off limits

Every single other thread in my sample follows a similar argumentative structure. The original poster lays out a set of premises, sub-conclusions, and secondary premises, leading up to a general overall conclusion that serves to fit or expand the black pill epistemology. Let's break down one example, the thread "Having to date a non-white woman as a white man is absolutely disgusting and repulsive." The thread opens with the following: "If you have to fuck a non-European female as a European male, then it's truly over for you. This act basically

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15. More specifically, ephebophilia; pedophilia refers to interest in prepubescent children, hebephilia refers to children around the ages of 11 to 14, and ephebophilia refers to interest in children from 15 to 19.

signals that you are not fit to reproduce within your own race, hence being rejected by your own women... Females of your own race reject you and hate you.”

The post almost exactly parallels the ideal construction of an argument within the context of analytic philosophy’s propositional logic, a calculus for simplifying and systematizing natural language arguments. Propositional logic reduces the nuances of natural language into a set of boolean manoeuvres centred around two characteristics: the atomistic proposition and the manipulating operator. Propositional logic is based on Aristotelian logic (as articulated in his *Prior Analytics* (1989)) and expanded on throughout the analytic tradition, especially in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell in developing the concept of logical atomism (see, for example, Wittgenstein’s claim on the fifth page of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that “the world is the totality of facts, not of things”). Logical atomism is the view that a set of ultimate, irreducible “facts” or “atoms” comprise the world. These facts are also self-constituting, i.e., they can be understood outside their relations. The operator, logically separate from the atomistic proposition, indicates a particular relationship between facts. The facts constructed by operators are also facts in themselves, but since they can be reduced to their atomic components, they themselves are not atomistic. Therefore, there exists a set of universal truths within these atomic facts. Further, universal truth claims can be made as long as their atomistic premises and the operations performed upon them hold true. Instead of breaking down the conceptual validity of logical atomism, I will map out our example argument into propositional logic. The first step is to break down the argument into deductive, propositional statements (note how little editorial intervention this requires):

1. **IF** you have to fuck a non-European female as a European male,  
**THEN** it's truly over for you
2. **IF** you are rejected by “your own women,” **THEN** you are not fit to  
reproduce within your own race
3. **THEREFORE** sexual relations with non-European females as a  
European male is equal to a lack of reproductive fitness.

Arguments in the form of propositional logic are judged on two criteria, validity and soundness. A valid argument is an argument wherein if the premises (in our case, points 1 and 2) are true, then it is impossible for the conclusion to be false. This judgment is a *structural* judgment, and has no bearing on the actual truth value of the argument. An argument that is valid *with premises that are true* is an argument that is sound. The premises—both the atomic facts that make them up, and the operational facts that constitute each “if-then” statement<sup>16</sup>—are themselves grounded in the particular set of truth values.

However, the original poster of this argument makes no claims to particular truth values—he is focused on providing a set of rules that themselves expand the epistemological purview of the black pill, as opposed to establishing any atomic facts. The discursive manoeuvre of creating rules as opposed to establishing atomic fact is, when combined with data, constitutive of not only a set of facts but an entire epistemology, a set of rules and relations between these facts. In this sense, the community moves beyond the commiseration of its precursors like Lookism and pick-up artistry forums from the sharing of anecdotes to the establishment of the “scientific blackpill.”

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16. “If-then” statements are referred to in propositional logic as following the relational rule of *modus ponens*.

That's not to say, however, that the scientific black pill is only created through the establishment of abstracted rules. The community also presents anecdotes as anecdotal and takes up preestablished scientific claims and studies to build out this black pill science.

One such mode of building out the facts of the community's worldview is through experimentation. The thread "MY LANDWHALE GOT 10+ LIKES LESS THAN A MINUTE AFTER SETTING THE ACCOUNT" details an experiment that one user undertakes with the dating app Tinder. The fake profile is intentionally unattractive according to the beliefs of the forum. "Landwhale" is online slang for an overweight woman; the fake profile is a "plus size wellness blogger", to which one poster responds "wtf the fuck that is [sic]". In the original post, the success of this profile in attracting male Tinder users is already established, with the poster getting "10+ LIKES IN THE BAR LITERALLY AFTER FINISHING THE BIO." This is distinct from the idea of building out an experiment communally and incorporating the results into the black pill science. Instead, the evidence is brought to the community fully-formed, and the discursive activity is to discuss the particular ways this extends the incontrovertible truth of the black pill science. The community then draws collective conclusions from this anecdotal.

This mode—of confirmation as opposed to experimentation—eliminates the possibility for the black pill to be questioned by taking up one of its truths as a premise to the entire argument (in this case, that women do not suffer from the same dating disadvantages as men when it comes to bodily appearance). One poster, for example, claims that this experiment "shows the sheer amount of desperate fucks out there." The idea that there is no explanation for the profile's success outside of men being "desperate" forecloses the possibility that the community's ideas about dating and attraction are incorrect. Instead, we see that anyone

responding to this match must be “incorrect”: in a follow-up post, the user who started the thread claims that “IF AFTER THIS BLACKPILL, MEN CONTINUE TO USE TINDER THE AVERAGE MALE IQ MUST BE like 30”. Framing this in terms of intelligence fits in with the overall framing of black pill science as a realm of knowledge; building out specific regimens of “black pills” (as a medication regime, in contrast to a single dosage) parallels the subject of Rebecca Hines’ article, mentioned in chapter two, and the permanently-altered sense of perception that he draws from his days posting in these communities. When the construction of the science itself is this anecdotally-iterated worldview, the black pill alters the interpretation of anecdotal data itself.

We also see this evidence-based knowledge construction in the thread titled “This totally normal 26 year old man is now an incel in 2019. Inceldom continues to accelerate ...” The opening post is copied-and-pasted from a forum devoted to providing feedback for users who use the dating app Tinder. He claims to have “modified the profile based on feedback” that he received from users on the Tinder forum, and provides an overview of his job, his interests, and his inability to find a date on Tinder. The poster on incels.co proffers this as further evidence of the “acceleration” of inceldom: the man is “perfectly normal”, and while posters point out his “early receding hairline, mild facial asymmetry, and a bit of weak jawline,” the fact that he too has fallen into the trap of inceldom is evidence that “standards are just going higher and higher every year at an incredible rate.” The thread is explicitly acknowledged by the rest of the posters as further anecdotal data supporting the black pill: one poster claims that “tests like this are what we need to spread the black pill,” while another claims that the test is evidence that “it will only get worse from here on out. We NEED to spread the message, we need more people to take the black pill... in a couple years they [society] will realize we told the Truth.” The only

contention in the thread comes when posters debate whether he is attractive enough to indicate an acceleration of incelism. One poster attempts to calculate the mean of the man's looks, posting class photos of graduating university students from Google Images and claiming that he is "pretty average" in all of those groups. Many posters rate his looks out of 10, with one claiming that he is "5.5 at best" while others rate him lower. The instructions for averaging range from comparing him to photos of others—the graduating class, or the other men in his photos—to "taking a walk outside" and observing the rarity of seeing men on "his level of ugliness".

But looks are not the only criterion by which posters judge his incelism, and his presentation to the forum as a Tinder profile allows for the examination of his entire self-presentation. One poster moves through the profile methodically in arguing that the profile is well-constructed according to the "bluepilled advices" that are society's recommendations for the romantically-challenged:

I wouldn't have guessed that he's an incel either. Outgoing style? Check  
pic 1. Be more masculine and elegant? Pic 2. Love animals and be  
sweet? Pic 3. Interesting life? Pic 4. Try different style and pose with an  
angle? Pic 5. Be yourself, get interests or hobbies? Pic 6. Smile? Pic 7.  
Another pose, different angle, and semi formal style? Pic 8. All pics  
consist of hairstyle maxxing and fashion maxxing. He should be  
gigachad<sup>17</sup> according to bluepilled advices.

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17. "Gigachad" refers to Chad, the name that the forum uses to describe the stereotypical "alpha male", prefixed with the modifier "giga".

Other posters draw similar conclusions: “This guy self-improves, has social hobbies, works, is perfectly average looking, and still struggles to get laid”; others comment on his job as a teacher, whether his photos make him look short or tall, and the predilection for sea-dooing as indicated in his picture.

Anecdotal evidence builds out the black pill science as an explicit contrast to the social narrative of these “bluepilled advices”. While we don’t see the blue pill explicitly named very often, the implication is that this sort of self-improvement advice is the boilerplate advice given to those having difficulty finding a romantic partner. The taxonomy that the above poster moves through contains its own set of assumptions: outgoing style, “being yourself”, smiling in pictures and have an “interesting life” all point towards the popular dating aphorism to be interesting to yourself, and others will follow. As a discursive activity, then, the construction of the black pill science is in explicit contrast to the perpetuation of this bluepill advice. The idea that self-identified users of incels.co aren’t “being themselves” hearkens back to Flynt’s paradox in the second chapter: if “being oneself” is the exact cause of their lack, then a social world wherein such advice is sufficient and necessary for romance does not logically cohere. We can thus see the black pill as a response to the incoherence of this social frame.

If the nihilism of the black pill is then the consequence of living as an incel, this consequence requires its own set of contrasting truths. These truths facilitate the process of anecdotally constructing the incel as seen above. In the community, the core immutability of the body grounds these truths. While the Tinder profile above may appear to have “fashionmaxxed” and “hairstylemaxxed”, these manoeuvres do not allow him to escape the inceldom they attribute to him: features such as his height, his jaw shape, and his receding



hairline take precedence over any minor self-modification available to him. In almost all situations wherein posters discuss a man's social value, they express similar sentiments: from brow shape to bone structure, from neurotypicality to height, from "eyelid retraction [sic]" to "philtrum", the "phenotype" is an *a priori*, inescapable determinant of social value.

The phenotype is the "visible and manifest nature of the individual," how an organism "presents itself visually" (Chun 2013, 117; Malice 2019, 26). In contrast to the *genotype*, which is the particular configuration of genetics that indicate the potential for a range of conditions and expressions, the phenotype refers to the actual expression of these genotypic configurations (Samuels 2014, 190). While a reading of the phenotype that lacks a cogent understanding of the genotypic/phenotypic split has long historically used within white supremacist and eugenic movements as a justification for racial supremacy (Vest 2013, 3; Semati 2010, 11; Linebaugh and Rediker 2013, 24), the concept of the phenotype itself—the particular expression of a predefined subset of potentialities—provides a heuristic to the black pill wherein essentialist categories of understanding such as race can accommodate different manifestations affecting social value while remaining legitimate deductive foundations. The phenotype becomes the "atomic fact" of the world. It functions both as a way to explain how things are, as well as a functional object for the process of knowledge construction to advance from. And in its deep immutability—down to the very genetic code of the individual—it likewise makes involuntary celibacy as another atomic truth, inescapable in its depth and breadth.

### **What makes an incel? Articulating community boundaries**

These judgments form the question of what makes an incel: not only is it a question about neoliberal sociality writ large, but a question about what makes this community. It is a

community of those “turned away” from participating in a society that, in their eyes, dishonestly patronizes their value while never acting accordingly. The community’s “Chad” meme personifies this contradiction. Chad is the name used to refer to those men who receive a disproportionate share of female attention and sexuality. Chad represents the ultimate phenotype, the man that women want and that men want to be. He is the synthesis of the highest point on each of the scales that grow out of the black pill’s fundamental axioms. Often depicted in memes with comically large versions of the features traditionally associated with masculinity (Popeye biceps, a Clark Kent jaw and a browline to block out the sun), Chad is a dialectical construction of the black pill’s conception of what women *really* want. He is thus not the object of the forum’s ire—for since he represents the phenotypic ideal, invalidating him would invalidate the black pill itself. The only moments wherein Chad is an object of anger is when the community believes that a Chad is in their midst. For a Chad to attempt to enter this community of his opposites is the equivalent of taunting; the community sees itself as formed exactly against that which Chad represents, a safe space from the world that belongs to him and not to them.

The incel identity itself then becomes a boundary for community. Articulating this identity is a common activity on the forum, and serves to demarcate not only who belongs to the community but who deserves the right to claim oppression in a world ordered by the black pill science. We see this in the thread “Incel term definition should be expanded (my own incel definition inside)”, wherein a user who I’ll call “Brad” attempts to expand the definition to mean a “person whose quality of life is negatively affected by their looks.” His supporting argument: “Inceldom is not only about having sex, but about how life in general treats you by default. It is about frequently being targeted with lookism. It doesnt matter if you had sex in

the past. If your life is currently very negatively affected by your current looks yoi [sic] are incel to me. It involves all your life areas and not only sex”.

This attempt to redefine the boundaries of involuntary celibacy does not sit well with the board. Brad is clearly known to the community for expressing similar sentiments in the past, and posters accuse him of being an “incel tom”,<sup>18</sup> a “fakecel”, a “larper”,<sup>19</sup> and “not even a virgin”; one commenter asks Brad to measure his frame from left to right clavicle before trying to redefine the term. Brad’s mistake is to attempt to open up the frameworks of oppression so that he can include himself in this frame. It is crucial that the rigid definition of incel, as a constituent archetype within the black pill science, remain demarcated. Because of the way in which black pillers reduce people to these phenotypic archetypes, a change in the boundary of what makes an incel disrupts the entire network hierarchy of the social that underlies much of the black pill claims. “Your definition of “incel” can be summarized as ‘lookism’. That’s not what this community is about”, one poster tells Brad. Another poster echoes this in-group sentiment: “I’m tired of you constantly pushing your agenda here. Go back to lookism.net and take all your f\*\*\*\*t friends with you”. For Brad to come in and claim that “lookism” is the basis of inceldom is a violation of the definition that holds the community together. This is, for some, the equivalent of taunting: “Hahahaha at least you had a gf and sex. We have all that shit ON TOP OF NOT BEING ABLE TO GET GIRLS OR HAVE FRIENDS. FUCK YOU, BITCH. NO EMPATHY, NO SELF-AWARENESS. DISGUSTING”. Another poster: “You’re fucking dumb.

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18. Based on “uncle tom”, a term used to disparage a Black person who is overeager to win the approval of white people. The attempt to draw parallels between Black oppression and incel oppression is common within the forum.

19. A reference to a practice within fandom communities, originally referring to “Live-Action Role Playing” wherein participants physically portray the characters they are roleplaying. This usually involves wearing costumes and adopting the behaviour of the character.

You're comparing yourself to people who have all of that on top of not being able to get girlfriends or even make friends. You are in a much, much better situation than we are. You have people that support you through tough times while we have nothing".

The thread titled "The signs of the fakecel" provides a similar demarcation. The original poster describes the fakecel as someone who attempts to "share your pain about being treated like a subhuman", but is in reality "a prettyboy larper that thinks that is not probably not even a virgin(and [sic] if he's is, is probably because he don't even fucking tried in the first place)". The thread is in the vein of a scientific program, just as the above: the fakecel is a set of behaviours, like saying that he "will not fuck fat/ugly/ethnic woman or says fucking them don't counts", or "admit[ting] he get matches in tinder". Most posters are in agreement, and instead of working on this negative definition of the fakecel, provide anecdotal data for the positive definition of an incel. "The only truecels are people with more than 1000 posts and very depressed and nihilist with short posts and few topics, all of them about desperation and loneliness", notes one poster. Other posters echo this metric of participation as incelism: a fakecel is someone "who don't spent the majority of they day here", while truecels are "those who spends over 15 hours every day on an incel forum or discord talking to fellow incels". To be a part of this community is not a choice, but something on the order of fate: "I still cannot fathom how someone would choose to be here if their situation didn't warrant it". Another poster articulates the incel identity as not only the specific characteristics, but the situation that arises from their confluence: "You're comparing yourself to people who have [suffered due to their looks] on top of not being able to get girlfriends or even make friends. You are in a much, much better situation than we are. You have people that support you through tough times while we have nothing".

By attempting to redefine the terminology of incel, Brad's attempts above throw the definition of the black pill itself into question. The black pill functions as both an epistemology and an explanatory mechanism for the oppression faced by the community. Brad's attempts to equate involuntary celibacy with suffering from lookism devalues the oppression experienced by the community. And as seen in the way that posters defend the boundaries of the term itself—without this oppression, the community itself does not exist. As overlapping phenomenon, the community and the black pill thus mediate through solidarity as well as being a collective exercise in sense-making through knowledge construction.

### **The phenotypic hierarchy**

The language used on incels.co could be charitably described as “politically incorrect”; uncharitably (and correctly), conversations are rife with the worst misogynist and racial slurs in the English language. While the histories behind the development and weaponization in this language makes their use indefensible, contextualizing the ways the community uses them can shed light on how they view their supposed victimhood.

One of the unchangeable phenotypic factors that the community concerns itself with is the concept of race. While the origin of racial superiority is hotly contested on the forum, members of the community are in general agreement that race is a factor in the inscribed and embedded questions of social value and beauty. The debate is between traditional, biological versions of scientific racism—which argues that there is a biological reasoning for differences between races—and a school of thought that grounds race differences in a confluence of social and historical factors. Race, alongside its deep ties to the aesthetic and behavioural criteria that

indicate value within the perceived social market, thus provides a useful explanatory mechanism for the community to articulate the positivist logic of the black pill.

A subset of these debates is the “Just Be White” theory (hereafter, and in quotations, referred to as “JBW”). These debates are, by proxy, debates over who gets to adopt the actual hopelessness of incel status. The community debates this theory through both positive and negative anecdotal; one poster attempts to make a table comparing the races of both Black and white former incels who have “ascended,” with “whites not exactly coming out in a distant lead.” What these debates show is that the “realism” of this race realism is not, across the community, biologically-determined. In the thread titled “Racial Allegiance Is An Extremely Blue Pilled Cope”, one poster argues that most “racecels” who argue for white supremacy and other “racial allegiance” frameworks are simply doing so as a displacement mechanism—and that to do so is “bluepill”, a weak and illogical coping mechanism. “Get off your mental gymnastics [and] at least be logically consistent,” he instructs his abstracted audience. The logical inconsistency, he argues, comes from the fact that white supremacists “are trying to convince men who can’t get sex period that they should help create a world where other men of their respective races can reproduce more easily... that’s like cucking yourself”. No man should want to make it easier for another to have sex, as the incel is already deeply, structurally oppressed: “as a genetically inferior male, you are the n\*\*\*\*r of your own race”.

This phrase occurs as a chorus throughout the thread’s debate. As a reader, this exchange has a Pyrrhic tinge to it; the relief of seeing a group regularly lumped in alongside the explicit racism and white supremacy of the alt-right denouncing racism gives way to the knee-jerk abjection of reading this slur. The phrase itself has pop culture precedent: from John Lennon’s

song with woman as the subject, to *Front de Liberation du Quebec* leader Pierre Valierres describing the plight of French Canadians during the 1970s, the idiom is arguably designed to elicit such a strong reaction. By comparing the plight of any particular group to the plight of Black Americans, the claim is that not only does contemporary society oppress these groups, but that these oppressions are embedded into the very mechanisms of contemporary society. Yet it also indicates at least passing familiarity with the idea that race has and continues to be a marginalizing factor in society.

Take, for example, the way that many users on the forum discuss colonization and its effects on cultural hegemony.<sup>20</sup> “Look at what has been termed beautiful in countries before colonization”, instructs one poster:

Beauty is socially constructed, nothing in our biology says that one type of nose/ ear type/ skin is better looking than another... accept the fact that the only reason white people traits are like [sic] by other cultures is because their grandpapis forced in [sic] onto the other cultures when they colonized them.

An economic reading of beauty standards (and, in this case’s extension, the superiority of white skin) makes its way through as well: “White skin was a sign of wealth as the rich stayed inside whilst the poor worked outside and got tanned”.

Histories are also interpreted into this frame. One poster argues that “from the early bronze age, Aryans were white skinned savage warlords” who brought the “white

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20. An interesting contrast to the explicitly-racist and white supremacist movements that much of the literature places incels alongside.

worshipping” of “proto-hinduism” into the civilizations of the Indus valley, where “dark skinned people are referred as ‘demons’ (asura) [and] their gods are all blue/white skinned”. Another poster builds on this, claiming that the perception of white superiority in history was because Aryan cultures “were simply located in a place that allowed them to trade with ease and have access to technologies that were developed in Middle East [sic] and Asia.” A third poster explicitly attributes the cultural advantages of whiteness to the cultural extension of the eugenic project, where “WW2 nazi eugenics gave it a theoretical/academic form and pushed the origin of beauty to northern europe”, while another poster echoes the sentiment held by many on the forum that beauty “Standards haven’t fully changed because whites are still in control of the media” while predicting that “slowly and surely” it will be the norm to have nonwhite features. In the same discussion, one poster links to a previous treatise of his that received little engagement titled “Racial Diversity Causes Inceldom” wherein he argues that because of the historical hegemony of whiteness, the solution is to abolish race entirely through racial interbreeding. Others, however, argue against the idealistic view: “consider that every white man who has an asian gf is essentially dooming an asian man to celibacy, since most asian men do not have sexual appeal outside their race”.

While the colonization argument isn’t taken up across the board, the social construction of beauty standards is. We see this in the counterpoints to the above interpretations of colonial hegemony: while they argue for a racist, white supremacist interpretation of European superiority as opposed to what one poster retorts as the “SJW” interpretation of this race realism, the valuation of white culture is still grounded in a eugenics that moves beyond simple biological markers. “White men default to controlling the narrative because black men produce nothing”, claims one poster. Another: “No ones stopping ethnics from getting an education in



fact [sic] its whites giving them the greatest possible chance.” Other posters ground this value in inventiveness and advancement of a concept of civilization tied to invention when he claims that “white people invented the internet ... the computer ... everything of importance that you benefit from,” while another paints the superiority of the white race as historically intuited when nonwhite populations<sup>21</sup> “worshipped white people when they saw them for the first time because they had minimal intelligence”.

The racism of the above white supremacist explanations reflects a “chicken versus the egg” argument about the origin of beauty. There appears to be two schools of thought in the community: the above, grounded in this social construction of the ineffable category of race; and a second, grounded in a more classically-eugenicist biological interpretation of race. Memetic among these posters is the idea of there being an ideal “phenotype” that happens to align with white biology. The eugenic ideal phenotype is what grounds the counterpoint to the social constructivist argument, in contrast to what one poster calls a “feminist sjw” utopia of “some kind of mega revolution where your typical hideous bug-eyed, nct, recessed potatoe and hook nosed phenotypes will suddenly become attractive”. These claims are often grounded in an established set of aesthetic norms that reflect the evolutionary and reproductive fitness of a man, with one poster arguing that white-descended people have better “proportions ... the occurrence of good facial ratios ... large robust jaws ... [and] bigger skulls” or another who claims that lighter skin correlates with “neoteny” (the slowing of the aging process). The scientific racists target the illogical nature of the social constructivist theory: one poster,

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21. The poster refers to nonwhite people here as “deathnik”, which is a portmanteau of “ethnic” and “death” whose origin isn’t clear. As for most quotes in this section, I’ve removed the slurs used in order to focus on the arguments and discourses put forth. I will tell the reader that, in the context of racial slurs used, “currycel” and “shitskin” are the least mild ones that I’m comfortable footnoting, and will instead say that whatever more offensive terms you can imagine from there, it’s almost a certainty that they are used.

attempting to take another to task for relativistic knowledge, claims that “if beauty standards are dictated by some imaginary invisible power structure then you can argue nothing is ugly”.

However, this biological race science is much less common than the former social constructivist theory. Posters associate an over-reliance on race or aesthetics as an explanation with the website Lookism.net and the “looks theory” detailed in Chapter 2, and those who attempt to ground attractiveness solely in race are often told to go “back” to Lookism. The idea is that Lookism’s obsession with physical appearance doesn’t account for the entire picture of incel oppression, because the community’s conceit is that improvement of physical appearance (looksmaxxing, surgerymaxxing, steroidmaxxing, and other prescriptions) leads to ascendance. As one poster puts it: “everyone who is redpilled gets eventually blackpilled. lookism is red pill”.

By being red pill, lookism is, essentially, “not far enough” into the phenotypic truths that the black pill claims actually form the foundation of society. Phenotypes are the ultimate truth, the set of “atomic facts” that underlie knowledge and being in the world. Everything else is “red pill”: not only does it falsely believe in the possibility for change, but it does not acknowledge that that which makes change illusory is etched into the very genetics of living beings.

## **The “multivariate calculus” of incel oppression**

To focus on race as the only factor in whether one is involuntarily celibate is, thus, a mistake; but this doesn’t mean that the community ignores these individual oppressions frameworks. Far from it: they are each articulated as a subset of black pill oppression, discrete levels on which they can difference itself. Thus instead of the expected “blood and soil” white

supremacy of the manosphere as articulated by Ging and others, we get a community who views racial discrimination as another expression of social hegemony. Ignoring the multivalence of incel oppression is, as one poster puts it, “low IQ beyond compare.” Hence, the status of being incel is not the result of strict lookism (whose acolytes end up “cucking to notions of ‘genetic superiority’”); economic oppression (the left-wing “Twittercels” who call for robust social welfare systems ignore the role of “male sexual access + moral living in the domain of temperance and honour”); or a loss of the patriarchy (whose followers mistakenly aim to resuscitate “never-were phantoms of ‘teen love’” by putting women “in the yoke and strip[ping] them of ‘rights’”). Or, as another poster puts it: “If you look into it, biology, economics, social attributes all factor into why incels exist”. Instead, a society that is a *confluence* of these factors is the ground of oppression: or, as one poster puts it, “Our society has made people think what is beautiful”. The invective against racial allegiance does not come from a politics of the Other; as “meta-political”, in the words of one poster, it comes as part of the black pill epistemology. Inceldom is about more than a single particular expression of the phenotype; it is instead the confluence of these factors. “Inceldom is absolutely caused by economic and social conditions,” one poster says in the “Fakecel” thread, “conditions which have made ugliness and short stature disqualifiers from having relationships.”

Recall, from the start of this chapter, the thread concerned with adult-teenage relationships, which argued from both a biological and economic perspective that such relationships would mean better outcomes and stronger social structures of the family. What is this argument even a response to? The original poster elaborates at the end of his screed: “Feminists and governments pushed that AoC [age of consent] agenda for several reasons, including throwing women into the workforce, destroying the family (which gives more power

to the state) and increasing promiscuity and dysfunction as was planned by people like Herbert Marcuse and others”. The post—and much of the thread that follows—points towards a concern not with sexual satisfaction extracted from relations with younger women, but with elements of contemporary culture (the state, feminism) that are anti-family and thus, by proxy, artificial obstacles to an assumed biological right for men to reproduce their genes. The problem with placing power within the state and feminism, according to one poster, is that “everything revolves around maximizing capital, not continuing the bloodline”.

The black pill as an explanatory mechanism for social capital and social value manifests in the ways that the community discuss dating and the concept of a sexual market. “I pity the man who is given an inherent attraction for blondes due to their extremely high demand,” one poster remarks. This economic discourse of supply and demand is foundational to the community’s perception of gender relations. Some examples: “I would have had a better chance of a job and a hole with less men around. Simple supply and demand”; “if there were much less men around my probability of pulling goes way up”; “People, even most here, do not grasp how completely different life is for females and those with sexual market value.” This market itself is the realm in which the black pill’s phenotypic ideals are both identified and take further shape, where one’s race, height, facial structure, neurotypicality, wealth, sense of humour, and confidence determine one’s value on the sexual market. When dealing with race, for example, we see where the rigid racial differences articulated above take shape. One poster anecdotally illustrates the perceived higher social value of Black men when he tells the board “I see black men in particular as the biggest foreigner competition to whitecels in the dating market because I have seen so many holes in my former social circle go with Tyrone,”<sup>22</sup> while

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22. “Tyrone” is used across the community to signal a sexually-active Black male, similar to Chad.

others locate men with South Asian or Middle East ancestry at the bottom of this hierarchy between Black men and white men: “if u [sic] live in a white place she will have huge supply of whites, but theres a huge demand for whites in asia,” one poster remarks, while another tells us that white women “are also THE most racist group of foids. they would rather put a bullet through their brain than date a curry or sandcel.”<sup>23</sup>

As the last quote illustrates, women set the market by the degree to which they find men attractive. Correspondingly, women are not subject to the same rigid hierarchies and competitive order as men. In the above discussion about white supremacy, for example, one poster claims that a white ethno-state would be no better for white incels: “Women’s nature is to go towards the best, despite his race. Only thing that will happen is chads harem would double in size and you’ll still be incel.” A common trope on the board is that women move through romantic life on “tutorial mode,” a reference to the first level in many video games designed to teach the player the game’s mechanics and is almost impossible to not win. “Females honestly live life on tutorial mode,” one poster puts succinctly. “You can fucking be deformed and still have guys hitting on you.” The same obsession with individual characteristics—especially weight and other bodily features that are immediately perceivable—becomes a way to illustrate this lopsided supply and demand: one poster asks “what has changed about foids lately for them to be held in such infinitely higher value than men despite being fatter more disgusting than ever in human history?” The entire Tinder experiment discussed above surrounds the unfairness of the supposedly-unattractive woman receiving matches on a dating app. “You can be literally physically deformed,” one poster draws from the

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23. “Foid” is black pill terminology for a woman. A bastardization of “feminoid”, which has its roots on 4chan’s *r9k* board as an epithet referring to women as homogeneous in character and taste. “Curry” and “sand” as prefixes to *-cel* refer to South Asian and Middle Eastern incels, respectively.

fake Tinder profile, “and still Chad would be just a swipe away from you on Tinder if you’re a foid.” Chad, then, comes to circularly define the highest-value man, the target of all women’s attraction, and the one who sets the hierarchical norms of the sex market. He has the power to violate the social rules the incel must follow yet from which they see no benefit. A poster offers the following anecdote in the thread about the age of consent: “both my Chadlite friends drill 14-18 femoids constantly, one of them kissed a 12yo at 21, this is illegal but no one would report a good and young looking guy for it.” For the black pill, this power proves both the falsity of the given “bluepill” explanation for how to meet romantic partners, and simultaneously the economics of the sex market. And the particular horror of living amongst bluepilled advice is the seeming hypocrisy that it exudes: those who have taken the black pill *know* that there is an ineffable difference between themselves and those with the privilege to only ever need the blue pill. Yet symptomatic of the black pill’s ingestion is knowledge of this very fact: bluepilled advices are like being told to take Tylenol for a terminal disease, a disease whose symptom is oppression that comes from its very invisibility. The “multivariate calculus” of incel oppression takes as its basis not only the recognition of Chad, but the recognition that his status is unattainable because of the very moment he revealed himself and the reality of the sexual market.

## **Conclusion**

As both an epistemology and a discourse, the black pill is a medication regime in the form of both an explanation and an activity. It both functions to explain the incel’s oppression writ large, and in its lack of a resolution or roadmap for application, serves as a commiserative activity. With this in mind, we can begin to see how the black pill is an all-encompassing

epistemology. It offers to explain both the oppression faced by incels and the isolation felt whenever they attempt to fight this oppression. As one poster wishes in the age of consent thread, “society should at the very least be honest and criminalize being sub6 or something already, instead of those bullshit anti-rape, anti-harassment and AoC laws”. The emphasis on phenotypes is an attempt to explain the perceived contradictory behaviour in organizing this market: a lopsided exchange, with small-time investors offered entry into the marketplace only to be sacrificed as justifications for Chad’s existence. Not “having” something required to access friends, romantic partners, and social success is how the community frames its lack. In the words of one poster in the fakecel thread, the incel possesses that which qualifies him to exist, but not to live. Thus, the denial of “life” itself: according to the black pill, the incel does not have access to enough value store to enjoy the social world, and is instead nothing but an atomic body, a pulsing heart and a thinking brain detached from social nourishment.

## 5. “I would do anything to not call this place home”: discussion

*The troop-machine produces the front before reaching it: it is the front. As the troop sets itself in motion, the border itself is displaced. War is the condition of its being.*

*Klaus Theweleit, Male Fantasies Volume 2: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*

The broad question that guided this research project was the difference between the black pill and the red pill. The red pill is the “vogue” way of practicing reactionary politics; the black pill much more than a political perspective, an epistemology that contains within it the cancellation of any and all political action and yet takes seriously the medicinal potential of the metaphor. As we’ve seen through the development of the contemporary incel identity, the black pill always comes *after* the red pill: the latter’s prescription for change is, eventually, alchemized with a dose of nihilism that snuffs out the former’s action-praxis. How does this nihilism come about, and for whom? And what sort of practices are left? How do these practices inform the creation and shaping of digital involuntary celibacy communities?



Incels.co is a sort of negative space in contrast to the open social world. It is what Jean-Luc Nancy would call an “inoperative community”, a community bound by the search for a pure and undivided social identity as opposed to one constituted by its relations (Nancy 1991, 9). The social identity of the incel as defined by hegemonic culture is the confluence of characteristics that make them what they are: the phenotypic advantages (of which they themselves lack) are all subsets of the devaluation experienced within the social hierarchy. We can view the black pill as a desire to explain the reflexive erasure caused by the neoliberal social order. Yet staying with Nancy, this is not to say that the community is an exercise in positive identity construction. It is instead a place wherein one’s search for the pure social identity stops at the very identifying traits whose logics divide in the first place, who reduces being to the market mode of *homo economicus*. To identify positively as an incel does not mean escaping the value hierarchy of neoliberalism: far from it, it means searching for an answer within this paradigm that, as we can see through the community’s attempts to construct a prison of their own oppression, will never come within the flawed hierarchical understanding of the social.

### **To have and to hold in neoliberalism’s programmed vision**

Community, for Nancy, is “the areality of an ecstasy” (Gratton and Morin 2015, 22). Nancy uses areality in the sense of both a-reality and area-lity: reality becomes immanent through community, and community itself demarcates the space wherein the reality can take shape. The “ecstasy” in question is the process of ecstasis, borrowing from what Heidegger calls the “primordial ‘outside-of-itself’” (Heidegger 2013, 329). Nancy locates the process of ecstasis in the other person whose presence draws me outside of my self into a “sharing-in-

being” with the other. The ecstatic process creates community; my encounter with the other person marks it out, and I am drawn beyond the confines of the atomized self into a shared “being”. It thus reveals the self to the self: a proper community reveals our internal selves to the world and the world thus reflects these selves back at us. In the incel community, this ecstasis never occurs. Members are ontologically, existentially, and politically subjectivated as *homo economicus* within the atomism of the hierarchical market, which extinguishes the possibility of being-in-common. “Being-in-common does not mean a higher form of substance or subject taking charge of the limits of separate individualities”, Nancy says. “As an individual, I am closed off from all community” (1991, 27). The inoperative community is thus the community for whom its members cannot reach ecstasis; they remain trapped in their individuality.

The inoperative community allows us to contextualize the particular way that community manifests on incels.co, especially the lack of solace or healing processes that would normally be the case for communities reflexively defined around oppression. Constituted reflexively through the lens of the neoliberal market, incels remain *homo economicus* who possess no value according to the processes of social capital. This explains many of the behaviours that make up the forum: the epistemological construction, the provision of anecdotal evidence, the identification of phenotypes, and the rigid archotyping are labour that furthers neoliberalism’s project of making value discrete. And by convincing themselves that they are forged in the bottom of neoliberalism’s social hierarchy in the first place, the labour of *identifying* the shape of this value hierarchy presents itself as a means of participating within it, creating knowledge capital through its own dictates. Yet we can also see how this causes the antagonistic bond. Nancy takes community to manifest in what Maurice Blanchot called

“unworking”, the behaviours that “withdraw from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounter interruption, fragmentation, suspension” (Nancy 1991, 31). Such completion cancels out the sharing between participants and places the completed work as immanent, dictating and structuring the actions that lead up to it. Work as production or completion necessarily implies the prioritization of the completed work over those performing within it. While the black pill may not parallel the content of neoliberalism’s ostensible claims to equal treatment of all, its *logos*—its ordering logic, the ultimate sense of reason that orders decision-making and thinking (Chun 2013, 112)—shares this view of the individual as the sum of their value.

Neoliberalism has “absorbed the common and society itself under its dominion,” with market value as the “exclusive measure of not only economic value but also our relations to each other and our world” (Hardt and Negri 2017 xvi). In the face of neoliberalism’s configuration of the social into a hierarchy of value, this rigidly-economic social both imposes particular possibilities for subjectivity while simultaneously tying the expression of this subjectivity to the hierarchy of value. As Bratich and Banet-Weiser argue in their study of the links between pick-up artistry and incel culture, neoliberalism’s most acute failure is in the inability to allow her subjects to restart themselves *as* a subject (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019, 5006). In short, those without are stripped of the means to become.

Thus, we arrive at the inoperative community of incels.co. It is not a community, but a fate, a state of captivity and marginalization. In the words of one poster: “I would do anything to not call this place home.” In this dwelling, the incel is confined to perpetuating the acquisitive hierarchical society, relegated to the labour of articulating a fundamental basis of

the neoliberal order that extends beyond something as contingent as the state. It is not a space outside of the neoliberal order, but a confinement within it. Nancy provides a binary of “societies” that helps us understand this contrast: the “simple society” is constituted by a structure, whether institutional, political, or economic, while the community is constituted by the sum of its relations. Neoliberal society is a simple society, organized by the logic of hierarchical value. And when value is the *logos* of a society, the mode of relations is the market mode and its relationships of acquisition articulated by Brown. The acquisitive society first individuates and then subsumes that which it is the relation of, defining these relations only as their relation to the social order; the society of lovers, on the other hand, involves not the bond itself consuming the singularities that constitute it, but the singularities, in their relation to the other, sharing in their mutual society and thus offering without limiting. The community “harbors the impossible and communal truth that simple society despairs of attaining: ‘Love unites lovers only in order to expend, to go from pleasure to pleasure, from delight to delight: their society is one of consumption, the inverse of the State’s, which is one of acquisition’” (Nancy 1991, 37).

This allows us to make sense of the discourses of acquisition on display that Crumplar identifies in Rodger’s manifesto and extend through to incel communities. Neoliberal logic rests on individualization, which depends on the ability for the individual to *have* power and access to the tools that allow them to move within the social world. Women, sex, intimacy; a strong jaw, a defined brow, white skin: they can all be acquired and *grasped*. To possess these things is to possess their innate value. This doubly articulates “having” as the representation value and the premise that to acquire is simply a matter of effort and savvy. Elliot Rodger’s skateboard gives its owner a quantifiable coolness. A strong jawline gives its owner a

quantifiable attraction. A woman's body, as acquired through sexual conquest, gives its owner a quantifiable attraction. And lacking these things means lacking access to the vitality of life itself, to be a body watching the world move past: as one poster puts it, "being truce isn't something to aspire to, it's the lowest form of life. I would say we are not really living...just existing."

Yet as seen in the "multivariate calculus" of economic, social and political oppression faced by the incel, these things are not always available to acquire. One thing, however, is available in the digital world they live within: the atomic fact. The atomic fact is the key to understanding the rhetorical mode on display within incels.co. As we saw above with the object relationships common to the masculine imaginary, these atomic facts become the "graspable" object. They can be utilized by the rational mind in order to enact and support the masculine will to power without violating the rigid mind-body split. The communal practice of constructing the black pill allows for the black pill itself, as an epistemology, to gain capital. It becomes the object that salvages the incel's masculinity by piggybacking onto the economic valuation of discrete facts. The warrior male's weaponry gains its power from its value within the market; within a social market that encompasses the possession of knowledge and intellect, the black pill projects a metallic gleam. The discourses on incels.co are selfsame to a smith forging his weaponry. It's no coincidence that the scientific black pill is most clearly articulated on the incels.co forum's sister wiki: wikis are the cultural image of democratized knowledge, lacking the institutional barriers that ignite skepticism. The construction of the black pill and the discursive modes involved are an attempt to leverage the value of knowledge and intelligence into the economic frame. They can construct accumulated, atomic facts—anecdotes, deductions from experiments, established scientific claims—according to the inductive criteria

of positivist epistemology. Science, in this case, is not only a method of discovery but a rhetoric: it is “a series of efforts to persuade relevant social actors that one’s manufactured knowledge is a route to a desired form of very objective power” (Haraway 1988, 577).

Yet by operating under the value criteria of neoliberalism, any and all knowledge creation is both tainted by and subject to this same market logic, wherein “all knowledge is a condensed node in an agonistic power field” (Haraway 1988, 577). The labour of constructing the black pill thus becomes the labour of contextualizing neoliberalism’s *logos* from within neoliberalism itself. The market determines the value of a thing, and if that thing does not have a market presence then it has no means of having value itself. Wittgenstein’s articulation of logical atomism becomes a market atomism, where the world is necessarily and sufficiently the “totality of existing states of affairs”, and all existing states of affairs are market exchanges (2001, 9). This market atomism is *given-to* the subjects of neoliberalism by configuring a necessary ethic from which relations grow: by placing “the responsibility for serious systemic problems at the feet of individuals”, neoliberalism insists “that we see market exchange as ‘an ethic in itself’” (Hearn 2017, 87). Chun tells us that logos can extend from “disciplining [and] axiomatizing” instructions into things in and of themselves (2013, 156); as an underlying ordering logic brought into being discursively, neoliberalism’s instruction to follow the market as this ethic furnishes us with the understanding of all things as objects, interfacing through a market of what is worth speaking—a market *logos*. So we can understand the discursive activity of the forum in constructing the black pill, the efforts to work atomic fact into underlying principles, as an attempt to create value through utterances. In this sense, it is *logos* as the thing that “does what it says” (Chun 2013, 22). The way that posters give out value and praise is a manifestation of this: the length and detail in posts themselves, the provision of

citations in conversation, and the degree of debate as a conversational form are all indicators of an attempt to leverage intelligence and factual knowledge into the neoliberal frame of value. From within the ideological waters, neoliberalism's hierarchical oppression is made productive through the labour of those who attempt to transcend it.

## **Recreating the warrior male**

Thus, the obvious failure to operationalize the weaponry that marks the warrior male—else there would be no incels.co. The black pill is not an actual weapon, but a poor facsimile thereof. And it is in this fact where the relation between the platformed nature of the community and this masculine isolation takes shape. The incel's masculinity remains firmly in the grip of the cultural practice of neoliberal hierarchy creation, a practice that further iterates their own victimization. Adler's "masculine protest", their response to powerlessness, takes shape in the aggressive misogyny, racism, and language of the community, but the closed nature of the platform means that this aggression has no target. They must be made as well.

You could sympathize with someone who, after reading the findings, thought that Chad was a proper name. Yet he is just a rhetorical device, summoned within the imagination of the community to get around the fact that the platform is, for the most part, a closed loop. He embodies the ideal framework of masculinity created by the community (he gets what he wants without trying; he possesses an outsized share of the finite masculine value to go around), and he also adopts a human appearance in order for the closed, *a posteriori* social oppression of the incel to maintain the presence of a social world against which the black pill can be articulated. Chad is a self-generative function of the black pill. He is the ideal warrior male because his taboo displays of aggression are precisely what we want from him; he is not

subjected to the social norms that regulate the behaviour of the incel into the unbearable home of the underclass. He transgresses, he behaves openly sexually, and neoliberalism's emphases on the individual, entrepreneurship, and market value rewards him for this. It is no coincidence that he is a placeholder for bodily traits, an avatar for the body that possesses the things required to succeed under neoliberalism: just as the search for neoliberalism's underlying truth begins in the incel community with the immutable body, Chad becomes placeholder for the benefits meted out by neoliberalism to the body that exemplifies its value hierarchy. *Homo economicus* interfaces on the level of the market, but his profits are on the level of the market as well: he becomes the "warrior male" who can transgress, who takes on the role of acting out the transgressions and our proxy for transgression through his displays of masculine aggression. Yet Chad's profits are simply iterations of themselves. By transgressing social norms, he gains permission to continue transgressing—and must, for without this performance he loses his status at the top of the hierarchy. If he were to stop and smell the roses, as it were, the confidence and individualism that allows him to remain in his dominant position would take a backseat to enjoyment. It is within this imaginary of the warrior male as not only the one who has what men want, but only *wants* what men want, that we can trace the desires created within the incel community.

Georges Bataille, in his essay on the Marquis de Sade and his sadistic, nihilistic male characters, reads in de Sade's work the concept of the "sovereign man". To Bataille, the sexual and cultural taboos violated by these characters indicate a deep strain of anti-social sentiment; the de Sadean sexual figure is one who instrumentalizes others in their own pursuit of erotic pleasure. In particular, Bataille reads the anti-social behaviour of de Sade's male characters as a drive towards "sovereignty". The de Sadean male is a Chad-like man who needs no society, a



society unto himself: he writes his own rules, follows his own logics, and bends those who interfere to his will in order to fulfill his needs (Bataille 1986, 164). He thus rejects the masses and the idea of living among them: to do so is to give up control over the means of exercising control. It is relinquishing control to excess, which by definition “stands outside reason” (Bataille 1986, 169). And the control exercised over relinquishing such control is, if the cultural moment is right, a matter of self-construction itself. By regulating the bodily desires, the sovereign man engages in an act of acquisition—the acquisition of control. “Out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed... a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit” (Foucault 1984a, 179).

Yet habit as a means of control is not valuable to the “sovereign man” solely because it is control. It is both the control over and the *cleavage-from* the desires of the body that only leaves room for the desires of the person existing within culture. In patriarchal societies with culturally-defined male privilege, power over the individual body is the first step in exercising power over the larger social body of which they are a part. A society “unable to imagine equal personal success for everyone” is a society with a gap or a vacuum of control (Bataille 1986, 165)—from the transnational businessman’s striving for handle on the leverages of capital to the boxer’s striving for fame and adoration.

As an imagined extension of the incel’s own existence, Chad too exists outside the mass. The body that rejects the masses is “dynamic, protean, and even explosive in its need to construct systems to repel danger or absorb tensions” (Theweleit 1987 xvii). Deleuze and Guattari provide a framework for understanding how this body both holds and reflects the

entirety of the cultural inscriptions given to it while remaining on the outside of this culture. It is a “body without organs” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 281), organized through external reflexivity as opposed to internal vitality. The mechanized body of the warrior male compacts the mass whose culture he reflects into a “molar” framework: a mass of totalities; discrete and atomized aggregates (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 280). This is in contrast to the “molecular” mass, which Klaus Theweleit tells us contains “infinite variety, multiplicity, [and] flows beyond boundaries” (Theweleit 1987, 75). Theweleit takes Bataille’s reading one step further and finds that this rejection of the masses manifests in the mental construction of what he calls the “armoured body”. This is the “mental subject,” the male body as tool, both in terms of the weapons of the warrior male and the gathering of knowledge as an attempt to forge this weaponry.

The process of knowledge construction is a process of building the same toolkit that permits the warrior male to occupy his place on the top of the hierarchy. Incels construct and understand the black pill atomically; this parallels the market mode’s understanding of all objects as constituent of other objects, each individual piece reified on its own and giving value to the part of any greater whole that absorbs it. By weaponizing facts against the ‘blue pill’ social, the black pill presents itself as an accessible hermeneutic towards understanding where exactly the embedded hierarchies of neoliberalism take root. Being sexually inactive is not just about looks, as the lookists would have it; it is a confluence of deeper factors, including those that are *prior* to looks such as race, phenotype, and neurotypicality. It is not just about lacking social skills or neurotypicality; it is the confluence of histories and upbringings. Yet the black pill is just as much an activity as it is an ideology: the never-ending discursivity of its development precludes its action potential.

## The purgatory of the double bind

The black pill functions as a hermeneutic to explain the incel's oppression. But the black pill's resultant explanations sublimate the exact patriarchal social hierarchy that they attempt to emulate. In neoliberalism's atomic construction of social being, behaviour and characteristics make the person—and incels target women because within a patriarchy that defines masculinity as power, women have the ability to validate them as men. The marketized social commodifies interaction itself; it quantifies desire; and the vector of economic policy and institutions that promote heteronormativity make being a straight man a comfortable place to be. Yet there is not enough room within the market for every man to have what he observes as rightfully owed. We can view the incel's anger, then, as coming from patriarchal neoliberalism's saying one thing and doing another. The state's version of discourses of feminism and multiculturalism ultimately serve the patriarchy; masculinity is thus an asset, one denied to the incel through the sex market as a proxy. The incel finds himself in the gyre of this contradiction – embodied as a man yet not man enough to enjoy the fruits of this masculinity; villainized against the women who face patriarchal oppression from both above and, in turn, below. Within the neoliberal state, women are burdened by the patriarchal order with social reproduction, the labour of providing care to maintain life and the social order *within the context* of increasing austerity measures placing more of this responsibility upon women (Braedley 2006, 216). For example, the state values the family unit, yet its care and nurturing falls upon women. By becoming burdened by further responsibilities to maintain the family, they become the visible barriers to the incel's lack of access to the sexual market, the very thing that determines their value. Through the burden of social reproduction, the transnational business masculinity of neoliberalism manages to make women bear the brunt of

the consequences of its own masculine dominance. In this manoeuvre, the incel does not come to hate his oppressor, but his fellow oppressed.

It is in this market invalidation that we can find the root of the black pill nihilism. Flynt's creep is such because he has no value; there is no future for him in the reproduction of the social. Outside the discursive creation of the black pill, some members of the forum seem to realize this: this inoperative community is a place to toil away from a society that finds no value in them. It is no coincidence that they call entrance into this society and out of incel status 'ascendance': ascending the hierarchy is a very real movement from outside of society to within. Yet powerless to affect social change, the incel is an exile of this exact place that goes against his own self-conception:

Do you know what it means to 'ascend'? To mangle your body with plastic surgery, to destroy and contort everything about you so that you're presentable to some superficial wh\*re? Whether that means dismantling all of your accumulated experiences and personality to be "neurotypical" or turning your back on any personal style you have developed to just dress in generic expensive clothes and get the generic "trendy" haircut, to 'ascend' means to kill who you are and become the generic superficial meat doll a femoid wants you to be.

But it is not a question of desire. It is a question of how the neoliberal state has configured access, safety, and vitality to its own society. When this self-exploitation is the only route to becoming a member of society, the production of subjectivity itself is a 'terrain of central conflict' (Gorz as qtd. in Mouffe 2013, 208). This brings us back to Flynt's role of the creep in

the social world. Recall that he concludes conformity and the ‘suspension of activities’ that define the self are the only way to attract female attention. In the value commodification of female attention, this abnegation of the self becomes the only way to produce subjectivity within society at all. The market marginalizes the incel to its outer bounds.

The clearest consequence of this abnegation of the body and its desires is the sublimation of erotic desire (Theweleit 1987, 170). The desires of the molar body of which the incel is a part replace those of the molecular body for which the male body is a part. The molar part is still fascinated by the idea of “grasping” something. But it is not *what* the molar part grasps that matters; instead, it is the action itself, the affirming motion of “synchronicity and exactitude” (Theweleit 1987, 172) that reaffirms the total control that the molar mass has over its environment. If he were to embrace the object grasped, it would be a nullifying move: because pleasure is inherently “hybridizing”, the confluence and synthesis of the Other and the self, to embrace something is to destroy the rigidity of the molar mass.

As a body representing this constant grasping, Chad gains the weaponry that makes him warrior through acting *against* the ostensible gender norms surrounding equality of neoliberalism. Recall that the warrior male’s status is given to him through the violation of social norms—we look to the warrior male for the frisson of transgression, the constant displays of masculinity that supposedly goes against these mores. The incel perception of Chad aligns with this cultural role of the warrior male: while Bordo never goes so far as to align the warrior male with the rigid neoliberal hierarchy, it follows from the articulation of the *opposite* of the warrior male that the have-nots, the incels, absorb this as lack. In turn, the social patterns of transgression that give him this status, in combination with the configuration of

social value as ‘having’ and ‘possessing’ traits, leaves anything that models this transgression as an object that allows him to scale this hierarchy. The incel compensates for the loss of masculinity—the tearing away of what is, at first glance of the male’s own body, rightfully his —by ‘taking on’ the quality of masculinity as he perceives it, the acquisition of some sort of tool that enables the same modes as the warrior male.

The incel’s bigoted attitude towards these mores, then, serves a similar purpose. The objectification of race and gender into their ‘constituent objects’ is a function of the *homo economicus* social; and as objects laden with a quantified value, dismissing or questioning their value within the neoliberal frame serves to act against it, to transgress the rules that dictate how to interact with these objects. By attacking the objects, they challenge the hierarchy of value, a transgressive act in of itself that parallels Chad’s wayward and wanton disregard for these same social mores based on valuation. Violent behaviour also reduces the other to an object-function: “In killing there is a transgression of the boundaries of the other while the inner cohesion of the self remains intact” (Theweleit 1987 xviii). The socially taboo vernacular used by the community—racial slurs, deeply misogynist objectification—functions within the same vein of breaking the taboos of mainstream social mores and the discourses that surround them.

Viewing this transgression as an act of resistance to neoliberalism as *logos* would, however, be a mistake. It instead supports the same contradiction between professed identity politics and the reality of material oppressions that underlie this ordering framework. The black pill is a roadmap for navigating neoliberalism from the bottom, not escaping it. The space made by neoliberalism’s contradictions birth the black pill; the discourses of value towards

non-hegemonic groups in order to support their continued exploitation by the patriarchal hegemony, Connell's "transnational business masculinity". Incels model transgression *after* the warrior male transgression, one that only gains such status *within* the neoliberal ordering hierarchy. This *logos* spreads far beyond attempts to transgress neoliberalism's social boundaries. The act of knowledge construction, viewed through the atomic lens, is simultaneously an act of acquisition. Discourses on the forum are constant attempts to break down the 'blue pill' of social norms that iterate group oppression. The value placed on knowledge and the atomic fact is similarly given through the commodity framework and the concept of acquisition.

The black pill is created discursively, both as epistemology and as community. This discursive molar mass gives shape to the margins that are otherwise only defined as outside the social. And having this marginalization given by the hegemony, by the first-actor that is society ordered as market mode, the community is *a priori* interpellated into the truth of neoliberal atomization and market rationality. The discursive activity of the black pill is thus the iteration and creation of their own isolation. Chad is not the only way in which the platform makes itself apparent within the community of incels.co. The entirety of the user-base is mediated to each other through its datafied configurations. The forum becomes what Sherry Turkle describes as "the architect of our intimacies" (2011, 3), filtering the presentation of users to each other through its own particular identity affordances—avatars, usernames, and post histories. Chad's construction instead illustrates the problem of the Other within the community writ large. In the forum's atomized presentation of all others, the Other becomes simply the configuration of their presented information, the fact of their presence. It presents the other as phenotype.

In other words, the Other is formatted as what Colin Koopman calls the “informational person” (2019, 2)—subjectivity is limited to the assemblage of social value, and others appear as likewise. This particular format of the informational person is the *grammar* of the marginalized digital subjectivity. As a grammar, it contains a meta set of potential configurations of language, including representation and the social. According to Bernhard Stiegler, “the process of grammatisation is first and foremost a process of making the continuous discrete” (2012, 24). The “informational formatting” of the Other is a process of formatting into a discrete unit according to the communication mechanisms afforded to its users. Yet this process of communication-as-information means a loss of the non-linguistic utterances that form a view of the Other as alike, as opposed to discrete facticity. This aligns with Jacques Derrida’s claim that language itself is a meek substitute for the other: “We are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it” (1998, 141). Phenotype mediates presence. The text object is necessarily the thing that is communicating the semantic information, and thus what becomes present as the source of information is the text object—not the abstracted, ineffable presence of an other person speaking it (1998, 143). Derrida goes so far as to call the text’s replacement symbolism a “literary suicide”, in that to communicate through writing is to “obliterate” the self in favour of the text, to become a part of the discourses the text constitutes and participates within. This self-abnegation through writing points to the failure of creating community on incels.co: the other is only ever confronted as a reflection of the self, and the subject loses the presence of the other that is crucial for understanding a world constituted by something beyond the solipsistic limits. And when even those who are ostensibly your peers are not fully available to you, the capacity for the incel to understand this mutual relation and reliance on the social world is short-circuited: all that



exists is the phenotype, and all that *can* exist is the phenotype. The platform plays a crucial role in the construction of involuntary celibacy as the inoperative community and, in concert with the phenotypic understanding of masculinity, renders the construction of the black pill the only way to imitate the sense of peer belonging and solace that a more functional community, rich with a presence of the other, would provide.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the isolating experience of involuntary celibacy, the forum as communal space has sprung up to fill this void. Yet in its attempt to give shape to the incel oppression, the black pill regime mediates all individuals into phenotype, their crystallized characteristics available to be grasped atomically. Through the digital mediation of the other, these phenotypes parallel the “informational format” mentioned above. Stiegler tells us that “A psychic individual is neither a stable state nor an identity but a phase in a process through which she never ceases to transform herself.” (2012, 20) But the atomic grammar of the market turns the encounter with the Other into an encounter with particular parts of them, formatted into pure facticity. The grammar of the platform is thus not a grammar of embodiment, but instead a grammar of *information*—I speak, therefore I am, and yet before that I cannot be known. At best, what is present is a picture of a network configuration of which speaking constitutes presence by active and continual embodiment of what Susan Leigh Star calls a “shadow body” through the creation of text objects (Balka and Star 2016, 425). When informational formations are the basis

of community belonging, continuous and dynamic embodiment is suspended in favour of the flash of information, the immediacy of the phenotype. The process of embodiment that *always already considers the other* is suspended. This creates not a politics of care, or a politics of belonging, but a politics of information, of atomization and objectification: the world as seen through network configurations of objects and their value, the market world. Marginalized within this market yet promised more by its patriarchal logic, it leaves for the incel the negative space of contradiction: no future, no past, but a static configuration of objects only seen from without.

I began this thesis with two questions. The first was what motivates the construction of the incel identity, as we understand it through its contemporary manifestations. The second was how the red pill, a memetic ideal capturing the reactionary racism and misogyny of the so-called “alt-right”, related to the “black pill” adopted by incels. These are the answers I found. The primary motivation behind the construction of the incel identity is a reaction to neoliberalism as the hegemonic economic system of the Western world, specifically the breadth of relationships that it absorbs under its domain. Neoliberalism’s rigid market heuristics, applied to the role of the state and civil society, seep into the configuration of social relationships. It makes a market out of the social world, configuring *homo sapien* into *homo economicus* that comes with it an implicit hierarchy of self-value. In concert with historical and cultural gender associations, especially masculinity, this hierarchy becomes the male’s to ascend. The incel identity is the result of the gap between this masculine imaginary and the marketized nature of the social. When value is made discrete and marks the individual, the masculine will to power cannot alone ascend this hierarchy.

The black pill emerges as a response to the threat of the will to power's failure; in this sense, the black pill is a *masculine* epistemology. While the red pill's reactionary genesis is, too, a response to threats both perceived and real, it keeps the faith in masculinity's ability to triumph over history and culture. The black pill is the prescription for those who have, to their own appearance, lost this faith. But what appears to be a loss of faith is only really an admittance of defeat within the current social context. The faith in masculinity's need and capacity to grasp the world and manipulate it as an object, its autopoietic drive, expresses itself instead through the construction of a seemingly airtight epistemology. And this epistemological lens is structured similarly along neoliberalism's lines of possession and acquisition: intellect and facts seduce when they take upon the commodity form.

The incels.co community is a project in two senses. It is, on the face, a project of communal belonging that provides people in similar situations support and a sense of belonging; this is seen in the forum at large. It is also the project of constructing the black pill. In the discussions that I studied, the discursive back-and-forth centres around deductively defining a programmatic understanding of the social world. The community, as a group of people with shared interests, is inseparable from the black pill—the former gives life to the latter. This is facilitated through the structure of the forum platform itself, as the traces of user presence and activity that it stores by default function to archive the experiences and discussions that make up the black pill's constitutive facts. Without the permanence of these conversational traces, the question remains whether the black pill would be able to function as such a rigid and robust epistemology.

The black pill fails to provide the solace and power promised to those who articulate it. By configuring the other as phenotype, it remains subject to the atomizing and economic social configurations of the contemporary neoliberal ideology that it does not realize undergirds phenotypic logic. The idea that any good will come from an attempt to create a rigid phenotypic hierarchy is simply the perpetuation of the exact neoliberal ideology that plants the seed of social hierarchy. In this way, the black pill is always and already interpellated into the neoliberal frame that gives rise to it; it remains castrated from the start. Instead of liberating its subjects, it serves to further perpetuate their own perception of victimhood. Seduced by neoliberal logic's winking promise that success comes to those who play by its productive rules, the incel's attempts to do so reveal the contingent reality of who, exactly, those rules are available to. The rest is seduction.

My study has its limitations. One of these limitations was just hinted at: whether the existence of the black pill is contingent on the platformed nature of the community. I have argued that it plays a role, through the way that users and discourses are shaped by the platform and the ease at which the Other can be understood phenotypically. Yet there are countless other examples of radically new social imaginaries that exist offline, many of which prescribe similar methods of social ordering. While the phenotypic lens is certainly accelerated by the platform, there is still the question whether it can exist without this particular grammar. This question can only be answered by taking up a different lens through which to study the black pill and incel identity, one that traces these twin phenomena across spaces and times in order to essentially double-blind the platform's relation to the creation and expression of the black pill. The potential for doing this is hinted at in my second chapter in my brief investigation of Alana's support website for the involuntarily celibate, as well as spaces that

are related to these incel forums such as the subreddit r/foreveralone, 4chan's /r9k/ board, and loveshy.com. These locations take up a less explicitly antagonistic approach to the problems of involuntary celibacy, yet remain valuable resources in understanding the isolation and lack of intimacy that has driven some to adopt the incel identity.

To this point, interviews with those who identify as involuntarily celibate would help us understand the phenomenon. By taking the data of the forum, my study attempts to map how incels talk in a “safe space”. And while this provides us with a good understanding of the behavioural and thought patterns that characterize the interior life of incels who have taken the black pill, it also does not study these behavioural patterns in a context of interaction with the “outside”. Hines' in-depth profile with a self-proclaimed incel, discussed in my literature review, illustrates the effect that knowledge of lived experience and the opportunity for a subject to be heard beyond a jury of peers can have in understanding this identity.

I made a big effort at the start of this thesis to acknowledge the debt that I owe to the feminist scholars before me who laid the groundwork required for my study of masculinity, its relationship to the social world, and the particular ways that it expresses itself culturally. It might seem remiss that in the face of that effort, I don't directly confront the instances of violence inflicted on women by men who identify as incels. Toronto, the city where I wrote the majority of this thesis in coronavirus-induced lockdown, is a significant place in this conversation: self-proclaimed incel Alek Minassian's mass murder on Toronto's Yonge Street in 2018 is the deadliest instance of incel-related violence to date, and another murderer identifying as an incel prompted the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to add incels to their Terrorism and Violent Extremism Awareness guide (Bell, 2020). I don't directly address this

because, within the genealogy of my object of study, it didn't present itself. Users on incels.co occasionally advocate for violence in the abstract, but it's not a part of the black pill or the community: the black pill's historical lens and nihilism doesn't set up violence as a direct prescription, and as detailed in my introductory chapter, reactions to the Toronto attack that prompted the RCMP's declaration ranged from apathy to elation that this provided more evidence of incel's social rejection. Taking the black pill at both face value and along the lines of the deconstruction that I do in this project, to say that it's radicalizing in-of-itself would be inaccurate. Whether it implicitly radicalizes is a question that I'm loath to answer directly; but violence always has a root, especially in the perception of oppression. The aim of this project was to deconstruct the black pill and understand how incels view themselves in relation to the social world; violence is, unfortunately, a contingency outside of my scope. It's my hope, and not my current capability, that this study provides a useful framework to take up this work by scholars of extremism, radicalization, masculinity, and ideological violence and those with the power to affect direct policy change.

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## Glossary

Incel: Short for “involuntarily celibate”, an incel is a person, usually male, who finds it difficult or impossible to find intimate or sexual partners.

Chad: a stereotypically-masculine “alpha” male. He does not refer to one specific person, but an archetype or avatar. He is usually posited as the opposite of the incel.

Red pill: the belief that society has been “brainwashed” by a liberal elite characterized by feminism and multiculturalism.

Black pill: a set of claims about society and individuals that together put forth the idea that men are oppressed not only by social structures such as feminism and multiculturalism, but that these structures have a basis in genetic material and are inescapable.

Manosphere: a “diverse assemblage” of men's rights groups that, for the most part, arose in the 2010s. Most all of these groups have primary or strongly ties to digital spaces, and are associated with the “red pill”.

Pick-up artists: also known as PUAs, a group of men who practice and preach a particular set of behaviours and techniques designed to express the appearance of higher social value and seduce women into sexual relations.

Lookism: the belief that society discriminates on the basis of physical appearance.

Maxxing: a suffix that refers to the process of “maximizing” the value of a given character trait, such as physical appearance, wealth, race, humour, neurotypicality, or others.