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ABJECT DESIRES IN THE AGE OF ANGER

Incels, femcels and the gender politics of unfuckability

Jilly Boyce Kay

In recent years, the figure of the incel – a man who is involuntarily celibate – has become emblematic of "toxic masculinity", and of what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) calls "networked misogyny".[1] Online platforms such as Reddit and 4Chan have emerged as fertile grounds for communities of men who are angry and resentful that they are denied sex and affection from women. After recent high-profile mass atrocities committed by men inspired by "incel ideology", the concept of involuntary celibacy has become linked in the cultural imaginary with the festering rage of vengeful, humiliated white men prone to outbursts of extreme violence. Pankaj Mishra's (2017) argument that we are living in an "age of anger" enabled by social media and characterized by *ressentiment* – what Nietzsche called "a whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge" – seems to offer an especially apt way to understand the disturbing rise of the incel, who represents an extreme embodiment of the politicization and weaponization of envious anger.

The seething *ressentiment* of the incel can be understood as a much broader structure of feeling, whereby white men's anger and humiliation at being "left behind" increasingly operate as a propulsive affective force in contemporary politics and culture. The suffering, sexual exclusion and "left behindness" of white men is increasingly centred within the purview of politics; whether it provokes sympathy or horror, the figure of the incel appears in contemporary culture as an emblem of the injustices of the zeitgeist, about which *something must be done*. In this chapter, I want to ask why the needs and desires of *women* who are excluded from cultures of intimacy and sex under neoliberalism are not also conceptualized as political problems; rather, as I argue, they are made invisible, dismissed out of hand or understood as problems that are merely tragic, and not political, in nature. The figure of the "femcel" (a woman who is involuntarily celibate), unlike the figure of the male incel, has no such political traction within public imaginaries. In other words, if women's sexual exclusion is understood as a problem at all, it is

a problem about which there is *nothing to be done*. This chapter considers the illegibility of the "femcel" identity against a broader backdrop in which white male anger, dispossession and loneliness are hyper-visible and worried over, but where women's psychic suffering, exclusions and humiliations are not countenanced as political problems.

The chapter first considers how the white male incel identity has been taken up in mainstream media discourse, noting that while the figure of the incel elicits various and often contradictory shades of sympathy and horror, male involuntary celibacy is almost always understood as a political issue; even where it is condemned, it is made legible through its connection to broader forms of injustice and inequality. It then moves to explore the radically different ways in which female involuntary celibacy registers in this context. It considers some of the few mainstream representations of femcels, as well as the online spaces of the "incelosophere", paying particular attention to a Reddit community for femcels ("Trufemcels"). I explore the contested position of women who identify as incel on these platforms, and the ways that they are subjected to particular kinds of gendered, sexualized abuse that are not readily recognizable within dominant frameworks of reading misogynistic trolling: that is, while they are deemed "ugly" and "unfuckable", they are not permitted to make a claim to an identity based upon this abject state, as any woman is assumed to be capable of ensnaring a man, should she really wish to.

Finally, I consider why the figure of the femcel seems so difficult to imagine as a legitimate identity, as opposed to the male incel, who has become a ready symbol of the humiliating exclusions of contemporary intimacy culture under neoliberalism. I reflect on the marked differences in the attention given to incels and femcels, and I link this to the ways in which the figure of the "left behind" subject – so common in narratives around Brexit and Trump – is imagined as white and male. Ultimately, I ask why the tropes of victimhood and "left behindness" are insidiously denied as narrative resources for women and minorities, and what the collective failure to care about women's romantic suffering tells us about the politics of gender and race more broadly. I consider how Black women's desire has been historically devalued and dismissed, but also how the failure to care about white femcel suffering must be understood in relation to white supremacy.

While the incelosphere is routinely understood as a niche and extremist space at the dark edges of internet culture, this chapter argues that the gender politics of incels and femcels actually replicate and illuminate gender and racial injustices more broadly. Incels and femcels may both be cast out from and abjectified by contemporary intimacy culture, but the particular articulation of this abjection, and the ways that it is politically mobilized, reveal continuities in longer patterns of gender injustice and white supremacy. Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond (2020, 4) point to the ways that in contemporary culture, the performance of abjection can function as a form of social power: as they write, "appearing to be socially abject, although strongly undesirable in daily life, can generate widespread sympathy and even institutional redress". The white male incel's claim to social abjection may

not always be met with sympathy, but it *is* met with broader social concern and recognition; in this way, incel abjection functions as a narrative resource that can be mobilized to demand redress. As I go on to show, however, femcel abjection, and femcel anger, do not similarly convert into social power; rather this is what Hennefeld and Sammond refer to as a kind of "involuntary abjection by dominant social forces" (2020, 4), rendering the appropriate social response to be one of tragic pity, or even outright dismissal, rather than social concern.

Sympathy for the incel?

Inceldom has become narrowly coded as pertaining to white, toxic masculinity, but the term "incel" was first coined in the context of an inclusive website designed to support lonely women and men in 1997, named "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project" after the woman who created it. In a recent interview, Alana explained that "The word [incel] used to mean anybody of any gender who was lonely, had never had sex or who hadn't had a relationship in a long time" (*BBC News* 2018). The term, however, has been hijacked, and is now almost exclusively associated with misogynistic masculinity and white supremacy. However, Alana's website points to the ways in which the state of involuntary celibacy is not *intrinsically* violent, racist, masculinist or misogynistic. In the contemporary context, women as well as men continue to self-identify as incel – but "femcels", as they are sometimes known, are rarely accepted as legitimately *involuntarily* celibate, due to widespread cultural assumptions that any woman can get sex from men. In the incelosphere, they are also termed "volcels", who are voluntarily celibate but simply overly picky; and they are subject to misogynistic trolling from male incels who deny their right to identify as such. Femcels are thus doubly abjectified: cast out from mainstream beauty standards and romance cultures, but simultaneously denied the possibility of building an identity based on their experiences of exclusion and loneliness.

As I have suggested, the figure of the incel has in many ways become the emblem of contemporary white male rage. With his festering resentment and existential envy of others' happiness, his anti-feminist radicalization through internet forums, his "aggrieved manhood" (Ging 2017), and his narcissistic quest for violent revenge, he embodies the poisonous, regressive impulses that currently animate movements of white supremacy, authoritarian populism and violent anti-feminist backlash (Hoffman, Wear and Shapiro 2020). In journalistic analyses, he is mobilized to advance differing assessments of the current political conjuncture. On the one hand, incels are derided and caricatured as creepy, pathetic losers – socially inept man-children sitting in their underwear, playing video games in the childhood bedroom that they never left, stewing in their own impotent anger and redirecting their self-contempt on to women and sexually virile alpha-men. (See Sharma [2018] for a discussion of this figure who dwells in "mommy's basement".)

And yet there is also a response to incels that identifies the underlying causes of their rage as part of a discourse of "legitimate concerns". To take just one example: a *Washington Post* headline from 2019 reads: "Men Are in Trouble. 'Incels' Are Proof"

(Emba 2019). In this way, incels are made emblematic of a broader crisis in (white) masculinity; the incel embodies the ways in which white men and boys are figured as the "losers" of cosmopolitanism and social and sexual liberalism, and their being cruelly "left behind" by globalization. Eva Illouz classifies incels as "the most extreme and disturbing manifestation of the transformation of sexuality through the new social hierarchies generated by scopic capitalism" (Illouz 2019, 224); that is to say, a form of capitalism in which value is created through the spectacularization of bodies and sexuality. As such, in this context – where economic and social value are generated through the modalities of sexuality and the visual – those without "sexual capital" will routinely experience self-devaluation (225). White male incels are the most visible and extreme embodiment of this form of abjection, and it is they who have received the most academic and journalistic attention for their lack of sexual capital. Yet, women who do not fit the narrow paradigm of light-skinned, thin, able-bodied beauty, and who are thus patently devalued within the new hierarchies of scopic capitalism, do not command our cultural attention, concern or interest.

Because the plight of male incels is made legible within broader understandings of how contemporary society is productive of new forms of inequality, it has been discussed within an explicitly political frame of distributive justice. Some high-profile commentators and academics have suggested that the "solution" to the "problem" of men's sexual exclusion may be to "redistribute" sex. Conservative *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat writes that, "as offensive or utopian as the redistribution of sex might sound, the idea is entirely responsive to the logic of late-modern sexual life", because

> like other forms of neoliberal deregulation the sexual revolution created new winners and losers, new hierarchies to replace the old ones, privileging the beautiful and rich and socially adept in new ways and relegating others to new forms of loneliness and frustration.
>
> *Douthat (2018)*

The Canadian psychology professor and internet celebrity Jordan Peterson (who is beloved in the alt-right manosphere and has enormous popular influence, with 2.94 million subscribers to his YouTube channel at the time of writing) makes similar arguments. He has suggested that the best response to male aggression born of a lack of sexual success is "socially enforced monogamy" (Peterson 2019). For Peterson, inceldom is a product of women's increasing "hypergamy" (their competing for the most desirable men, therefore leaving most men single); the best means of ensuring that all men are sexually satisfied, and therefore less violent towards women is, Peterson says, the enforcement of social norms of monogamy. The extent to which gendered violence occurs within marriage is apparently not relevant; nor is the fact that Peterson and other conservatives oppose all other forms of redistribution. We can see here the ways in which free-market neoliberalism increasingly allies with socially conservative "family values", as Melinda Cooper (2017) compellingly shows.

The British writer James Bloodworth (2020) has drawn on Peterson's rhetoric to make a similar argument, suggesting that men are the losers in a Tinder-fied dating culture. Women, for Bloodworth, are the "sexual selectors" in digital dating culture, while men have "lower sexual market value (SMV)". The erosion of traditional social pressure to "settle down" monogamously, and the resultantly low SMV of males, are identified as factors that leave "increasing numbers of men on the scrap-heap". It is telling that in these commentaries, there is no consideration of how the new sexual arrangements of digital culture might bring any disbenefits for women, who are always construed as "winners" in these new social relations, in line with the ways in which feminism is blamed more broadly for men's contemporary ills.

A seeming tension exists between understanding male inceldom as, on the one hand, a toxic combination of pure misogyny and social ineptitude (embodied by the figure of the grown white man sitting in front of a screen in his underpants) and, on the other, as the inevitable consequence of de-traditionalization, feminism and globalization. In the former interpretation, incels represent archaic misogynies that are newly multiplying, gremlin-like, from the dark and fetid spaces of men's bedrooms, and via the sinister networking possibilities of private screen culture. In the latter, incels are the unfortunate but logical consequence of "hypergamy", or the cruel ways in which women reject non-alpha men, leaving them on life's "scrap-heap". To put it in cruder terms still, incels are either objects of contempt (mixed with, variously, ridicule and/or fear) or objects of sympathy and concern.

Joker (Todd Phillips, United States, 2019) – the highest-grossing "R"-rated film of all time, and for which the lead actor Joaquin Phoenix won numerous presti-gious awards – has drawn regular comparisons with the plight of incels (even being

FIGURE 1.1   The character of Arthur from the 2019 film *Joker*, whose humiliating experiences of social and sexual exclusion have drawn comparisons with the contemporary plight of incels.

described as "akin to an incel training manual" [Abad-Santos 2019]). The narrative centres on a bullied, socially excluded and sexually unsuccessful character who wreaks terrifying revenge on those who have humiliated him. The film has been widely lauded for the bleakly compelling ways that it captures the "anti-hero" zeitgeist but has also been the subject of controversy for potentially excusing or glorifying incel violence.

Debates around the film have replayed the competing interpretations about which social and ideological forces might be producing the incel phenomenon. For example, some reviews have emphasized the disturbing ways in which *Joker* seeks to humanize and justify the anger and resentments of wounded white masculinity. David Edelstein (2019) wrote in *Vulture*: "As Hannah Arendt saw banality in the supposed evil of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann, I see in *Joker* an attempt to elevate *nerdy revenge* to the plane of myth" (my emphasis). However, for others, *Joker* reveals the devastating consequences of neoliberalism and austerity; the central character is a victim of cuts to social services and mental healthcare, and of society's ruthless individualism and cruel mockery of "losers". For Chauncey Devega (2019), writing in *Salon,* the

> character of the *Joker* is forced into being by neoliberalism's assault on public services and its indifference to real human needs — and also by the way neoliberalism and gangster capitalism create a feeling of social isolation and loneliness among people around the world.

The challenge for feminists, then, is to try to understand the social and political conditions that have produced this particular variant of misogyny, but without eliciting undue sympathy for the incel – or otherwise to theorize the proliferation of new misogynies without neglecting to consider how the proliferation of economic inequality and the cruelties of capitalism are (in part) fuelling toxic masculinities. To straightforwardly dismiss incels as creepy misogynists and weirdos festering in their dingy bedrooms misses something crucial about the socio-political conditions of this subject formation.

In this way, I argue it is not helpful simply to lay blame at the feet of an essentialist notion of "white masculinity" as some unchanging category abstracted from historical contingencies and impervious to the injuries of class. On the other hand, the incel phenomenon clearly cannot be explained by class or economic inequality alone. After all, Elliot Rodgers – the incel killer who murdered six people and injured 14 others in Isla Vista, California in 2014 as an act of "revenge" for being denied sex and affection by "stuck-up" women – was from a socially privileged background and wealthy family. This case shows how economic and sexual inequality are not always neatly aligned. It is essential, therefore, to understand inceldom as produced through a complex interplay of neoliberalism's devastating effects on the social fabric *and* the reassertion of misogyny and white heteropatriarchal power – or as a complex admixture of social disenfranchisement and social privilege.

Pankaj Mishra's (2017) analysis is useful here as it identifies the world-historical conditions that have given rise to *ressentiment* – the poisonous mixture of resentment, envy and hatred of others' happiness that now characterizes the global mood – without "excusing" the intensified manifestations of racism and misogyny that it has produced. For Mishra, it is modernity's failure to live up to its own promises of equality, democracy and freedom that has given rise to a "global structure of feeling" of deep *ressentiment*. The consequences of modernity's broken promises are ugly and yet, in some ways, inevitable. However, Mishra's analysis is also limited in the sense that it equates *ressentiment* almost exclusively with men's anger. Why has *ressentiment* – and most specifically its sexual dimensions and articulations – become so narrowly coded as masculine? Why have political discussions of sexual inequalities, exclusion and humiliation become linked almost exclusively to white men and masculinity? Why do we lack similar theories of the relationship between women's sexual desires and global political affects? Why do we care and talk so much less about women's sense of envy, humiliation and their feeling "left behind"? Or, put more crudely: why is it so difficult to countenance the cultural figure of an angry woman in her underpants?

The gender of humiliation: love and suffering in late modernity

Eva Illouz notes how most sociological research has not accounted for the "psychic suffering" of late modernity, being instead more concerned with large-scale and visible "social suffering" (that which results from war, famine or poverty, for example) (2012, 12). She compellingly argues that psychic suffering is, in fact, as constitutive of late modernity as social suffering. Romantic suffering is especially heightened under conditions of late modernity, because of the increasing and overwhelming importance of romantic love to the constitution of a social sense of worth in contemporary life. In contemporary romantic suffering, much more so than in previous periods, the self is made intensely vulnerable and directly at stake, leading to an extreme form of pain and an assault on one's sense of self-worth when things go badly. Love and romance leave the late modern subject unbearably psychically vulnerable.

Romantic suffering, however, is not universally experienced or distributed; the deepness of the hurting is profoundly shaped by gender. Under heteropatriarchy, in general, women suffer most. As Simone de Beauvoir (1953) argued, while love is a source of life for men, for women it is a site of mortal danger. In the domain of love, men strengthen their self-sovereignty and self-worth, but women's sense of self is surrendered and lost, often catastrophically. Shulamith Firestone (1970, 126) identified romantic love as "the pivot of women's oppression", more often resulting not in mere heartbreak but in "the destruction of the individual". In summary, we might say that men feed off, benefit from and are nourished by heterosexual love; women, on the other hand, are sucked dry. The institutionalization of heterosexuality through marriage has thus not only maintained profound *economic* hierarchies that subjugate women but has also inflicted terrible *psychic* injuries. During the

second-wave feminist movement, political lesbianism was one striking response to the harms of heterosexuality, exhorting women to get rid of men "from your beds and your heads" (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1981). Heterosexuality has been understood, therefore, as a kind of danger zone for women, in which humiliation and hurt are systematically in-built features of the game.

It is clear that under conditions of late modernity the terrain of love and romance has undergone deep change; the colonization of this domain by market logics means that there are new kinds of "winners" and "losers" and altered forms of inequality that are tied to sexual desirability. But while feminist theory points to the ways that women are especially exposed to the social and psychic risks that come from love, many mainstream discussions of inceldom evince a different concern: that is, for *men's* disadvantage, humiliations and suffering in the spheres of love and sex. Within the manosphere, but also in the mainstream media into which this discourse bleeds, the clear message is that it is *women* who are the beneficiaries of the new sexual marketplace; they have high "sexual market value" which they wield at the expense of men. In many ways this argument is not new; it has long been claimed that sexuality is a domain in which women hold power over men; that power is attributed to a "supply and demand" logic in which men are always desperate for sex. Within these quite ridiculous but powerful logics, it becomes almost impossible to imagine the existence of women who are excluded from sex and intimacy.

Femcels and the gender politics of unfuckability

Enter the femcel: the woman who is involuntarily celibate. Femcels have many shared experiences with male incels: they feel cruelly excluded from the sexual marketplace, in which "high-tier" women monopolize male attention, and in which unattractive women are denied a whole range of romantic experiences and social benefits that attend feminine desirability. Like male incels, they use internet forums such as Reddit to share their experiences of loneliness, rejection and humiliation. Similarly bleak philosophies of life are mobilized by both communities: many male incels subscribe to a "Red Pill" philosophy – in which they submit to the terrible "truth" that those men who "lost the genetic lottery face shallowness and unfairness".[2] Femcels often refer to "Pink Pill" philosophy, a similarly desolate understanding of human nature in which sexually undesirable women are the victims of society's in-built "lookism", an immovable prejudice based on physical appearance.

Both incels and femcels are engaged in discussions around "looksmaxxing" – the attempt to improve one's appearance and therefore one's romantic desirability. Male incels typically focus on strategies such as becoming more muscular through diet, workouts and steroid use; preventing hair loss; appearing taller through shoe lifts; or the strange practice of "mewing" (attempting to improve facial bone structure by continuously pushing the tongue against the roof of the mouth). Femcels also share advice on "looksmaxxing", typically through weight loss, makeup and clothing choices, and sometimes through cosmetic surgery. In this way, incel and femcel

communities are both generally oriented to a desire to "ascend" to non-inceldom and find a romantic partner.

Just as the manosphere is a not a monolithic entity but comprised of "diverse assemblages" of different masculinities and political groupings (Ging 2017), female involuntary celibacy is articulated and discussed within a complex ecology of online forums that are underpinned and animated by different political impulses. Broadly speaking, in the male-identified incelosphere there are those who seek to escape inceldom and "de-incelify" by securing romantic success, and those who adhere to a more radically nihilistic and misogynistic "Black Pill" worldview, in which women are seen as irredeemably shallow and cruel. The Black Pill philosophy has been associated with the growing male separatist movement – "Men Going Their Own Way" (MGTOW) – as well as with the kinds of terroristic violence enacted by Elliot Rodgers and others (see Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019).[3] Similarly, the femcelosphere entails diverse and sometimes contradictory philosophies; some "Pinkpilled" women identify as radical feminists who promote a "Women Going Their Own Way" movement, whose calls for separatism have interesting similarities to earlier articulations of political lesbianism. They often show disdain or pity for the "tragic" femcels who are obsessed with "ascending" and securing male approval.[4]

Within this complex ecology, the Reddit group Trufemcels is the most prominent forum devoted to female involuntary celibacy; it is a space for femcels which is broadly oriented to a desire to "ascend". It was set up in 2018, and at the time of writing, it has 25,500 users – a not insignificant number (for comparison, the most notorious incel Reddit group that was banned in 2017 for inciting violence against women, r/Incel, had 40,000 users). Soon after its inauguration, the Trufemcels group was noticed by some media outlets: the London-based, subcultural publication *Huck* ran an extended piece entitled "Meet the Women of the Incel Movement" (Chester 2018) which explored the phenomenon of femcels with some nuance, subtlety and sympathy. UK newspapers such as *Daily Mail* and *Metro* then picked up on this story, although were more dismissive and derogatory in their tone – the *Metro* story was headlined "Forget 'Incels', 'Femcels' Are the New Online Terror to Haunt Your Dreams" (Waugh 2018). As such, Trufemcels came to some temporary, limited public visibility as representative of femceldom more broadly in 2018, but this interest in femcels has not been sustained or repeated since, unlike the growing media fascination with white male incels.

The description of the group on the Trufemcels subreddit reads: "A community of the truest of femcels. Vent dear sister. Chad, Stacy, and their incel friend Billy Betabuxx are never going to accept us. Feel free to rot now." This description indicates the specific "incelish" language that is used across the incelosphere – "Chad" is used to refer to "high-status" men, for example, and "Stacy" to "high-tier" women. This description also indicates the sense of support, solidarity and sociality that the forum seeks to provide ("Vent dear sister"), and yet also how this sociality is based on negative affects and a shared sense of existential despair ("Feel free to rot"). This *networked loneliness* has many similarities with the ways that male incels use their social exclusion as the basis for forming homosocial bonds with one

another; as Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser point out, male inceldom is based on a "loneliness that finds others" (2019, 5017), and it is this which differentiates it from earlier, pre-digital iterations of male isolation. The networking of masculinist *ressentiment* enabled by digital media technologies is widely understood as having given rise to monstrous new forms of misogyny whose power (emblematic of a rageful zeitgeist) is flourishing and multiplying in unprecedented ways. But how might we make sense of the networked despair of femcels?

Trufemcels has other broad similarities with the preoccupations of male incels. Common topics of discussion in the group are how ugliness impacts life chances – not just in the sphere of romance, but in other areas such as education (there is a widespread understanding that ugly women are given lower grades); and in careers (lack of success in getting hired is often attributed to lookism). Other topics include the painful recognition of being invisible and ignored in everyday scenarios, or otherwise treated with casual contempt – whereas "Stacys" are perceived to receive flattery and affirmation in all their encounters.

Other subjects of discussion include dealing with loneliness and a lack of friendships, which are often attributed to social awkwardness and autism (some femcels identify as "mentalcels" and attribute their inceldom to neurological diffe-rence or mental health disorders).[5] Some women discuss the ways that racism, anti-Blackness and colourism shape their sexual exclusion. Depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts are commonplace and often accepted as a constitutive feature of life as a femcel.

In short, many of the issues fixated upon as characteristic of the femcel experi-ence are very similar to those which abound in male incel forums. The male incelosphere is much more racially and ethnically diverse than mainstream media representations suggest; so too is the femcelosphere. However, despite these simi-larities, there are also important gendered differences. Most significantly, I would argue that Trufemcels is characterized by a particular relationship to *anger* that is structured and constrained by perniciously gendered communicative norms (Kay 2020). The broader, male-identified incelosphere directs its anger on to "misandrist" society as the ultimate cause of incels' humiliation and despair; blame is apportioned to an external cause; hate and anger are projected outwards on to women and feminists (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019). With femcels, however, what is evinced instead is a melancholic anguish, whereby anger and blame are turned inwards and loathing is directed at the self. Discourses of retribution, justice and revenge are not articulated in Trufemcels; rather, the tagline "Feel free to rot" expresses the ways in which mediated femceldom avoids mobilizing anger as a politicizing force, in con-trast to inceldom. Femcel anger is rather self-directed, self-abasing and emotionally depleting. This is not *ressentiment* in the Nietzschean sense of a "tremulous realm of subterranean revenge", boiling over into retributive violence, but a tragic form of *ressentiment* that cannot even imagine justice for itself; no pre-existing sense of entitlement has been violated. It is tragic in the sense that there is no possibility to right wrongs, no avenue through which to achieve justice, and so nothing to be done.

In this way we can see how female sexual desire is re-rendered as apolitical – as beyond the purview of politics and justice. Whereas men's sexual exclusion is experienced as "aggrieved manhood" (Ging 2017) – a sense of moral indignation that their entitlement to *love as a resource* has not been honoured – there is no equivalent femcel outrage, no sense of being robbed of what was rightfully theirs. This repeats the ways in which men's desires and sexual needs *are* brought into the realm of politics and understood within the frame of justice and rights. We can see this in the mobilization of the incel figure as proof that men are in "crisis" and cruelly "left behind" – the implication of this, whether explicitly articulated or not, is that *something must be done*. On the other hand, women's needs and desires disappear from conceptual view; they can gain no traction in the political realm; they are discursively illegible within the frame of justice and rights. There is no comparable public discussion of a crisis of femininity; there is no sense that women and other minoritized people are also being "left behind"; there is no sense, therefore, that *something must be done*. In this way, the gender politics of mediated incel anger replicate and replay much broader patterns of gender injustice. Just as feminist thinkers have argued that love is an emotional resource for men but dangerous and depleting for women, we can see the insidious ways in which anger becomes a political resource for men, but, by being bent inwards, becomes a source of self-negation for women.

These gendered inequalities in the articulation of anger and resentment have grave implications. Soraya Chemaly (2018) shows how social norms which deny women and girls the possibility of expressing anger have been linked to a range of disorders including depression, self-harm, auto-immune disorders, chronic pain and eating disorders. Angela McRobbie (2008) discusses what she terms "illegible rage", in which the loss of feminism is experienced as a form of melancholia by girls and women, so that rage cannot be channelled and shaped through collective endeavour, but instead manifests "illegibly" through "post-feminist disorders" such as anorexia and bulimia. The figure of the femcel also evinces what Amia Srinivasan (2018) has termed "affective injustice"; with her rage cast as illegitimate and uninteresting, with nowhere else to go, it doubles back on herself.

The second key factor distinguishing Trufemcels from the male-identified incelosphere is the fact that its users must spend an inordinate amount of time and energy defending their right just to self-identify as incel in the first place. As I have already discussed, within the manosphere – but also in culture more broadly – the concept of the femcel is virtually unintelligible. The Incels wiki states in its glossary definition of "femcel":

> It is generally accepted that involuntarily celibate women don't exist with the exception of women that have medical issues like vaginismus, terminal illness, horrendous lesions all over her body […] Of course, women can be sexless, but this is largely self-inflicted because men have a higher sex drive meaning there will always be men around willing to sexually satisfy any woman.[6]

This statement expresses a widespread myth about women's universal access to sexual power, and as such, femcels face a struggle for the most basic recognition: the acknowledgement that they exist in the first place. At the top of the Trufemcels Reddit is a pinned note, addressed to men, which gives a sense of the extent to which men's trolling, and denial of women's right to identify as incel, has been a significant problem. It reads:

> It's quite simple.
> This moderated sub is a safe space for femcels. It is not for you.
> […] The women who come here come to vent, relax, and to be free of your thoughts and input. They can shitpost or be highminded as they so please without interruption.
> As such, moids[7] who insist on being here are VISITORS ONLY.
> […] No one here will be debating with any moids about her femcel status. No femcel will have her thoughts or feelings dismissed or trivialized by outsiders.[8]

That a femcel discussion board is overwhelmed with trolling – most particularly from what the pinned note describes as "brigading incels" – demonstrates how wounded masculinities gain their legitimacy through disavowing the possibility that women might be subject to comparable injustices. White male inceldom depends upon a logic in which men are the victims of women's cruelty and shallowness – and so any sense that women might similarly be victims of sexual rejection and gendered cruelty threatens the basis of this claim. "Victimhood" is thus made into an artificially scarce resource, access to which must be rigorously policed along the lines of gender. Debbie Ging shows how masculinities within the manosphere operationalize tropes of victimhood in order to shore up their power, and how this reflects a broader "discourse of white male suffering" that has become "a dominant trope in American culture and is a deliberate strategy to reinstate the normalcy of White male privilege through the articulation of its loss" (Ging 2017, 648). It is because of this deeply entrenched narrative of white male suffering that other forms of injustice, humiliation and anger become so vulnerable to deniability.

No woman left behind: the illegibility of feminine disadvantage

Despite the significant similarities to highly visible male incels that I have identified in this chapter, the figure of the femcel is virtually nowhere to be seen in popular or political culture. She is also nowhere to be found in academic writing on the gender politics of inceldom. For example, Eva Illouz (2019) discusses the ways in which involuntary celibacy is highly symptomatic of contemporary sexual culture – but she identifies the "female counterparts" to male incels not as femcels (who are not acknowledged in her analysis), but rather as the "housewives of white supremacy" – white women, primarily in the USA, who pointedly embrace traditional patri-archal gender roles (225). I agree with Illouz that incels and extreme housewives

are related, through the resurgence and co-constitution of white supremacy and patriarchy; in Gramscian terms, they are both "morbid symptoms" of the contemporary interregnum. However, it is also telling that the femcel, yet again, is made to disappear from view. The sexually unsuccessful woman, it seems, is of no sociological or political interest. Her plight seems to have nothing to say or reveal about the contemporary conjuncture; yet again, we can see how she quietly slips off the horizon of politics. The femcel is not simply invisible, but more precisely *illegible* within the gendered scripts around romantic suffering: it is almost impossible to imagine this identity, so powerful are the assumptions about women's unfair sexual advantages and men's "natural" sexual impulses. The most common response I have from those who I tell about my writing about femcels is one of surprise and scepticism about the existence of such a category. Surely *any* woman can get sex, if she really wants it?

There is a broader set of cultural narratives through which the femcel's illegibility is ideologically sustained. One ready answer to the question of why the media is so interested in the emotional life of the incel, but almost totally uninterested in the feelings of unfuckable women, might simply be that unlike their male counterparts, femcels do not go on killing sprees. But I want to suggest that there is something more deeply and insidiously structural about the lack of available narratives through which to understand women's romantic suffering, exclusions and humiliations.

Specifically, I want to argue that the overabundance of attention, concern and sympathy for the white male incel, and the dearth of such for femcels, must be understood in relation to the broader ways in which the "left behind" subject is persistently imagined as white and male. We can see this in the ways that the electoral victories for Brexit and Trump are so often (reductively, to the point of being erroneously) interpreted as populist protests by "left behind" white male populations (Bhambra 2017). This deeply entrenched narrative gains its ideological power from the pervasive notion that white men are the losers in the new economy, obscuring the extent to which feminized and racialized people have suffered most from capitalism and austerity. Just as the figure of the "left behind" white man who has been economically dispossessed and humiliated has become the emblem of social suffering, the white male incel has come to stand in for the psychic – and specifically romantic – suffering wrought by neoliberalism. The femcel identity cannot gain discursive traction in this context because of a broader lack of concern and sympathy for women's disenfranchisement, suffering and humiliation, and a cultural inability to believe that women are losing out in any way. It seems that we are doing the collective emotional labour of worrying about, discussing and seeking to understand the frustrated desires of white men. The femcel identity and experience, meanwhile – as with women's desires more broadly – are eminently ignorable.

This analysis of femcels will, I hope, contribute to feminist debates about heterosexuality in the contemporary conjuncture. I have sought to argue that even the shadowy underside of heterosexual culture – that is, the abject domain of its rejections and exclusions – is structured by gendered inequalities. The cultural attention paid to male incels evinces the extent to which we collectively "worry" about white

men and boys, while the illegibility of the femcel identity reveals the distinct lack of social and emotional infrastructure – including anger as a political and narrative resource – available to women and girls, as well as queer people, people of colour and other "others". White men's desires are perpetually re-inscribed as legitimate human needs, requiring a political response when they are unmet; women's desires, on the other hand, are insidiously denied entry into the public sphere.

The anger at being rejected can function for male incels as the basis of homosocial bonding with other men, as a kind of *solidarity of hate*. Women whose desires are unmet, meanwhile, have no such equivalent narrative resources – even those attempts to build communities based on shared feelings of despair are incessantly trolled, disavowed and disbelieved. Solidarities of hate are clearly not something to aspire to – in this sense we cannot understand male incels to be straightforwardly privileged as such – but this dynamic does illustrate how access to anger as a political resource, and the mobilization of victimhood or abjection as the basis of political claims making, are profoundly and unjustly differentiated by gender and intersecting axes of oppression. We increasingly see discussions in which white men's frustrated sexual desire is linked to the broader politico-affective phenomenon of being "left behind". But women and people of colour are also patently left behind in multiple ways; and yet they are subject to the double injustice of being genuinely disenfranchised but then having the possibility of disadvantage as a basis for political claims-making incessantly undermined.

There are no mainstream calls for a redistribution of sex in ways that would benefit Black women, for example, even though, as Amia Srinivasan (2018) argues, the cultures of online dating have intensified the worst aspects of contemporary sexuality, in which whiteness is taken to be the paradigm of feminine beauty. As the editors of this volume highlight in their introduction, a growing body of research demonstrates how digital dating architectures actively reproduce and intensify racism, ableism and other forms of prejudice and social injustice (see for example Hutson et al. 2018). The work of Averil Y. Clarke (2011) points to longer histories in which Black women have routinely experienced "romantic deprivation" that is indivisibly connected to inequalities of race, gender and class. Sonu Bedi (2015) argues that digital dating ought to be the object of public concern, for the ways that it perpetuates "sexual racism", artificially reinforcing whiteness as the sexual and romantic ideal of feminine desirability. This form of "private" racism, he argues, is indivisibly linked with structural inequality, inhibiting opportunities for many women to participate in the social and personal good of a reciprocal romantic relationship. It is exceptionally telling, therefore, that the most prominent discussions about the need to "redistribute" sex centralize white men as paradigmatic subjects of sexual exclusion, and not those women whose structural position under racial capitalism has always subjected them to these intimate injustices.

As such, it is essential to understand the resurgence of patriarchal white supremacy as the context in which cultural concern is increasingly directed to white men's romantic suffering, and in which the sexual and romantic desires of women of colour are conversely positioned as emphatically outside the realm of

politics and justice. But, given that whiteness is so central to these inequalities, why is the white femcel not also the subject of social concern? I would argue that the white femcel is not a beneficiary of, but rather is made abject by, white supremacy. She is not legible within the ideological frame in which whiteness is instituted as the norm and ideal of beauty – in fact, in her "unfuckability", she threatens the ideological basis, power and function of white femininity, and its role in the racist impulse towards white reproduction and nation building (Deliovsky 2008). Part of her illegibility, then, is due to the need for white supremacist culture to cast her out for her failure to achieve normative white femininity, as an embarrassment to the race, as not really "white" at all.

The interventions that seek to "redistribute" sex in order to assuage the "crisis in masculinity" are rooted in a fundamentally misogynistic and racist worldview and, therefore, to take them seriously is a profound risk that is best avoided. However, I would also suggest that sexual and romantic exclusion *are* legitimate subjects of sociological and political critique; unwanted exclusion from sex and intimacy may well severely curtail one's ability to flourish as a human being, and should be understood as *intimate harms* of racism, misogyny, ableism and other forms of oppression; as such these domains ought to be made available for political debate and transformation.

In her essay "Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?" (2018), feminist philosopher Amia Srinivasan grapples with the fraught question of whether sex is an appropriate subject for distributive justice, asking how we might "dwell in the ambivalent place where we acknowledge that no one is obligated to desire anyone else, that no one has a right to be desired, but also that who is desired and who isn't is a political question". By centring femcels and the ways that they are excluded and abjectified in multiple ways in contemporary culture, this chapter has sought to tackle the vexed question of how we develop a political critique of desire and "fuckability" without falling into the misogynistic trap that posits sex as entitlement, or that re-installs white men as the paradigm of "left behindness" within contemporary sexual culture. If our response to the issue of sexual exclusion is simply to say "there is nothing to be done", then this complacency works insidiously to reconfirm racist and misogynistic inequalities as immutable, and as beyond the purview of politics.

Unlike that of women, and as I have been arguing, white male sexual desire is *already* on the agenda as a political question – it is politicized through debates about sexual redistribution and socially enforced monogamy, and in the fact that the suffering of the incel has been put in dialogue with broader issues of economic justice in mainstream media discourse. Such debates about sexual redistribution are only likely to become more prevalent and mainstream, given the disturbing direction of travel, in which the "aggrieved entitlement" of white men is increasingly making its way into the very heart of formal politics (Kimmel 2017). Bringing sexual desire into the purview of politics and making it conceptually available for political critique, struggle and transformation is not intrinsically problematic. It is certainly a domain which has caused headaches for feminism, and for many critics,

any attempt to transfigure desire is perhaps a futile endeavour that can only end badly (see for example Long Chu 2018; Pfannebecker and Smith 2020). But given that the dominant articulation of the impulse to politicize and intervene in sexual desire is being routed through misogyny and white supremacy, I would suggest that contemporary feminism should not shy away from the thorny politics of desirability, romantic suffering and justice. A key form of engagement might be to divert some of our intellectual and political energies away from the incel, and instead to start to listen properly to the femcel.

Notes

1 Toxic masculinity is a term that is used in popular discourse to refer to extreme forms of traditionally masculine traits and behaviors such as aggression, self-entitlement, violence and misogyny. The toxicity is held to harm not only women who are often at the receiving end of abusive male behavior, but also the masculine subject himself.
2 The Incels Wiki is a collaboratively written knowledge base about incels whose contributors are largely male incels. It is available here: https://incels.wiki/w/Main_Page
3 As Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser explain, "The Black Pill rejects the notion that desire and attractiveness are socially constructed and therefore malleable, opting instead for more conventional evolutionary biological explanations […] A Black Pilled incel finds life to be an eternal sentence, a curse, a destiny. There is no restarting, no possibility of skills-based training for improvement. There's also no responsibility for one's lot" (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019, 5017).
4 The Reddit group r/Pinkpillfeminism has significant overlaps in users and topics with the transphobic and sex-worker exclusionary r/GenderCritical.
5 Interestingly, the denial of femceldom as a genuine state has parallels with the ways in which gendered assumptions about autism have led to a massive under-diagnosis of women and girls with autism.
6 https://incels.wiki/w/Femcel
7 "Moids" is a term used in place of "men". Its usage was adopted in response to male incels' use of the dehumanizing term "femoids" in place of "women".
8 www.reddit.com/r/Trufemcels/comments/9evxak/to_the_men_who_have_just_discovered_the_femcel/

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