ONLINE ONTOLOGY:

A FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGY OF ONLINE COMMUNITY AND SELFHOOD

by

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Phenomenology, the study of the structures of consciousness, attempts to understand the ways in which we understand reality and our lived experiences. Historically, the discipline has been overly generalized and all encompassing, claiming to account for all or most of humanity's experience. Critical phenomenology is an intentional turn away from this kind of practice, and suspends the universal, commonly accepted accounts of reality in order to attend to the unique influences of power that dictate particular experiences. Philosopher Mariana Ortega uses resources of Heideggerian phenomenology with Latina feminism to continue this new phenomenological tradition and conceive a new understanding of selfhood and identity. Ortega describes this self as being multiplicitous, a quality that accounts for its ability to exist as a singular entity–*simultaneously*–in worlds that both affirm and reject it.

Feminist phenomenology seeks to bring forth experiences that have traditionally been deemed not serious enough to be considered in philosophical discussions. One of those not-serious-enough-to-be-philosophical things is social media. This paper analyzes the impacts that online communities have on our sense of self through the lens of Ortega's theory of a multiplicitous self. In order to honor the project of analyzing selves that are forced to the margins, this paper will look at first-hand accounts (interviews) and subcultural aspects of two highly stigmatized groups with strong online presence and membership: real-person fanfiction authors and incels

(involuntary celibates). Through understanding the background social conditions of heteropatriarchy in which each group formed themselves against, we can better understand the implications and complexities of pursuing modern selfhood in online spaces.

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media and online spaces became one of the only places people were able to access any semblance of social interaction outside of our immediate households. During lockdown, there was about a 20% worldwide increase in social media usage (Hichang et al. 2023). The massive-scale lockdowns and government enforced stay-at-home orders forced many to experience unprecedented levels of social isolation, disconnection, and in many cases, distress (Tull et al. 2020). With little more than our families and roommates, the internet became the singular refuge for social interaction and communal belonging. Social media provided its users with the tool of instant connectivity to potentially build long-lasting and emotionally healthy relationships. Although this is supposedly the main purpose of social media, whether such an end is feasible has been challenged by researchers as profit driven platforms grow and become integrated into normal life. Current studies investigating the impacts of using social media as a place for regular social engagement are mixed and inconclusive about if such spaces are net positive or net negative (Hichang et al. 2023). Even if social media usage is a net negative, it is highly unlikely that we would be able to remove it from our current zeitgeist, necessitating understanding it as part of our lifeworld.

But the pandemic did not *only* cause an increase in social media usage. The increase in social media usage also altered the way we think about ourselves, each other, and the world around us. Social media became a large-scale space of relational validation, its increasing presence catalyzed by the need for connectivity the pandemic had carved out. Shared struggles, interests, and large-scale events all took place on platforms that crossed cultural and geographic borders. In a sense, it was the only way one could participate in the social. However, not everyone engaged with online life in the same way. Some simply stayed in contact with friends and relatives, some

took the opportunity to engage in their interests, and some became engrossed in the news and explored niche areas of knowledge. The social affirmation in finding a network of other people who shared a common interest, especially those who one would otherwise not encounter, became a crucial mechanism to counteract a potentially overwhelming alienating experience of uncertain isolation. For those who found solace in an online space, this social acceptance and celebration made the world feel less lonely, and more like *theirs* by reestablishing their place as someone recognized and appreciated amongst others. When the restrictions on in-person interactions subsided, those who felt as though their online life became an important part of their identity did not suddenly abandon their network of social support. So what is retained for the people who do stay actively involved online? Were they changed? How, and to what degree?

Since the online realm has already solidified itself as a cornerstone of contemporary culture, it would be a disservice to not consider its implications on an only growing number of individuals. There has been and continues to be a plethora of research on the effects of widespread social media usage on the individual in myriad disciplines: sociology, media studies, data science, information science, communications, political science, etc. However, these discussions are less common in philosophy. This is not to say there is *no* philosophical work surrounding the topics of internet and social media, but its increasing presence also requires an increase in the types of methodological approaches we use to make sense of it.

The online profiles and presence we create represents us and lifeworlds, no matter how real or disingenuous they are. But is it possible that this participation is more than just a mere representation? What do the online spaces we choose to spend time in reveal about us and individuals, and society as whole? Do these spaces offer us a new way to create a unique sense of

self that is not available offline? Are there implications for what online communities mean when it comes to constituting a sense of who we are?

The tensions and differences between online and offline identities are best represented by communities that are primarily cultivated online. Two unique online communities that have this quality and a strong sense of shared, communal identity are self-described involuntary celibates, and fans who write "real-person-fiction" (RPF). Involuntary celibates, known as incels, are defined by their name. Mostly comprised of heterosexual men, incels are individuals who continuously fail to find success in all their sexual and romantic endeavors. They do, however, greatly desire sexual experience and make efforts to do so, but to no avail (hence the *involuntary* aspect). RPF is genre of fan fiction in which real life figures–rather than fictional characters–become the protagonists of stories written by fans which are shared with other fans. This philosophical investigation analyzes how these individuals' unique participation in these spaces changes their sense of self, and by extension, the way they experience the world. Yet these efforts to build community relations in these two groups are often ethically fraught, raising questions about responsibility to those outside the immediate community. I have chosen examples that are particularly ethically complex or ambiguous because the issues surrounding their identities requires them to navigate reconciling their online and offline life in a unique way that prompts us to think about the moral pitfalls that are inseparable from our online choices. This approach will be phenomenologically oriented, as this practice allows us a way into these experiences, revealing their meaning, connections, and resistance to the greater structures that shape them.

The 227 Incident

In 2019, the television drama series *The Untamed* aired on Tencent Video in China. Adapted from the danmei[1] novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, the fifty-episode series gained staggeringly positive critical and commercial success, in both domestic and international markets. The series centered around two characters–Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, portrayed by Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo in the TV adaptation respectively–as soulmates in a historical fantasy fiction. Although the original novel featured these two main characters in an explicit homosexual relationship known as "Wangxian," the TV series did not. Due to China's ban on portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters in film and television (Davis 2020), the romantic aspect of their relationship was mostly left out, providing little to no homoerotic subtext to pay homage to its source material.

The actors, Xiao and Wang, were at the height of their careers during this time, and their incredible on and off-screen chemistry during the show's production became a hallmark of their reputations as great actors. Behind the scenes footage of *The Untamed* fueled and further shaped public perception of the pair's unique relationship, showing the actors interact with a closeness and familiarity that caught the attention of those outside its already dedicated danmei fanbase. Their documented out-of-character chemistry caused speculation around whether the actors themselves were in a relationship.

On January 30th, 2020, a user posted a story titled *Falling* (下坠) to the website Archive of Our Own (AO3), a domain which hosts fanmade stories known as fanfiction. *Falling* featured Xiao and Wang, portraying the former as a teenage crossdresser and the latter as a prostitute. Although set in an alternative universe, this story was not about the characters Xiao and Wang portrayed in *The Untamed*, but presented a fictionalized representation the actors themselves. The

[1] Danmei (耽美) is a fictional literary genre that centers romantic homosexual relationships between male characters; also known as BL (boys' love) to Western audiences.

story followed Xiao and Wang as they fell in love, including sexually explicit scenes between the characters. Usually, such works stay on AO3 and do not cross over into more generally populated social media. However, a few weeks later, another fan of the series posted links to chapters of *Falling* on Weibo,[2] where it was ill-received by many. Fans on Weibo were upset with the way Xiao was portrayed in the story, publicly contending that the "feminized characterization" and homosexual relationship with Wang heavily tarnished his image. Xiao Zhan fans on Weibo began to mass report the story and AO3 to Chinese authorities as "distribution of underage pornography" and a gross overstep of Xiao Zhan's personal right. One user wrote that fans do not need to "accept vulgar underage prostitution literature based on artists," and that "such behavior not only infringes on the artist's reputation, but also pollutes the online environment and brings down a large number of underaged fans who lack judgment" (Amo 2020). The uproar of attention, led by only a handful of fans, on the actors' fictional relationship and portrayal caused the Beijing City Chaoyang District Police Office to open criminal cases against some of the Weibo users.

The fans claimed that those filing reports were exercising their rights as citizens, upholding laws and justice for their beloved idol. These fans sought to protect Xiao's reputation and believed works like these should not exist in the online fan sphere. Fans even shared step by step instructions with each other on how to report the work and website to the authorities. The attention brought to this single story caused AO3 to be completely blocked and banned from China on February 29th, 2020. Only two days later, another Chinese fandom-based site equivalent to AO3, Lofter, was also taken down by Chinese cyberspace police.

Although Xiao's fans had successfully made the novel inaccessible, it also facilitated the complete removal of the fandom space AO3, which was one of the few sites that flew under the

[2] One of China's most popular social media microblogging websites.

firewall's radar. The banning of these platforms caused a major uproar from not only Xiao and Wang fans, but fans of other idols and media. After the ban, Xiao's fans were blamed for this act of censorship that forced people of all fandoms (AO3 users, general BL fans, and LGBTQ individuals) out of their spaces, which then extended to people calling for Xiao himself to take responsibility for his fan's actions. When there was no comment from Xiao, AO3 users and fans protested and boycotted Xiao and the censorship by sabotaging ratings for the show and brands of whom he was a spokesman for months. The hashtag #BoycottXiaoZhan on Weibo alone was viewed over 380 million times. This event came to be known as the 227 Incident, marking the day that *Falling* was posted onto Weibo and initiated this defining event in international fandom history.

This incident brought much of fandom culture into the spotlight, and exposed many to real person fanfiction for the first time. Homosexual and erotic fanfiction about real life celebrities, however, is not new. Since 2013, the blogging website Tumblr–known for hosting almost every fandom under the sun–posts what they call "Fandometrics" every year. Fandometrics are a collection of data and statistics that showcase the most popular topics discussed on the website for that entire year. The "ships" category, shorthand for relationships that fans create between characters, has been a definite category since 2014. In its debut year, the third most popular pairing was Larry Stylinson, a combination of the names of Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson from the British boy band One Direction (Tumblr 2014). As of 2024, there are 40,000 unique works that include Larry as a romantic pairing in a story on AO3 alone.[3] On the twenty-place list from that year, there are eight more ships that consist of real-life people and celebrities.

[3] This does not account for stories posted to Wattpad, FanFiction.net, Tumblr, and other un-archivable social media sites. There are most likely more.

Real-Person Fiction (RPF)

Even though real-person fiction has existed for many years, real person fiction (RPF) has always been a bit of a sore spot in fandom in general. When Henry Jenkins wrote *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* in the early 1990s–a cornerstone of the academic literature in fan studies–he was explicitly asked by his informants *not* to write about real person fiction in his book. This is because questions about the ethics of RPF were (and still are) largely divisive in fandom spaces. But why is it considered to be so fundamentally different from other forms of fanfiction? If it is condemned by their own peers, why do fans choose to write about real people instead of fictional ones? What ethical boundaries are pushed by fictionalizing the real, and why do so in the first place? A Reddit thread titled "RPF's (Real Person Fics): How Do You Really Feel?" inquired about the attitudes towards the subgenre in the subreddit r/FanFiction. The first and most upvoted reply begins, "RPF is super gross." In another thread that asks the same question, the first response is, "Makes me honestly uncomfortable" (Reddit 2017).

There are a few concerns that come up in this thread that often come up in conversations about RPF. The first and main concern amongst fans is that RPF is invasive and dehumanizing to their real-life counterparts, similar to the arguments from Xiao Zhang fans in the 227 incident, especially in stories that contain sexually explicit material. Users and fans state that it is not only creepy, but wholly unethical to write sexually explicit material about someone without their consent. It is important to note here that an overwhelming majority of fanfiction consists of gay and lesbian relationships, making sexuality a crucial characteristic of fanfic practice. In 2023, in the top 100 ships on AO3, 58 were M/M (Centreoftheselights 2023). RPF is no different, but sex and sexuality seem take on an entirely new ethical weight in this genre of fanfiction. A common

criticism of RPF is that it assumes or projects upon its subject's sexualities. Would Xiao Zhan fans still report *Falling* if its content had been heterosexual and non-explicit?

Although fanfiction has grown organically over the past few decades, there has been a recent rise in the backlash RPF writers receive in fandom spaces for the reasons stated above. All RPF writers are aware of these concerns within fandom spaces, and as a result, many choose to keep their hobby secret or completely separate from other fandom activities. When asked about the secrecy of their hobby, RPF authors' sentiments– which reflect a much greater pattern amongst them–included:

> The people I know in real life don't know I write [RPF] because I know they're not open to the type of stuff I write. I don't feel comfortable sharing this side of me and I'm scared of their reaction (Aïda, online interview submitted to author, 2024).
>
> Mostly yes because of the stigma that we're all trying to assume [their] sexualities (the irony because those who say that often assume they're all straight and cis, when most of them don't have the chance to publicly come out, ever) or that we make them uncomfortable and will cause friendships to tear apart (Anonymous, online interview submitted to author, 2024).
>
> I do keep it a secret, from both my friends offline and online. Fanfiction writing is something that's rather heavily criticized in any space. Whether it's real person or fictional, explicit or not, and the tropes involved, someone will have an issue with it. Because writing is something I greatly enjoy and appreciate, I'd rather protect myself from any potential judgement I'd receive from the people around me (Anonymous, online interview submitted to author, 2024).
>
> I'm embarrassed by it (Misha, online interview submitted to author, 2024).

RPF is not simply labeled as delusion, but as morally abhorrent and warranting of real-life persecution, as we have seen in the 227 Incident. Does RPF blur the boundary between public, private and personal? The 227 Incident certainly implies such. Yet, fans continue to write RPF despite opposition from fellow fans and the dominant culture: but why? What does actively being an RPF author offer them that other spaces do not? What social norms dictate RPF as unethical,

and why do its authors keep writing it despite these criticisms? Does writing fiction about reality change our perceptions of it?

Going ER

On May 23rd, 2014, Cheng Yuan Hong and George Chen were stabbed to death by their roommate upon arriving home. Their friend Weihan Wang suffered the same fate as he entered the apartment building to pay them a visit.

Several hours after these three murders, Elliot Rodgers, a 22-year-old, worked on his laptop from his car in the apartment's parking lot after purchasing Starbucks. Rodgers was working on uploading a YouTube video, titled "Retribution," and publishing a 137-page autobiographical manifesto titled "My Twisted World." Both the manifesto and YouTube video detail an unbearable frustration Rodgers was dealing with: being an incel. In his manifesto, Rodgers wrote, "I desired girls, but girls never desired me back. There is something very wrong with that. It is an injustice that cannot go unpunished" (Rodger 2014). His hands were seemingly tied by forces outside his control. In order for justice to be served for his unfair, disadvantaged, and crushing experience, Rodgers had to enact revenge. Upon receiving the worrying manifesto via email, Rodger's therapist contacted his mother, who informed his father. All three of them left their homes to find Rodgers, alerting the Isla Vista Police Department on the way.

The deaths of Elliot's roommates were the first of six, soon to be followed by fourteen more injured in an act of premeditated violence. After his video was uploaded, Rodgers drove to UCSB's sorority house Alpha Phi, what he called "the hottest sorority," with intentions of killing as many women as he could. Fortunately, nobody in the sorority answered the door when Rodgers arrived. Still determined to orchestrate his Day of Retribution in some capacity, Rodgers got back in his car and began shooting passersby on the sidewalk. Only about twenty minutes after he

uploaded his YouTube video describing the revenge he would carry out; he was found dead inside his car from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. Police found 584 rounds of unspent ammunition alongside pistols and knives. Rodger's actions received overwhelming reception from the community he belonged to and committed his crimes in the name of, the incel resulting in the creation of the reverent slang term, "going ER."

On November 28th, 2023, Justice Suhail Akhtar sentenced 17-year-old Oguzhan Sert to life in prison after stabbing Ashley Arzaga 42 times to death at the front desk of a massage parlor while yelling misogynistic slurs. Upon arrest, police found a note in Sert's pocket "promoting an ideology of violence against women" along with an engraving on the murder weapon reading, "THOT slayer"[4] (Isai 2023). Akhtar not only tried Sert as an adult, but also ruled his murder as an act of terrorism. Although there had been quite a few other attacks against women in the name of incel retribution in Canada–like Alek Minassian, who plowed a van into a busy pedestrian street; or Marc Lépine, who opened fire on a college campus with a semiautomatic rifle–none of the perpetrators had been charged with terrorism. Sert's ruling was the first of its kind.

Over the past fifteen years, there have been over one hundred victims, mostly women, who have been either murdered or injured because of the same ideology at the center of Rodgers, Sert's, Minassian's, and Lépine's cases (Bates 2020). How did they all come to the conclusion that women not desiring them was an offense necessarily punishable by violence? Most incels do not end up committing large acts of violence like those aforementioned. However, hundreds of thousands of men empathized with the feelings that drove them to commit such acts of terror.

[4] "Thot" began as an acronym for "That Hoe Over There," but once popularized became colloquially known to refer to women who have many casual sexual relationships (interchangeable with slut and whore).

The Incel

Incel, a term short for "involuntarily celibate," is more than just a descriptor for someone who has yet to lose their virginity. The term incel is an identity, a word to signal to others a central frustration and host of misogynistic ideas. Originally "invcel," the term incel was created in 1997 by a woman in her mid-twenties, known by the alias Alana. Alana created a website called "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project," where she began a mailing list and a blog forum where people could exchange and respond to anecdotal stories or discuss their struggles to find love, and more specifically, sex. When Alana created her forum, the social media platforms we are familiar with today were nonexistent. This site was intended to be a friendly place for those considered "late bloomers" or "lonely virgins," like Alana herself. She was, unsurprisingly, not alone in her frustrations and feelings of intense loneliness. The blog quickly took off and became a supportive safe space for thousands of people, men and women alike. One couple who met on the site even eventually married. Three years after she created the site, Alana left the community as she began to have more success with her dating life, having faith that it would continue without her, and others would eventually follow her path of eventually being able to relinquish their connection to involuntary celibacy (Bates 2020). It did in fact continue without her, but morphed into something horribly unrecognizable in relation to the original version.

Bastardized from its initial sentiments, the incel today refers to men who feel that they are unable to enter into sexual (or romantic) relationships, all at the fault of women. Incel ideologies are marked by a deeply misogynistic culture and worldview, where feminism is the symbol of societal denigration. Incels share a belief that "the world that he has been forced to believe works in his favor is actually hopelessly stacked against him. Everything, from our government to our wider society, is designed to promote women over men" (Bates 2020). This is,

of course, against all empirical academic research that shows the reality of the intricacies of patriarchy at work in society. Incels believe they live in a man-hating 'gynocracy,' and that feminist movements are only leftist façades to keep men in subordination to women (Bates 2020). It is important to note that the incel is fundamentally formed around the central belief that women have control over the most valuable form of currency in society: access to sex. This access to sex is a right being systematically stripped away from some men through evil social and economic systems.

By vilifying women, and flipping the feminist narrative on its head, incels are able to make sense of their unsuccessful experiences with women, giving them peace of mind that nothing is fundamentally wrong with them. The pieces begin to fall into place, and suddenly the incel becomes an awakened underdog, touting the truth and fighting against all odds. This transfiguration in their reality–as negative, self-centered, and defeatist as it is–is the foundation of their community. This relief, however, comes at a cost.

The extremist views of incels have garnered much criticism from other online users and cultural commentators, essentially labeling them as a niche online extremist group. Incels have been banned from social media platforms and online forums time and time again on the grounds of hate speech and instigating violence, forcing them to try and find somewhere where they can reestablish community. Why is it that regardless of much opposition and silencing, incels continue to put so much effort into keeping their community alive? What is so important, from their perspective, about having access to this space?

Method: Critical Feminist Phenomenology

The increase of active social media users from the COVID-19 pandemic applied fan fiction authors and incels alike. It is difficult to track the number of self-identifying incels that participate on forums, since their blogs and designated subspaces on social media platforms have been banned time and time again. However, the steady increase in membership on current forums, popularization of what is known as the manosphere, and documented cases of incel motivated violence indicates that the numbers are not dwindling. AO3 saw an increase of an average of 230 million weekly page views in early 2019 to 350 million in May of the following year (Archive of Our Own 2020). This is not to say these groups are only phenomenologically significant because of their numbers. Instead, the numbers suggest that there may be some form of important, collective meaning worth examining. Why exactly have these communities retained their members? What is unique about the space they create?

Each of these communities are more than just a creative outlet or a forum to find those who share similar experiences; I argue the meaning that is created for the individual from participating in the communal space to the individual is uniquely ontologically significant. Their participation uniquely transforms the relationship the individual has with themselves, with others in and outside of the community, and with the world itself. Identities change, norms and notions are challenged, and change the way someone finds themselves in the midst of the world and its existing structures. Because of the need to address the individual experience within the norms that shape them, I found myself turning towards the phenomenological tradition–more specifically, critical feminist phenomenology.

Critical phenomenology is a fairly new movement in phenomenology–with feminist phenomenology being even more nascent–which builds upon the foundations of classical

phenomenology as a study of the structures of consciousness. However, the distinction between critical and classical phenomenology lies in the intention of its analysis. Lisa Guenther defines the fundamental commitments of critical phenomenology as such:

> 1) the art of asking questions, moved by crisis; 2) a transcendental inquiry into the conditions of possibility for meaningful experience; 3) a quasi-transcendental, historically-grounded study of particular lifeworlds; 4) a (situated and interested) analysis of power; 5) the problematization of basic concepts and methods; and 6) a praxis of freedom that seeks not only to interpret the meaning of lived experience, but also to change the conditions under which horizons of possibility for meaning, action, and relationship are wrongfully limited or foreclosed (Guenther 2021).

Unlike classical phenomenology, the critical tradition seeks to respond to contemporary affairs that establish the broader conditions of possibility for individual sense-making. Additionally, critical phenomenology is able to uniquely dissect the relationship between an individual's situated experience and the greater socio-historical preconditions that shape it, without discounting the unique particularities of that lived experience. Feminist traditions also aim to elevate non-traditional sources of knowledge that have been historically rendered inferior into contemporary discourse.

Online community is seldom considered as having serious philosophical implications or grounds for altering our existential possibilities and is at worst seen as merely a symptomatic reflection of offline life. Furthermore, fanfiction as a medium has been deemed a women's hobby, or negligible literary material. However, a phenomenological examination of RPF writers and incels reveals that these online groups, surrounded by heavy stigmas, actually provide access to a novel sense of being. In order to discuss this, I will use Guenther's six commitments as starting points for inquiry into the structures of meaning for RPF writers and incels.

Moreover, both of these groups have been written about or studied on a much broader scale that I find tends to overlook one of the most critical things about being an active member of these: the lived experience of the individual participants. Data and statistics we are able to glean from these groups is highly informative, and can help paint a clear empirical picture, but is not able to address the individual meanings and structures of existence that the people who make up these populations experience. In order to get an authentic account their unique experiences, I will be using direct testimony from RPF writers and incels that detail what it is like and what it means to be a member of these groups. Relating these testimonies of marginalized communities to a greater society while addressing the feminist context they arise in is something critical phenomenology is particularly suited for.

For these reasons, I will mainly use Mariana Ortega's conception of phenomenological sense of "mineness" which she develops in her work *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity and the Self* as a starting point to explore the questions of selfhood, subjectivity, and personal identity of these two niche-but-not-so-niche groups. Building upon a Heideggerian phenomenology, Ortega uses Latina feminist thinkers Anzaldúa and Lugones to recontextualize selfhood and argue for a multiplicitous self. In order to identify oneself as an "I," there must be some sense of continuity of experience. One must have the ability to identify experiences as mine. However, a sense of continuity and comfort with their experience does not come as easily to those who find themselves outside of the dominant ontology. Latina feminist philosophers have poignantly been able to depict a selfhood, *mestizaje*, that takes into account versions of the self in-between and at the margins of being. By synthesizing these thinkers' notions of *Dasein* (German for existence, or "being-there") and *mestizaje*, Ortega comes to describe the multiplicitous self as being-between-worlds and being-in-worlds. Ortega proposes that an important aspect of this

multiplicitous self, mineness, “has to do with the individual character of the self in the sense that it registers the self’s awareness of its own being, or how the self is fairing. Mineness thus captures the existential dimension of being an “I” that is always situated in particular contexts.” How do RPF writers and incels experience a sense of mineness? What structural or ideological aspects of their respective communal cultures contribute to their attunement to an existential sense of mineness? What are the feminist issues that come to light when analyzing the phenomenological experience of these individuals? Do they challenge these structures or reinforce them?

A Sense of Mineness

Phenomenology of the In-Between

Heidegger's *Being and Time* turned phenomenology away from a transcendental and epistemically centered sense of self and towards articulating existence as that which is practically situated in the world. The relationship between the we, as subjects, and the world around us was no longer primarily mental representations of things outside our own mind. He describes this kind of being-in-the-world as Dasein. This reinterpretation of existence as grounded in concrete and lived experiences is the reason Mariana Ortega uses Heidegger's phenomenology in tandem with Latina feminist thinkers, as their synthesis is more able to account for the fundamentally opposed experiences of those "whose experience is marked by oppression and marginalization due to their social identities, those selves that have not figured prominently in the pages of philosophical discourses." (Ortega 2016, 50).

In *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*, Ortega notes a key difference between the Latina feminists' view of the self and Heidegger's conception: the ruptures in everyday experiences. Heidegger's phenomenology emphasizes the experience of already being in the midst of the world, a state he calls *Dasein*. His *Dasein* recognizes that our existence is always situated in a certain historical and temporal context of which our selfhood is built upon. The self has a practical involvement with the world it exists in and the tools it uses, rather than being epistemic in substance This means the self if always a work in progress, always "in the making" (Ortega 2016, 51). However, Ortega argues that those whose selves are at the margins are not simply at ease or not at ease, but constantly experience disruptions in their being-in-the-world, creating instances of not-being-at-ease. However, Ortega views these experiences as constitutive of a single multiplicitous self, similar to yet distinct from Anzaldúa's *mestizaje*. The

mestiza, a kind of self, is a "being who is thrown in the US-Mexico borderlands and has to negotiate her various social identities in this complex in between territory." (Ortega 53). Although they are addressing the same issue of contrasting and conflicting identities, there is a key distinction between Ortega's and Anzaldua's notions of self. To use Lugones' example, the new *mestiza* has a two-fold understanding of how she fairs in the Latino world and the US white world; "this self might feel playful in the Latino world but not in the Anglo world." (Ortega 81). Anzaldua recognizes that there are different versions of the self that show up in different contexts, and these iterations end up constituting one greater whole self. The playful self that exists in the Latino world and the non-playful self that exists in the Anglo world are two separate parts that come together as components of the self. Ortega, however, argues that this understanding of the self misses the fact that the self is not existing in one context then the next, but always *simultaneously* accounting for both contexts. The multiplicitous self is fundamentally one entity that extends both hands to touch the borders of two worlds at once. The self is playful and unplayful at the same time, able to change and accommodate based on its involvement with the world around it. One aspect of the self may become more prevalent based on the context, but the self's experience is always dual.

The need for the self to have a multiplicitous quality is produced by ruptures in experience; experiences that tell the self that she belongs or does not belong, and the ability to carry that lived experience. With this multiplicitous self comes a need for a sense of belonging, dwelling, and affirmation. A particular self's awareness, their ability to reflect upon their own situation and social fairing is a quality of the multiplicitous self that Ortega calls mineness. Mineness allows for an existential continuity of experience across various aspects of the self when one experiences a "thick sense of not being-at-ease" after a rupture (Ortega 2016, 50). Let's think back to the example of playfulness and non-playfulness from before, where the mestiza experiences herself differently

based on context. Here, mineness helps the self realize both the mineness of the experience of being playful in the Latino world and the mineness that experiences the inability to be playful in the Anglo world. If each of these experiences resonates strongly with one's being, the contradiction about the nature of one's being rises to the surface a thick sense of unease. Mineness is the sense that in both of these cases, the crux of these lived experiences is one's own being. However, Ortega disagrees that this sense of mineness points towards a coexistent plurality of selves. A plurality of selves would mean that the break in continuity between a playful and unplayful self needs to actively be made sense of by a "transcendental ego or other mechanism of association." (82) Instead, the multiplicitous self that Ortega argues for is a single being that inherently allows for a complex flow of disparate experiences and contradictory elements, since each respective sense of mineness is informed by the other.

Additionally, Ortega opens up the possibility of resistant practices in the multiplicitous self's ability to travel between worlds. Because Ortega's conception of self is able to contain multiple kinds of existence at once, navigating spaces that put the self at ease or not at ease can be a liberatory practice that challenges the status quo that causes contradiction in the first place. What if the self, then, was able to create new a space in which a central attribute or characteristic is able to be positively affirmed?

Before continuing, I do want to address a common tension that comes up between decolonial theory and the way it is sometimes used in an academic setting. There are times where scholars will take concepts of decolonial and critical race philosophies and apply them to things that have nothing to do with such topics, essentially removing them from their essential contexts. I acknowledge that the jump from *mestiza* consciousness (a critique centered around race) to RPF authors and incels (identities that are consciously sought out and chosen) may seem disingenuous,

as it is removing the core context in which the *mestiza* consciousness came to be. However, both RPF authors and incels are reacting to estrangement from the dominant culture of heterosexuality; more specifically, a fully racialized, white heterosexuality. Julian Carter has documented the necessary connections between normality, whiteness, and heterosexuality in *The Heart of Whiteness*. Carter details in his history that the entire conception of the "normal" American was defined primarily on whether men and women were able to adhere to erotic and emotional conventions. These conventions rose to importance and became legitimized by becoming the markers of white political and social dominance. To be a normal American meant to be a white, heterosexual, cisgendered individual. These identifiers also came with rules around how to love, the significance of marriage, reproduction, and family structures. Since heteronormativity is inherently racialized, discussions about heterosexuality are by extension involved in the feminist and decolonial projects that Ortega, Anzaldúa and Lugones center in their works. Although race is not the central focus of this paper, it is imperative to remember that heterosexuality's "normality" is inextricably tied to a history of whiteness.

Incels and fanfiction authors exist in a newly constructed in-between. The ideologies and cultures that permeate each individual communities' space are at odds with the ones that govern offline life, but in vastly different ways. While fanfiction authors challenge the rules of heterosexuality, incels attempt to instill heteropatriarchal norms to an extreme. Yet the nature of an online space forces its members to always be in between. There is no option to fully immerse yourself into your online identity, nor is there a way to leave it behind without the experience having altered the way one is able to think the world around them. Understanding how their multiplicitous selves are affected by their communal involvement online reveals the ways in which

notions of gender and sex factor into constituting the orientation of mineness and the self's ability to critically travel in-between worlds.

Fanfiction Authors

The Fan is Female

The word fanatic, introduced into the English language in 1550, described someone "marked by excessive enthusiasm and often intense uncritical devotion." Its Latin origin *fanaticus* initially described a kind of religious devotee, one who was insane but divinely inspired "by orgiastic sites and enthusiastic frenzy." Colloquially, we now know this kind of person as a fan. The term has lost its explicitly religious associations, but still references the above average emotional investment one has in their interest. The first instance of the term "fan" appeared in journalistic accounts from the late 19th century, describing American sports enthusiasts after baseball made its move from a participatory sport into a mostly spectator sport (Jenkins 1992, 12-15). It did not take long for the term "fan" to quickly expanded beyond the realm of spectator sports and take hold in other cultural areas.

The difference between saying "I like basketball," versus "I am a Warriors *fan*" are the implied connotations of excess involvement or temporal dedication. The person who likes basketball may play recreationally with a team or watch local games when they happen to be in the area. The basketball *fan* has a favorite team or player, most likely owns some kind of merchandise, stays up to date with schedules and interviews, and schedules their time in accordance with watching televised games. They are emotionally invested; they feel temporary defeat when their team loses the championship game, as if they themselves are the benched players watching their teammates in anticipation. Of course, there are varying levels of intensity when it comes to being a fan of something, all of which still exist. To be a fan, though, undoubtedly makes up a considerable part of one's life. However, this dedication only accounts for a small fraction of our contemporary associations with who a fan is, what a fan does, and how a fan is created.

The most common kind of fan is what is known generally as a "media fan." These are fans of movie or TV franchises, book series, video games, etc. Media fans connect with each other through social media platforms to discuss their interest, creating the subculture known as fandom. Fandoms existed offline as well, before social media in the form of conventions, fan clubs, and zines (fan-run magazine publications). These were fairly niche groups, held together by mailing lists and tiny newspaper ads (Jenkins 1992). The closest thing to the idea we have of a contemporary fan arguably came to the forefront of cultural consciousness during the height of The Beatles' popularity, a time in the '60s known as "Beatlemania." In a documentary covering this historic time, *Eight Days A Week*, there is a clip of a reporter interviewing a fan across steel barricades, raving outside a Beatles concert. She yells into the microphone:

> I love them, I don't care what anybody thinks I love The Beatles for them, and I'll always love them! Even when I'm a 'hundred and five and an old grandmother, I'll love 'em! Paul McCartney if you are listening Adrienne from Brooklyn loves you with all her heart–I love you Paul and please come to the window so I can just see you. I saw you smoking before, I kissed the limousine you looked out of, but I love you and I want you Paul–

This impassioned speech, along with the ecstatic screeching from fellow fans surrounding her, is the crux of what is known as fangirling. Most Beatles fans that were showcased in this manner were in fact women. So perhaps fangirl is an appropriate term for Beatles fans. However, sports fans–a male dominated space–were to have similar reactions or enthusiasms, are not called fangirls. They are not even called fan*boys*. This is because this particular kind of excessive and obsessive dedication is reserved for women. The notion of intensified feelings inherently devoid of logic married perfectly with the already sexist belief that women are overly emotional and are unable to possess logic to overcome it. Increasingly, being a fan became closely associated with being a girl. I use the word girl here instead of woman to further emphasize the kind of immaturity

that is tied to being an involved and active fan. The avid fan, especially those whose interests or activities are outside of the realm of "normal" cultural experiences, is someone "whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality" (Jenkins 1992, 15). These associations have become so strong that the word *fangirling* has become a standalone verb to describe such behavior.

Words like "mania," "crazed," and "insane" are still regularly used to depict female fans. Femininity is almost inherently associated with fandom and is also perhaps the reason that women make up the overwhelming majority of fandom spaces. To be in fandom would mean to identify oneself with those qualities, qualities that are in direct conflict with heteronormative ideas of masculinity. Men are still in fandom spaces of course, but do not have the same associations tied to their character. Male media fans are nerdy, asexual, or impotent; but the fan who screams "I love you and I want you, Paul!" is almost always female. This affinity for the thing of interest, especially erotic, is feminine. When these people are so unable to experience the excitement of being a fan without being scrutinized by the general public or risk being labeled as crazy, where do they go? What do they do once they find each other?

Rethinking Relationality: Breaking the Heterosexual Frame

One of the cornerstones of fan culture is the production of fan labor. Fan labor includes works like fan created visual media, such as art, compilations, or animations. Henry Jenkins notes in *Textual Poachers* that there are two types of fans: *active* and *passive* fans. Although passive fans still make up a large portion of fandom, active fans are the ones who have access to the means of culture production in these fandom spaces. Active fans are those who are creating the tangible and substantive items in fandom; whether that's fan art, compilations, or–what will be at the heart of this paper–fanfiction. Fanfiction has always been a part of fandom culture. Stories used to be

physically distributed through subscriptions to club mailing lists. Nowadays, most fandom interaction and fan labor are hosted on social media sites and archives.

The most popular kind of fanfiction is known as slash fic. The "slash" refers to the symbolic designation of a romantic pairing. For example, the tag "Harry Potter/Draco Malfoy" implies the characters together romantically, whereas "Harry Potter & Draco Malfoy" communicates to the reader that the main pairing is platonic. In 2023, 58 out of the top 100 pairings on Archive of Our Own–the most popular website for hosting fanfiction–were M/M[5] (Archive of Our Own 2023). Out of that same list, only 9 of the pairings classify as real-person fiction.

There is a preconceived notion that slash fic–especially erotic slash fic–is obsessively enjoyed for two reasons: first, that those who write it project themselves into one half of the story, or second, that they write out their sexual fantasies as pseudo-pornography for others to enjoy. However, the majority of people who write fanfiction are women, most of whom identify as LGBTQ+. So even though the claim to self-insert may hold true for some, there is not a very strong case for that being the main motivator for erotic slash. As for slash fic simply being a vehicle for person erotic fantasies, scholars who have delved into fanfiction's cultural significance and meaning argue that there is something deeper at play. Henry Jenkins outlines a few basic premises of M/M slash fic: "the movement from male homosocial desire to a direct expression of homoerotic passion, the exploration of alternative to traditional masculinity, the insertion of sexuality into a larger social context" (Jenkins 1992, 186). Slash fic is rarely ever about just the sex. Academic feminist and author Joanna Russ argues that erotic fiction written by women is more about "the lovers' personal interest in each other's bodies, the tenderness, the refusal to rush into a relationship, the exclusive commitment to one another" (Jenkins 1992, 192). The physical act of

[5] This is a system for denoting the gender/sex of each member in a ship. M/M for Male/Male, F/F for Female/Female, and M/F for Male/Female. Platonic ships are categorized as Gen.

sex in these slash stories is only a small part of a larger exploration about the limitations of traditional masculinity and heteronormativity. Anne Jamison writes that "the point is, fanfiction isn't just an homage to the original–it's subversive and perverse and boundary-breaking, and it always has been" (Jamison 2013, xii). The world of slash is not liberatory in the sense that it is a place free of all normative gender and sex roles, but it is at the very least a space for something *else* beyond the boundaries to exist.

Real person fiction has recently garnered an increase in criticism despite it having been a cornerstone genre of fanfiction for over a decade. Arguments made against RPF fic are built on a couple key moral concerns. The first and most common argument against RPF is that writing erotic fanfiction about real people is a gross transgression of a celebrity's personal boundaries. This offense seems to be especially heinous when the fanfiction is gay (as much of it is), as the stories could force celebrities out of the closet, put pressure on their private relationships, or assume their sexuality without their explicit input. This stigma around RPF being immoral or in bad ethical taste forces its authors much deeper into a hole they were already in. Some authors are secure in sharing their hobby, whereas some admit to hiding it from their own therapists. An RPF author, Tori, writes:

> [Being part of the fic writing community has] absolutely impacted me in both good and bad ways. It's strengthened certain friendships and formed others but at the same time seeing the way people are judged and for lack of a better word, demonized for writing or engaging with fic has been exhausting and really disheartening. I've had friends doxxed over their fic, I've seen people called predators for writing fic. It's really… it's hard. It's supposed to be a fun hobby but the culture in certain fandoms (speaking specifically about RPF here) is such that this new wave of conservatism makes it difficult to enjoy (Tori, online interview submitted to author, 2024).

Doxxing, the act of searching for and publishing private information about an individual on the internet (like residential addresses or legal names) with malicious intent, is especially egregious

for RPF authors. Many use pseudonyms or remain anonymous online to avoid judgement from fellow fans and from society at large. In the worse cases, to avoid potentially losing jobs or career opportunities due to the generally erotic nature of RPF stories. In offline life, many opt out of telling their family and friends about their hobby. Another author writes:

> I do keep [writing fanfiction] a secret, from both my friends offline and online. Fanfiction writing is something that's rather heavily criticized in any space. Whether it's real person or fictional, explicit or not, and the tropes involved, someone will have an issue with it. Because writing is something I greatly enjoy and appreciate, I'd rather protect myself from any potential judgement I'd receive from the people around me (Anonymous, online interview submitted to author, 2024).

Writing fanfiction is already stigmatized by dominant culture. RPF even more so, and the authors are aware of it. Both of these authors have found comfort in the community aspects of RPF and fandom, while also alluding to some of the tensions that exist around engaging in such a hobby. Although there is some validity to these arguments against the existence of RPF, I am not here to refute them. Instead, I aim to point out that RPF allows its authors to experience the most important social aspects of fandom community while simultaneously gaining a unique experience that informs their selfhood that fiction-based fanfiction does not offer. If authors have such similar experiences to other fanfiction communities, what does RPF subvert that normal fanfiction does not?

What is unique about RPF stories is that they do not have a fixed point of reference for their fictionalizations. Certain franchises like Star Trek or Harry Potter can absolutely be updated by their original authors or have endorsed official spin offs; however, those characters and situations are not being offered to the authors as beings situated in our real world. For example, Daenerys Targaryen's character is unaffected by the current discussions of LGBTQ+ rights because she only exists in the fantasy world of *Game of Thrones*. All RPF features celebrities as

the real people of their stories, both internet and Hollywood personalities. These celebrities, by contrast, already exist in the real world and are situated within the same heteronormative structures that we all endure. These people are able to be placed in every kind of alternative universe while also having their potential characterization informed new information, from how they respond to the things around them in the real world to small interactions with other celebrities (that they would be shipped with). We do not have to imagine the reverse of what it might be like for them to exist in reality, because they already do. Instead, the focus of RPF (and especially canon-compliant RPF) is on the possibility of different modes of existence in the reality they are already living. What if we were allowed to see certain interactions as more than platonic? What if we were able to know interpersonal dynamics beyond the facades presented to us? No community of RPF authors are claiming that their canon compliant fics are the absolute truth. Real person fiction is just that: fiction. Everything is speculation. The nature of celebrity culture forcibly creates a separation between their public and private personas. Fans find themselves fictionalizing about the private, about the what-ifs, behind the scenes, and the moments when no one is looking. However, it is that possibility that gives authors a new lens to begin rethinking the meaning of our interactions and potential relationality to those around us. The speculation of possibility, especially queer possibility, allows the authors to re-interpret offline line. This is why fictionalizing reality–RPF writer's version of "the canon"–has greater phenomenological implications that fiction-based fic.

After receiving personal testimony from over sixty RPF authors, there were a few core experiences that were mentioned in about every individual's story: a positive experience in a strong sense of community, learning about people with different life experiences and cultures, sexual normalization and exploration, and self-discovery. Online fandom space is unique from any offline space because it lacks a geographic base, therefore also lacking a singular dominant culture.

Fanfiction also becomes the way in which its authors are able to access cultural production, which becomes especially pertinent when the dominant narrative inaccurately describes marginalized experiences or identities, or leaves them out entirely. But how does writing fic actually affect the individual author's experience? How does it expand their worldview? And who are they allowed to be in this space that they cannot be offline?

Finding My Self

Fanfiction writers are not solely defined by the content of their work. More often than not, when asked about their relationship to writing fanfiction as a practice, authors responded by speaking to their sense of comfort that the community offered them. These are some testimonies authors gave when asked how being part of the fic writing community has affected their lives:

> In real life I figured it must've been a part of what shaped me to be the person I am now. Writing exclusively mlm stories for one. Writing nsfw stories as well. Finding an outlet, even "pre-social media," for sexual imagination that seemed super taboo and shameful, it was a place of comfort; knowing I'm not the only person that thinks about these things (Cameron, online interview submitted to author, 2024).

> Most of my fanfics are fantasy AUs, with heavy found family themes, and a lot of them center around characters that are queer, trans and disabled. Those are all identities I hold myself and fanfic has helped me through many big self-realizations as I came to terms with my life as it unfolded. I also love being able to be in community with other readers and writers who hold those identities too, there's something so magical about feeling connected to people who live halfway round the world because of something I used to think of as just a silly fanfic but now realize is something much bigger than that (Anonymous, online interview submitted to author, 2024).

> Fanfiction has gained me some of the best friends I've ever had online. […] It is a hobby, but one of my favorite parts of the hobby is the community I have made. The people are really one of the best parts of this. Additionally, fanfiction and the community helped me become more accepting of myself; maybe it's a little lame, but fanfiction helped me become accepting of my sexuality because I saw so many

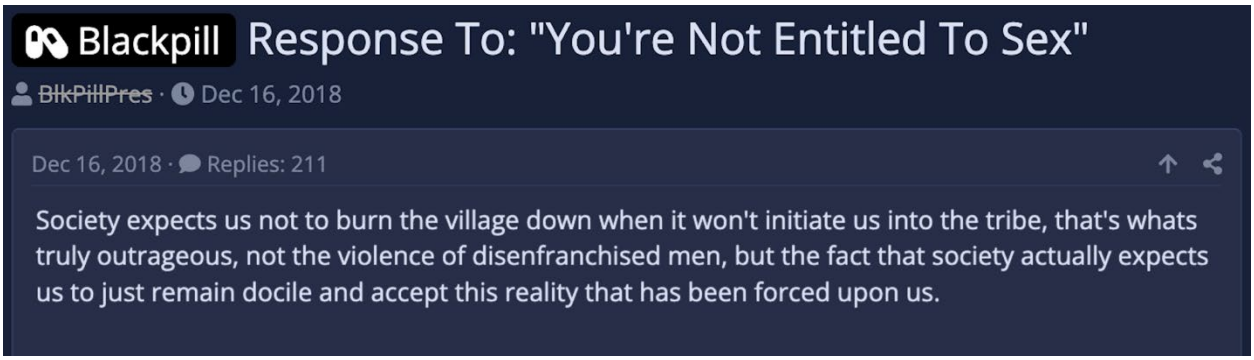
> people writing gay ships so sweet and wonderful and I realized it was okay for me to be gay too (Chai, online interview submitted to author, 2024).

These three responses reflect most of the sentiments across the responses. As we know, the content of slash fic deals with themes of intimacy and sexuality in a way that goes against the grain of heteronormative rules. It is comprised of mostly women and LGBTQ+ members, giving them a space to explore these topics unhindered by greater oppressive social forces that may have normally silenced or shamed open discussion. One author wrote that writing slash fic is "a tremendously valuable way to learn about myself (through the process of writing) and connect with others (by sharing it)" (Zess 2024). Additionally, when talking about why they write, authors more often spoke about how this creative but community-oriented writing helps them explore and make sense of their personal lives, giving them a space to be unapologetically enthusiastic fans while also discussing taboo matters of sex, love, and gender. One author described their personal experience with writing fanfiction:

> Fanfiction was one of the things that really helped me normalize queer relationships to me, as someone who was brought up religious and wasn't really exposed to queer people very much. I started out feeling like I shouldn't read slash fic, since it was gay and I felt like I shouldn't normalize it, but I kept reading it because it was really good, and it helped so much with helping me get over that and see gay relationships as normal and good. That probably helped with the realization that I myself am gay and trans, lmao. (Also obligatory mention to the fact that reading smut inevitably makes you discover various kinks that you're into. And also in some ways has helped me think through what I might want out of a sexual relationship in a pretty controlled way) (Lauren, online interview submitted to author, 2024).

Fanfiction authors gravitate towards the fandom space because of the negative or shameful connotations of being a "crazy" fan, find community with others, explore taboo topics of sex and sexuality, all which end up changing the way they think about themselves and their selfhood. Authors discovering that they are transgender or queer alters the way they exist in real life, changing their positionality amongst the background of heteronormative culture. Not only is there

change here, but a real affective sense of safety and comfort in the diversity of the community. By having their fanfiction center real people, the connection between fiction and reality fundamentally and irreducibly overlaps in the experience of an RPF author, changing their own landscapes of relationality.


Blackpill
Response To: "You're Not Entitled To Sex"
BlkPillPres · Dec 16, 2018
Dec 16, 2018 · Replies: 211
Society expects us not to burn the village down when it won't initiate us into the tribe, that's whats truly outrageous, not the violence of disenfranchised men, but the fact that society actually expects us to just remain docile and accept this reality that has been forced upon us.

Incels

Redpilled

Incels are a subset of the manosphere; a complex, amorphous web of different associations, individuals and mediums that focus their content on men's issues. Men's activist groups like *Men Going Their Own Way* (MGTOW) or the Men's Rights Movement (MRM) address issues of male loneliness, female promiscuity, divorce court inequity, and other forms of social and financial disenfranchisement targeting cisgendered, heterosexual men (Bates 2020). Much of this ideology is a direct reaction to the impacts of feminist ideology on societal norms surrounding love, sex, and relationships. One of its tenant beliefs a disdain for the way feminism has destroyed the traditional family structure, a women's sense of morality, and instituted a system that perhaps initially strove for equality but in reality, actively disadvantages men.

For incels, this structure disenfranchises men because of the core belief that women hold the key to just about every social and economic advantage: access to sex. Sex is something everyone wants, and is single-handedly the most significant sociocultural milestone in a man's life. It is, to some extent, what makes a man a man. It also emphasizes as a key moment in a women's life, but does not validate an agency over self-hood in the same way it does for men. The incel community provides an emotional and ideological comfort unavailable to those who seemingly do not have access to sex, no matter how hard they try to "get along with" or seduce women to them in the real world. Even in some of the most conservative or right-wing offline spaces, the ethos of the incel is too intense. You either get it or you don't, and everyone who is *not* in is irrevocably out. This exclusivity bands incels strongly together, and the echo chamber allows their attitudes to safely become more and more extreme. The identity of incel and norma around inceldom then become more closely tied to an incel's self-hood, become either a part of him or

wholly him. In an interview with an incel *Vice* conducted in 2020, an incel in a chatroom began making threats of violence, stating that he could commit a domestic terror attack in the next three months, and he would firebomb multiple government buildings. The incel, who was in the room with the reporter only laughed (Reeve 2018). Some incels (also pick-up artists, another branch of the manosphere) go as far as to say that rape should be legal, that men should have full control over their wives' appearances, or that there should be federally distributed girlfriends (Bates 2020). Despite incels' track record of committing actual acts of violence and terrorism, other incels brush off such threats as jokes because they only understand them to be a cover up for the bigger, deeply seeded insecurities that brought them together in the first place. The societal stereotypes of virile, dominant masculinity create overwhelming feelings of inadequacy and shame that is fundamentally tied to these men's very sense of self. In an incel forum blog post, one user wrote, "Having sex is part of being a man, and being a human being, Sometimes I feel like I'm not even human, because I rarely get laid" (Bates 2020, 56-57).

Most incel forums have been notably banned from most social media and blog sites for inciting violence and facilitating hateful speech, especially after the Isla Villa Killings. One of the last remaining public forums is Incels.is. Although such forums have FAQs and rules detailing their views–for example, Incels.is bans furries[6] because they consider them to be part of the LGBTQ+ community, which they do not want on their forum–not all incels hold the exact same beliefs or opinions. One post on Incels.is, titled "Last Refuge," User *Slut_Annihilator298* writes, "This is the only site I know in which its users and I are like-minded. At home is where I feel comfortable" (Incels.is 2024). The rules on these forums are strict. Such rules, authorizations and

[6] A subculture that first emerged in the 1980s, furries are people who have an interest in cartoon-like anthropomorphic animal characters, often dressing up in full suits of their unique characters. Although many furries are part of the LGBTQ+ community, being a furry does not automatically make one LGBTQ+, nor do any of their practices explicitly center around sexuality.

statuses attempt to vet out fake incels. Some incels consider those who have had *any* form of intimacy with women, such as holding hands, being asked out, or kissing, disqualifications for the incel title. These spaces give incels a place where their deepest laments and feelings of despair are validated, and they are amongst peers who are all on the same playing field. There is self-regulation amongst incels, rules about what discussions are allowed, formed around a status system that is not present in fanfiction communities. The need to organize in this power structure is just one of many examples of a patriarchal consciousness entering into online space and dictating how these community members are allowed to actively participate. Later, we will see how the adaptation of the oppressive structures that landed incels here in the first place ends up exacerbating the lack of mineness and at-ease selfhood.

It is not my intention to generalize the most radical opinions to all incels, as many incels do not end up commit mass acts of violence. Some incels do end up leaving the community behind after finding genuine success in their romantic and sexual endeavors (Incel 2019). Some who retain the title even go on to patriciate in good faith debates with others. Instead of focusing on the moral beliefs of incels, I will analyze how their shared experience of existing unsuccessfully in heterosexual culture binds them together, and apply Ortega's multiplicitous self to how they create a space in which their masculinity (or lack thereof) can feel at ease in the community they built for themselves.

In similar ways, incels rely on the engagement of their community for the upkeep of this particular part of their identity. It is *not* simply a synonym for virgin. The incel was not a term or identity (as we understand it now) that existed out in the world and just happened to come together, unlike the natural transition fans and fanfic authors naturally made onto the internet. Alana's blog was built on the premise of sharing experiences, ideas, and giving advice in a way that builds

camaraderie and solidarity. The incel does not exist on its own, and it only exists when it has others to recognize and reinforce its existence online.

Incels are able to reimagine their relationality to each other and to women through essentially fictionalizing reality to make sense of their existence in a way that validates the unease of their selfhood. In many instances, incels use the exact same statistics that many who have the exact opposite values and views use for their own arguments. For example, the statistic that men's suicide rates are higher than women's. On paper, this is true. Men do tend to have a higher rate of successful suicides than their female counterparts (CAMS-care 2019). Many incels would attribute this statistic to the male loneliness epidemic and the shift in social power. If less men were feeling worthless because of their unsuccessful dating lives, perhaps we would have less suicides.[7] The meaning that is gleaned from these real-life events and data ends up being vastly different because of the incel's communal involvement in their online space.

A former incel, Jack Peterson, reflected on the time he identified strongly with inceldom:

> I mean, it's exactly what you said so, it's the one place where, like, I think I described this to someone else recently, but it's the one way where you can kinda, you can climb the dominance hierarchy by being more and more of a loser. Like the more of a loser you are, the more people like you and the more people want to be friends with you, and so like, it's the only place where you cannot be ashamed of… of… you know, all the awful shit you've dealt with in your life. Where you can almost brag about the time that, that… you know, the girl came up to you and called you ugly or whatever. [...] So there's no other place that's like that where you can discuss those things.

[7] If you look at this data further, you will find that the most successful suicide attempts are those committed by firearm: 80% of those attempts result in death. Additionally, 60% of suicides by firearm are committed by men. 77% of those who die by suicide on their first attempt are men, more often because they tend to opt for the deadliest form of attempt. However, there are 3 female suicide attempts for every 1 male suicide attempt. Combining all these numbers, women are *attempting* suicide at much higher rates than men, but men are *successfully* committing suicide at a higher rate.

This affective comfort is the key to countering the intense feelings of shame–and by extension inhumanity–that incels feel. Yet in order to feel more comfort with his peers, the incel becomes "more and more of a loser." The hierarchy of incel-ness is not something that exists in RPF spaces. This competitive nature of inceldom mirrors the exact nature of heterosexual culture they criticize. If the incel space is a recreation of the structures that piqued their sense of mineness towards finding an online space, how successful are they are constituting a multiplicitous self that feels some form of ease both online and offline?

Rethinking Relationality: Forcing A Way In, Falling Flat

Incels have a tie to heteronormativity that runs deep between each other and within themselves. One of the many requirements on a list of gender specific demands to be a "real man" is to be able to sleep with women. The manliest men, the Chads, are the pinnacle of manhood every incel wishes to achieve. Yet no matter how hard they try to alter their appearance, personality, or add to their interpersonal skills toolkit, they exist at the bottom of the food chain. The heteronormative idea of a strongman does not make room for men who fail to live up to its standard, essentially relegating every man who cannot surpass the milestones to the edge. The first feeling of social inadequacy through the pressures of sex is Ortega's notion mineness at play. Because this gendered identity is an integral part of the incel's identity, his masculinity being not at ease in the world is a rupture to his sense of self.

How are the incels to remedy their selves' feelings of not fitting into the dominant masculine narrative? Interestingly, instead of attempting to dismantle the social structures that set them up for failure, incels more staunchly abide by its rules and attempt to force their way into the narrative, even if it means they do not come out victorious.

I understand that for many, reading about white, misogynistic men through a Latina feminist philosophers' theory somewhat validating the stigmatization of their experience is jarring, to say the least. My response to this is two-fold. Firstly, I understand completely. My goal here is not to provide an overly sympathetic reading to incels as a whole; that would be a disservice to the surplus of violence that has been born out of, motivated, and committed by the ideology that binds this groups together. As much as many posit that most incels are not violent, raging misogynists, it is undeniable that the community lays the groundwork for such inclinations. Secondly, it is key that we hold space for some ambiguity in this interpretation. If we can note how incels take the same tools of mineness and selfhood that Ortega and fanfiction authors use to find a sense of ease in the world, we can better understand which aspects make the pursuit of resistant multiplicitous self is successful.

Incels struggle to fully embrace a multiplicitous self. Ortega emphasizes the multiplicitous self's ability to move between worlds, as it gives one the ability to resist against oppression and domination, something the incel claims to be suffering at the hands of. The political implications of this ability are not competitive or imperialistic. When the self is able to openly travel between worlds, in this case online and offline life, it has "an openness to being a fool, being surprised, not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred, and not being afraid of ambiguity" (Ortega 2016, 119). Through this definition, the multiplicity of the incel's selfhood falls flat on its face on every account.

Similar to the way fanfiction authors create their own vernacular, incels create their own language to make their online space even more tight knit. Incels have a set of vocabulary that is extremely specific to their identity and understanding of the world, enough to almost constitute an entirely new language. This further solidifies the online space as an exclusive culture that does not

translate into real life. Amongst their vocabulary are terms that fall under the umbrella of "knowledge pills" (Anti-Defamation League 2019). These "pills" are a reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where the main character Neo is offered a choice of taking one red pill and one blue pill. If Neo takes the blue pill, he will wake up and all his revelations about the truth of the world will disappear in a dream and he will return to his life as it was before. If Neo takes the red pill, he will enter into the real world he had just uncovered, be ripped out of the purgatory matrix and forced to live the rest of his life in a dystopic physical reality rather than the simulation in which he once was. The red pill offers a rupturing truth, and the blue pill offers a blissful ignorance. Incels adopted this metaphor, keeping the concepts similar. The red pill in inceldom is simply the first step into shifting one's understanding of the world, especially its social structures. A redpilled incel has realized the fundamental 80/20 rule, where 80% of women only desire the top 20% of men. The "top" 20% being the most attractive, richest, and tallest men in the dating pool. When this belief is realized and then fully internalized, it suddenly makes sense that feminism has caused a gross shift in social power. Feminism, in this case, simply being women's right to choose who they sleep with (Bates 2020, Anti-Defamation League 2019). Taking the red pill is the opposite of Ortega's definition of a self that can travel between worlds. Claiming that there is a singular truth about the world, waiting to be revealed by peeling back a thin veil of feminist propaganda reassures the self that he is *no longer* a fool, unable to be surprised at any of his or anyone else's shortcomings as he holds universal competence. This view practically erases any possibility of there being multiple worlds to travel between in the first place, therefore making the incel's self not multiplicitous.

Another knowledge pill the incels have to offer is the black pill. Taken after the red pill, the black pill concludes that the system and social hierarchies working against their access to sex are too strong, too far gone to change. Being blackpilled is a form of nihilism, a belief that the sexual marketplace is predetermined and wholly governed by a genetic lottery. This pill acts counter to Ortega's notion of the resistant multiplicitous self being "not self-important" and "not taking norms as sacred" (Ortega 2016, 119). This hopelessness centers the idea of self-improvement in the face of normative persecutions, essentially making the rules of sexual culture "sacred." One is either attractive or not attractive; there is no way out, and at the end of the day, those who are deemed unattractive are seemingly left with nothing but themselves.

The resentment and rage created from being redpilled fosters what Michael Kimmel calls aggrieved entitlement. This culturally constructed entitlement, particularly associated with the masculine, is the feeling that one (usually an individual in a group, creating a "we") deserves something that has been previously taken away from them by those undeserving of those privileges. In this case, the incel–who is a man–feels angry that he does not have the same privilege of access to sex that other men have. The want to keep male entitlement instilled in society but democratize it to be equally available to all men. Even with such anger-driven hope, the incel does not actually find a new sense of selfhood in the variety of knowledge pills he chooses to take. Instead, he reinforced a self that is in line with a world that seemingly does not choose him.

When incels try to break into the social norms that relegated them to involuntary celibacy in the first place, they are not holding space for phenomenological possibility for others. Initially, the incel did not feel at home offline. The social pressures of love and sex overwhelmed his sense of manhood and identity, leading him to seek out a place where he could feel at ease. Once he found that place and had his laments affirmed, he did not re-enter the world with an additional

perspective. He only came back with a singular, fully changed perspective with the conquest of gaming the system that destroyed him in the first place. Incels hate normative sexuality, yet almost like Stockholm Syndrome, return to play by its rules of masculinity and hope for a different outcome.

Conclusion

Ambiguity and Critical Responsibility

Regardless of what the ethics of joining each of these communities are, both are a reclamation of self in a deeply heteronormative world. This uniquely accessible online space that does not have an equal counterpart in the real world is able to smooth over the ruptures of experience in a heteronormative world by offering their members what Ortega calls hometactics, the skill born of the experience of the self being at ease at least *somewhere*. This new world–the online world–allows them a space where they can be more at ease with their gendered experiences, and most importantly gives them the ability to be at ease in a world they are *not* at home in. The aspects of the multiplicitous self need only one place to feel at ease; in the places they are not at ease in, they are able to recognize the structures that dictate exactly why this aspect of the self cannot be at ease. In both cases, the multiplicitous self rubs up against the rough fabric of a heteronormative society.

One of these groups wants to build connections with its members and resist the heteronormative messaging around sex and relationships to feel a personal sense of relief, whereas the other seeks that relief by waging war against those who seem to benefit from the power that disadvantages them. RPF authors have access to their own sense of cultural production, while incels do not. As stated before, one could argue that the way RPF authors go about creating a space for a multiplicitous self is in some way, indecorous, since it may take away some of the agency the celebrity has over their image. Yet at the same time, RPF authors are creating a space where they find representations of LGBTQ individuals and non-normative sex. Their exploration of sex and gender allows them to question the world rather than question themselves, even offering avenues to push against the values and norms that made them feel ill at ease in the first place. They

reassure their selfhood with each other and are able to lay claim to a space in our shared lifeworld. Even though there is much to criticize about the community's practices, it is absolutely incomparable to the levels of violence and destructive impulse it plants in its members. Incels find representation of their experiences withing their own community but are unable to reconcile their own aggrieved entitlement. They change, too, but their agency in their lifeworld is stripped and they are unable to lay claim in reality in the same way. Their initial alienation never really leaves them.

Despite the fact that the incels affirm their experiences withing heteropatriarchy and want access to the power within it, they struggle to find the playful affective feeling of being at home that fanfiction communities achieve. Both of these communities exist in the same offline world, are given the same means of connection online, yet result in two vastly different kinds of community. At their core, they are attempting to achieve the same thing; their respective mineness detects that their selfhood does not fit into the gender roles the heterosexual patriarchy has them relegated to, leading them to seek out a space that not only allows them to fill an existential need but simultaneously enables them to make more sense of the experiences that led them online in the first place. RPF authors and incels created an online space as a hometactic to find a place to be at ease, yet the thin line between their online and offline ideas permanently alters the way they are able to exist in the world. Their multiplicitous selves are simultaneously in the online world and the offline world, constituting a new singular whole rather than two separate, untouching selves.

As much as it is important for marginalized communities to have access to these online spaces to create new forms of resistance, we on the other hand open the door to an affirmation of selfhood that can also reinforce the structures of oppression. These spaces should offer resiliency to a self that is not at ease in the world rather than a fundamental restructuring. The struggle to

quell an uneasy sense of mineness is sought out by everyone; even those who created and benefit from the very structures that create ruptures in their lived sense of self. The way that we go about calibrating our sense of mineness under the extraordinary pressures, and the places we gravitate towards to explore our selfhood must be carried out critically. It is important to recognize the self as multiplicitous, pay attention what marginalizes pieces of it, and interrogate the places, people, communities and structures that make us feel at home.

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