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ARTICLE

What Do Incels Want? Explaining Incel Violence Using Beauvoirian Otherness

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Abstract

In recent years, online "involuntary celibate" or "incel" communities have been linked to various deadly attacks targeting women. Why do these men react to romantic rejection with not just disappointment, but murderous rage? Feminists have claimed this is because incels desire women as objects or, alternatively, because they feel entitled to women's attention. I argue that both of these explanatory models are insufficient. They fail to account for incels' distinctive ambivalence toward women—for their oscillation between obsessive desire and violent hatred. I propose instead that what incels want is a Beauvoirian "Other." For Beauvoir, when men conceive of women as Others, they represent them as simultaneously human subjects and embodiments of the natural world. Women function then as sui generis entities through which men can experience themselves as praiseworthy heroes, regardless of the quality of their actions. I go on to give an illustrative analysis of Elliot Rodger's autobiographical manifesto, "My Twisted World." I show how this Beauvoirian model sheds light on Rodger's racist and classist attitudes and gives us a better understanding of his ambivalence toward women. It therefore constitutes a powerful and overlooked theoretical alternative to accounts centered on objectification and entitlement.

In recent years, incel violence has moved from obscure corners of the internet into mainstream news. The label—short for "involuntary celibate"—is associated mainly with online communities of men who take themselves to be systematically romantically and sexually rejected by women.[1] They seem to be mostly young, North American and European, middle- or upper-class, and living with their parents. And although over half identify as white, substantial numbers identify with other ethnic backgrounds (Incels.co 2020).[2] In 2014, twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger became the poster child for the phenomenon, shooting down seven people and killing himself in a "Day of Retribution" for his loneliness. Since then, other attackers have cited similar motives. In 2015, Chris Harper-Mercer killed nine in Oregon, claiming, "here I am 26, with no friends, no job, no girlfriend, a virgin." In 2018, Alek Minassian drove a van through a crowded street in Toronto, killing ten, as part of what he called "the incel rebellion." Scott

Beierle, who was active in online incel communities, opened fire at a yoga studio. Nikolas Cruz killed seventeen in a high school in Parkland, on Valentine's Day, and said that "Elliot Rodger will not be forgotten" (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 571). In 2020, a seventeen-year-old in Toronto went on a fatal stabbing rampage in an erotic massage parlor motivated by "incel ideology" (Brean 2020; Stelloh 2020).[3] From "pathetic, sad, ridiculous, [and] laughable," incels have become routinely discussed as a serious threat to public safety, and as domestic terrorists (Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021, 1685; see also Marcotte 2018; Bates 2020, 11; Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 568).

But what has really captured the public imagination is the seemingly "incongruous mindset" of these violent attackers. Their disarming insistence on their own unattractiveness and inferiority is a far cry from strong-man machismo (Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021, 1667, 1676). But their misogynistic vitriol can rival the most hateful rhetoric ever produced about women. They claim to be losers in a biologically determined hierarchy structuring society, and yet they blame attractive women for actively bringing about this immutable situation (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 567–68, 577; Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021, 1675). To explain this paradoxical set of attitudes, mainstream commentators have often invoked individual factors, such as mental illness. However, feminists have pushed back and argued that incel violence is a *systemic* and *gendered* phenomenon, and that these attackers are motivated by patriarchal attitudes shared by the broader culture. They have offered two explanations along those lines. One depicts incel attacks as a byproduct of the *objectification* of women, as failures to see them as full human beings. Another highlights a sense of *entitlement* to sex and love on the part of these men, who then perceive feminine rejection as insubordination. On both these views, the catalyst for the rise of "inceldom" is the progress toward gender equality achieved by the feminist movement.

In this article, I will take on board this idea that incels are not just troubled individuals. They crystallize gender dynamics present in their wider social environment. However, I will argue that both models presented by feminists are explanatorily insufficient. They fail to account for incels' ambivalence toward women—the "incongruous mindset" that makes their violence distinctive. Incels are obsessed with hyperfeminine women, whom they both desire and decry. To shed light on this oscillation, I will offer a different account, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's notion of woman as "Other." According to Beauvoir, when men view women as Others, they represent them as sui generis entities: at once human subjects and embodiments of the natural world. As Others, women function as unique entities through which men can shore up a vain sense of themselves as pure agency in the world—as what Beauvoir calls "sovereign subjects." Incels' incoherent projection of their hopes and fears onto a feminine "Other" is what takes them from obsessive eroticization to lethal hatred.

I will first show that incel ambivalence toward women is insufficiently illuminated by current feminist accounts. It is neither just a product of a failure to recognize women as humans, nor of a disappointed sense of entitlement. I will then introduce the Beauvoirian model of woman as "Other" by reconstructing a major strand of argument in volume I of *The Second Sex*. I will suggest that this model accommodates the core insights of contemporary feminist views but remains distinct from them. I will then show that Beauvoir's framework gives us a better feminist explanation of incel violence by using it to analyze Rodger's infamous manifesto, "My Twisted World." I take this focus to be warranted by the iconic status[4] of the document and by the fact that it provides a 137-page-long window into Rodger's attitude toward life, women, and the world. In it, we see Rodger's attempt to assert himself as a "living god" through a particular kind of

feminine "Other": the rich, white, blonde, sorority girl of southern California. Growing up mixed-race and financially insecure, his reactive embrace of white-supremacist and classist ideals functions to shore up his sense of sovereignty and deeply shapes his view of women. This aspiration to sovereign subjectivity in turn sheds light on how Rodger goes from obsessively desiring women to declaring war on them. I conclude that this alternative feminist approach highlights the importance of changing not just incels' attitudes toward women, but also their attitudes toward themselves and toward the world.

I. The Problem of Incel Ambivalence

One of the most baffling things about incels is the way they direct violent hatred toward those they obsessively desire. Beautiful women are so important to them that their rejection is a life-ending tragedy. But these "goddesses" are also "evil, slutty bitches" and disgusting "whores" (Rodger 2014, 76; Tolentino 2018). Incels are fixated on sexualized and sexually available women, "hot model-like girls" with "tantalizing" bodies, but they revile "sluts" who "throw themselves at" men (Rodger 2014, 110). They seem to both put women on pedestals of desirability and throw them down to the depths of repulsion. Rodger famously articulated this ambivalence: "I will attack the very girls who represent *everything I hate* in the female gender: the *hottest* sorority of UCSB [University of California, Santa Barbara's Alpha Phi]" (132, my emphasis).

How do we explain this apparent contradiction? One initially appealing strategy is to deem it an acute case of sour grapes. Their ambivalence is only superficial: incels' disdain and anger are a way of coping with loneliness. However, feminists have pointed out that this is an inadequate explanation. Many other women and men face systematic and prolonged sexual rejection and struggle with a lack of intimacy (Tolentino 2018). The contingents of female incels, or "femcels," online are a vivid testament to this (Chester 2018; Kohn 2020).[5] But they do not all respond by declaring war on the people they desire or going on killing sprees. Feminists have maintained that this swing from love to hate cannot be explained by appealing to an individual, gender-neutral psychology (Manne 2018, 37–41; Bates 2020, 3, 50). Incels turn from attraction to violence because, like other perpetrators of misogynistic violence, they see women in a particular way.[6] What is this representation that fuels incel desire and incel hate? Two answers have emerged. The first is that incels desire women as objects without the capacity for choice. Call this *objectification*. The second is that incels see women as loyal servants who owe them sex and love. Call this *entitlement*.[7]

The core idea of objectification is that incels are driven by a patriarchal conviction that "women are decorative sexual objects, and that male worth is measured by how good-looking a woman they acquire" (Tolentino 2018). They dehumanize women because they regard them as lacking characteristically human capacities, like the capacity to choose, to have a subjective point of view, or to have complex emotions (Radford 1992, 5; Bates 2020, 29; Kohn 2020; Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021, 1675).[8] In this way, incels expect women to be like dolls, ready to be picked off the shelf. And social norms, economic dependency, and other constraints meant that, until relatively recently, men *could* just pick women off the shelf. However, over the last century, women have gained substantial "economic and cultural power." These changes

> have created a situation in which many men who hate women do not have the access to women's bodies that they would have had in an earlier era. . . . Most American women now grow up understanding that they can and should choose who they want to have sex with. (Tolentino 2018)

Women have independent incomes, their social status is not determined by marriage, and, in the era of "dating apps," they too can swipe right or left. These supposed objects are now choosing, expressing feelings and preferences. Incels are then men who desire women qua "inconveniently sentient bodies" and find themselves taken aback by a changing reality (Tolentino 2018).

However, as Kate Manne has pointed out, the attitudes and actions of someone like Rodger "not only presuppose but seem to *hinge* on women's presumed humanity" (Manne 2018, 150; 2020, 25). The point here is twofold. First, objectification misses what is attractive about women for incels. It is true that Rodger talks of women as things that "should be his" (Rodger 2014, 69, 100). But what he wants are not just "inconveniently sentient bodies." He wants the attention of women as choosing agents, capable of genuine "subjectivity, preferences, and . . . deep emotional attachments" (Manne 2018, 150; 2020, 25). He wants women to notice him, to admire him, "to check him out" (Rodger 2014, 98, 122).[9] And a mere simulation of this attention will not do. For example, when his parents hire a "pretty looking blonde" as his counselor, Rodger says:

> even though it was all fake, I really enjoyed it. . . . But then, I thought about how unfair it was that I could only get a fake little taste of such an experience. . . . It has the same effect as hiring a prostitute, I imagine. It temporarily feels good for the moment, but afterward it makes one feel like a pathetic loser. . . . (120)

What Rodger wants then is the genuinely free exercise of distinctively human capacities in selective and directed ways. A hired simulation provides fleeting comfort, but quickly proves profoundly unsatisfying.[10]

Second, objectification does not make sense of why incels' complaints against women are so distinctively second-personal, centered around notions of "fault" and "blame." In a video uploaded before his attack, Rodger said "I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it. It's an injustice, a crime. . ." (quoted in Manne 2020, 15).[11] If women are just mindless objects, why blame them and punish them? Rodger's moralistic tone and his charges of personal wrongdoing presuppose that women are human. They must have "agency, autonomy, and the capacity to be *addressed* by him" (Manne 2018, 150; 2020, 26). Therefore, objectification misses both key aspects of incel desire and incel hatred.

This brings us to entitlement. On this hypothesis, incels desire women not as objects, but as subordinated humans, bound by patriarchal social norms to offer them sex and love. The incel is the kind of "sexless man . . . who is convinced he is owed sex, and is enraged by the women who deprive him of it" (Srinivasan 2018). Much like a feudal lord sees his servants as personally owing him their loyalty, incels represent women as owing them a similar hierarchical allegiance. Put differently, what Rodger "wanted and felt entitled to" was a "human giver": "a woman who is held to owe many if not most of her distinctively human capacities to a suitable boy or man, ideally, and his children" (Manne 2018, 301; 2020, 11). Incels' hatred is then a reaction not to unrequited love, but to thwarted hierarchical expectations. When women fail to behave as adoring subordinates, they are punished for this disobedience (Srinivasan 2018; Bates 2020, 17; Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021, 1684).

> What he [Elliot Rodger] shared with garden-variety rapists and domestic abusers . . . was a sense that he was entitled to women's bodies and attention, and a

willingness to use violence to punish those, both women and men, who resisted this belief. (Marcotte 2018)

What enrages incels, then, is not that women today assert themselves as humans, but rather as *equal* humans. On this reading, incel violence is a way to keep women in line and is a prime example of the reactionary phenomena theorized by feminists as "backlash" (Faludi 1991; Caputi and Russell 1992, 17–18), "aggrieved entitlement" (Kimmel 2013), and "misogyny" (Manne 2018; 2020).

Although there is something deeply intuitive about this hypothesis, it has two crucial weaknesses. First, entitlement leaves unexplained the exterminatory character of incel violence. Incel attackers do not just want to put women back in their proper place. They want to rid the world of women altogether. This seems too extreme to be just punishment. Consider the delusional fantasy that Rodger sketches at the end of his manifesto: a "fair and pure world" where women have been rounded up and starved to death in concentration camps, sex is outlawed, and a few women are "kept and bred" in secret labs. There is no "creature more evil and depraved than the human female"; she is a "plague" that must be eradicated (Rodger 2014, 136). If the problem is an insolent servant, why fantasize about a world purged of all servants and the great work they do? If incel rage is nothing but a reaction to a violation of hierarchical expectations, we are forced to write off this language as inconsequential rhetoric. However, the lethal attacks that these words have spawned make this move unappealing.

Second, the claim that incels are punishing the assertion of women's equality seems untrue. Incel attacks are notoriously *not* directed at feminists or women perceived as bucking patriarchal norms.[12] On the contrary, they target "hot" sororities, yoga studios, and erotic massage parlors. These are not just places where you are likely to find women (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 570); they are places associated with the very hyperfemininity that incels are obsessed with and that they encapsulate in the "Stacy" meme.[13] The Stacy is described as "naturally curvy" with a body that can "give men instant erections," "sexy, majestic long blonde hair," "makeup on point," and as letting "Chad" (her alpha-male counterpart) "dominate her" and abuse her. She is also unintelligent, vain, fake, sociopathic, and "never works a day in her life." For most men, she is out of reach and dangerous, exploiting them for money and favors (Jennings 2018; Maxwell et al. 2020; Incels Wiki 2020; 2021). At the end of the day, the Stacy organizes her life around pleasing the most patriarchal men. And yet she is reviled. When Rodger declares war on women, it is the Stacys he is talking about: those "hot, beautiful, blonde" women throwing themselves at domineering men (Rodger 2014, 132). Minassian made this clearer: "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys!" (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 570). It seems then that, if something is being punished by incels, it is not feminist-inspired insurrection, but high compliance with patriarchal norms.

Entitlement theorists may reply that punishment does not always target those who break the rules. Sometimes it is displaced onto women who are particularly vulnerable, regardless of their "good behavior" (Manne 2020, 52). Could the Stacys be an easy target for men frustrated by feminists? This seems unlikely. They are more accepting of masculine authority, but only from Chads, who can abuse them at will. Stacys inhabit different social circles and even different physical spaces. These are women whom incels see from afar, and who are often aggressively guarded by their male partners. Moreover, the manipulative, self-interested Stacy feels no sense of obligation toward "lower" men.

Targeting them is not easy. Rodger himself headed for the "hottest sorority" on campus but, in the end, did not manage to kill a single woman inside (Manne 2018, 35–36).

The problem of ambivalence remains. Why do incels hate what they love and love what they hate? Feminists are right to criticize individualistic, gender-neutral, sour-grapes narratives. However, the representations they have claimed drive incels—women as nonhuman objects or women as "human givers"—cannot account for the ambivalence that characterizes their attacks. In what follows, I propose an alternative feminist explanation that employs a different model of patriarchal representation.

II. Beauvoir on Woman as "Other"

The extreme ambivalence that incels exhibit toward women may seem odd, but it is far from idiosyncratic. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir points to it as central to patriarchal social relations and to the culture that sustains them.

> Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena, woman is both Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, source of life, power of darkness . . . woman embodies no set concept; through her the passage from hope to failure, hatred to love, good to bad, bad to good takes place ceaselessly. However she is considered, it is this ambivalence that is the most striking. (Beauvoir 2011, 162–63)

Men have represented women in a myriad of ever-changing, contradictory ways. According to Beauvoir, this oscillation between love and hate is the only constant content of patriarchal representations over time (Direk 2011, 68).[14] One of the things she does in *The Second Sex* is then explain how these contradictory attitudes hang together.

According to Beauvoir, the key to understanding the way men see women is to first understand the way men see themselves. As human beings, all of us experience our existence as both *active* agents in the world and *fixed* beings under the eyes of others—as both *subjects* and *objects*. This gives rise to "a tension between our drive to transcend ourselves and our drive to cement our identities in ways that we and others will find ceaselessly praiseworthy" (Bauer 2015, 47). We want to do things in the world, but we worry about the uncertain judgment of others. We would like to be successful. But success requires taking the risk of doing things. Many men try to resolve this "phenomenological dilemma" by embracing a certain cultural myth of masculinity that dissolves this problematic human ambiguity.[15] They become, in their own eyes, what Beauvoir calls "sovereign subjects": pure active agents in the world (Bergoffen 2002, 412; Beauvoir 2011, 86, 159; Kruks 2012, 16–17, 69; Mann 2014, 42–45).[16]

Sovereign subjects refuse to think of themselves as objects. They see themselves as *only* subjects in the world, unconstrained by facts about who they are, what they have done, or what their bodies are like. At the same time, sovereign subjects attempt to make their capacity to transcend themselves a "cemented" characteristic of who they are. This means they experience their capacity for action as if it were a *fixed* characteristic of who they are, like a deep and stable essence.[17] These two things—being just a subject and being a fixed subjectivity—are deeply connected. To think of yourself as just an actor, and never as someone who has done certain actions, is to experience your capacity for acting in a very distorted way, as if it were a static feature of who you are. In adopting this attitude, sovereign subjects are trying to be successful without taking any risk. Failure is something we experience only as objects of evaluation. If you are never an object, you can never fail. And, because their only fixed feature is

subjectivity itself, sovereign subjects can think themselves permanently successful. They are, by nature, great actors, who can never be disgraced by their actions.

The problem is that this dreamed "sovereignty" is impossible. To say we experience ourselves as subjects is to say we experience ourselves as an active process of self-fashioning, of *becoming* ourselves. The idea of a fixed subjectivity is therefore profoundly incoherent: "to "be" something, once and for all [for example, a sovereign subject] is precisely not to be a subject" (Bauer 2015, 48). Put differently, to experience oneself as a praiseworthy actor, one must also be open to the risk of evaluation as an object. There is no heroism without the possibility of failure. But what these men seek is to be heroes, regardless of the quality of their actions. They are engaged in a form of "bad faith": an ethically reprehensible denial of their ambiguous freedom, of its risks and its responsibilities (Beauvoir 2011, 208, 263, 27; Bauer 2015, 48). They are thereby *alienating* themselves from their own agency and identifying with a flattering fiction.[18]

Men who see themselves as sovereign subjects need to have their paradoxical self-conception shored up constantly. They need an impossible confirmation that they are only activity, once and for all, to drown out their constant experience of human ambiguity. Beauvoir points to two kinds of entities to which these men can turn. The first is "Nature": the natural world of impersonal forces, of life and death, of geological and organic processes. Sovereign man can experience himself as being only activity in some ways of relating to Nature: as its master, reaping its fruits, contemplating its landscapes, conquering its mountains. However, according to Beauvoir, this conquest will always be unsatisfying for an aspiring sovereign. Either he is not successful, and Nature remains a foreign obstacle; or, if Nature is successfully conquered, it is destroyed or assimilated: "in both cases, he [that is, the sovereign subject] remains alone; he is alone when touching a stone, alone when digesting a piece of fruit" (Beauvoir 2011, 159). There is no one there to confirm that he has indeed shaped and surpassed the forces of the world. He can be only a subject, but he cannot experience his subjectivity as something he *is* in the fixed, object-like sense.

After all, it is only by being captured in the eyes of other humans that we find confirmation of what we are.[19] Unlike Nature, other humans are capable of judging us, praising us, and of making us experience ourselves as *fixed* beings of some kind or other. It is this experience that the sovereign subject needs to accomplish himself as a fixed subjectivity. But humans pose another problem. A judging peer can never confirm him as *only* an active subject. By the mere act of judging, the other makes the aspiring sovereign a constrained object of their gaze. To be confirmed as a subject by another human, we must also embrace the fact that we are objects in the world, in relation to them (Bauer 2001, 186). Sovereign subjects are incapable of this. They want to be praised but they cannot stand the risk of scrutiny. They will therefore try to eliminate this risk, by attempting to completely master others, like they did Nature. But, unlike natural objects, humans can always make a similar claim to mastery. For self-alienated men, interaction with others turns then into a ceaseless conflict (Beauvoir 2011, 159).[20]

Sovereign subjects are caught in a bind. They can reign over Nature, but this will do little to shore up their precarious sense of themselves. Among their peers, they can find confirmation of their subjectivity, but only by being objects of judgment. For a sovereign man, the natural world is too unlike him, and the human peer resembles him too much (160). He has then a "dream." He wishes he could experience himself as just a subject, in relation to another consciousness who would confirm him as such. "This embodied dream is, precisely, woman. . . . She pits neither the hostile silence of nature

nor the hard demand of a reciprocal recognition against him; by a unique privilege she is a consciousness, and yet it seems possible to possess her in the flesh" (160).

"Woman"—or, strictly speaking, this representation of women—is the perfect creature that *uniquely* enables men to accomplish themselves as sovereign subjects. This is the representation that Beauvoir terms woman as "Other."[21] Feminist readings of Beauvoir have often interpreted this term as referring to a representation of women as objects or "things" (LeMoncheck 1985, 31–32, 115; Langton 2009, 1–2, 316; Cahill 2010, 2–4; Garcia 2021, 125). However, the passage above tells a more complex story. In Beauvoir's technical sense, a feminine "Other" is an entity that is *both* another human consciousness and an embodiment of Nature.[22] She is like other humans in that she can judge and give man the confirmation that mountains and pieces of fruit cannot. But, unlike other men, she can be truly dominated because she embodies Nature.[23] In being Nature and a peer, the Other is neither. She is "a perfect intermediary" (Beauvoir 2011, 160), a sui generis invention, an "interesting amalgam" (Mussett 2006, 280). She is an impossible, paradoxical entity: "nature raised to the transparency of consciousness; she is a naturally submissive consciousness" (Beauvoir 2011, 161).

This myth of woman as Other provides sovereign subjects with a "marvelous hope": to escape the silence of Nature and the struggle with other men (217, 161). Unlike Nature, she offers him not just the experience of doing things, but of seeing himself as a doer in her eyes. Unlike other men, she is fully conquerable, meaning that he can relate to her as just a subject. Even when he is being judged by her, sovereign man is never a helpless object. He can always conquer her judgment, just like he can conquer mountains. Therefore, in her eyes, he can never fail. But this great power is purchased at a price. Woman is only Other if she is assimilated to Nature. And Nature can only be gloriously conquered because it is a dangerous obstacle. "Man seeks the Other in woman as Nature and as his peer. But Nature inspires *ambivalent* feelings in man. He exploits it, but it crushes him; he is born from and he dies in it; it is the source of his being and the kingdom he bends to his will" (163, my emphasis).

The promise of the Other ultimately depends on her embodiment of the risk and danger of impersonal and uncontrollable natural forces (Griffin 1981, 12–14). Man can accomplish himself as sovereign by shaping Nature, but he can also feel trapped or crushed by it in ways that make him an object. Man's ambivalent attitude toward Nature becomes then an ambivalent attitude toward woman as the embodiment of Nature. As Other, she becomes "the stuff of action and its obstacle, man's grasp on the world and its failure," and she acquires a permanent "double face" (Beauvoir 2011, 213, 163).[24] This produces an eroticism that is possessive but also profoundly *ambivalent*, marked by "hesitation between fear and desire, between the terror of being possessed by uncontrollable forces and the will to overcome them" (172). Man's desire for woman as Other is always then already a desire for an ambiguous projection of his deepest "hopes and fears" (162).[25]

One of Beauvoir's key insights is that, in chasing this impossible fantasy, men doom themselves to a bitter disenchantment (211, 184). Because "man seeks himself entirely in her and because she is All," woman as Other "is never exactly *this* that she should be; she is everlasting disappointment" (213). Just like his aspiration to be onlya subject once and for all, man's desire for woman as Other is impossible to fulfill. He wants the lush beauty of Nature, but not its destructive forces.[26] He wants a docile alterity, but not a full subjectivity facing him. He wants "to subdue her, as an untamed animal" (Vintges 2017, 139). He dreams of a real victory without risk, of a glorious conquest without possible failure, of being a subject without ever being an object. But these aspects cannot be

detached from each other. This is why Beauvoir claims that these self-alienated men are trapped in a disappointing "game" in their relationship with women (Beauvoir 2011, 201, 208). In this game, woman as Other must act aloof. The man must then "tame" her not into subjugation, but into a willing adoration.[27] However, if he wins the "game," she is "had"—her danger is neutralized, and so is her desirability. Submissive wives, annexed as property, quickly lose their erotic interest (204–5). Sovereign man needs to move on to yet another affair. But if the Other remains aloof, then this is not just a "game," but an actual refusal (208). Man's insecure sense of himself crumbles faced with this. The Other becomes then a natural obstacle, like a crushing rock. Her dangerous allure turns into an uncontrolled threat and she "becomes praying mantis or ogress" (262). Sooner or later, the Other inevitably reveals herself to be nothing but a "mirage" (272).

Woman as Other is then a patriarchal myth tailor-made to fulfill the needs of masculine bad faith. Men want to do things in the world, but they worry about the risk of failure. She gives them hope of evading this risk altogether by enabling them to embrace the cultural myth of masculinity as pure, unconstrained activity. Through the Other, men can distance themselves from their experience as objects of others' judgment. They can instead see themselves as essentially heroes, as fixed transcendent subjectivities. To fulfill this function, woman as Other must be simultaneously another subject and an embodiment of Nature: someone who can judge, and someone whose judgment can be completely conquered. But this representation is paradoxical, unstable, and always bound to collapse. To experience oneself as a hero, one must be open to the risk of evaluation. Men cannot help but be aware of this. Hence their ambivalence toward Nature and toward women. This "is why woman has a double and deceptive image: she is everything he craves and everything he does not attain" (213).

What Beauvoir gives us is a model for thinking about patriarchal representations of women that incorporates what is intuitive about objectification and entitlement, but remains distinct from them.[28] As Other, woman is both an object and a vassal, in a certain sense. But in being both, she is neither. She is a freedom, with a subjective perspective. But, unlike other men, she is not another competing rival. She is an object to be possessed, but not a mere tool to be used for one's purposes. She is a natural object filled with ambiguous powers: like the ocean that is calm and submissive but can engulf and kill you; or the ripe and fragrant fruit that can contain disease and putrefaction. For Beauvoir, "nymphs, dryads, mermaids" and other animistic goddesses are paradigmatic Others (174–76). They are impossible feminine figures that embody the natural world, with its promise and peril, while retaining a distinct human consciousness.

III. Elliot Rodger or the Dream of Sovereignty

I have argued that existing feminist proposals to explain incel violence fail to adequately do so. Objectification misses the fact that incels presuppose women's agency in important ways. Entitlement cannot account for why women excelling by patriarchal standards are singled out for extermination. I want to suggest that we can get a better understanding of incel attacks by thinking of these as self-alienated men pursuing the myth of woman as Other.

Consider Elliot Rodger's infamous manifesto, "My Twisted World." One of the central themes of this autobiographical narrative is a search for a sense of accomplishment as a great actor: "as I've always believed, *I am destined for great things*" (Rodger 2014, 79, 81). Rodger narrates his life as a heroic tale, driven by a clear sense of not just

superiority, but extraordinary agentic power. In Beauvoirian terms, Rodger seems to think of himself as a sovereign subject. He constantly talks about himself as "a creator" and a "living god" (109–10, 113–14, 117–18, 131, 133, 135). These are tropes Beauvoir associates explicitly with this masculine attitude. A sovereign subject, attempting to identify exclusively with his transcendence, will often repudiate his "carnal condition" and consider himself a "fallen god" (Beauvoir 2011, 164).[29]

Recounting his early childhood, Rodger revels in the security and stability of this sovereign self-image. He describes climbing a "Big Rock" when he was eight years old, having "already conquered every other rock in the area." It was a "challenge," he was "nervous," but it was "exhilarating," and we find him marveling at the "sense of accomplishment" he felt. The "dread" of looking down only added to his pride (Rodger 2014, 12–13). We get similar descriptions of flying a kite, or "conquering" far-away lands traveling with his family (3, 14). Encountering Nature and mastering it gives the young Elliot a satisfying feeling of control and activity. However, what he really craves is not just the experience of making it to the top, but the acknowledgment by others—including the readers of his manifesto—of that feat. Childhood is an idyllic time because he can easily gather that acknowledgment. "As kids, proving our self-worth and gaining validation among our peers was achieved in a fair manner, by how good we were at games we played, or how big our collection of Pokemon cards were" (13). Life is good because others always assure him of his sovereignty.

Problems arise when Rodger starts noticing he may not always be seen as the best. At nine years old, he realizes he is short for his age and that tall boys get more "respect." These are his "first feelings of inferiority" (15). Soon he discovers that school hierarchies are not based on card collections, but on wealth, race, height, and "coolness" (17). Rodger finds himself judged by others in ways he cannot control and that threaten to make him a "loser" (31). His reaction is then to double down. To maintain his godlike view of himself, he adamantly refuses to be an *object* of appraisal. He tries to turn all facts about who he is into new games that he is determined to win. This is when he becomes obsessed with social status and competition—something common to many incels (Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021, 1676). "Life is a competition and a struggle, and I was slowly starting to realize it" (Rodger 2014, 17). He takes up skateboarding, dyes his hair blonde, buys new clothes, and demands that his parents become rich overnight. But, try as he might, he cannot fully dictate what others think of him. He is still an object of their uncertain, and often negative, scrutiny.

Rodger's classism and racism are a central part of this attempt to reassert himself as sovereign. His family is not as well-off as their upper-class friends in the Los Angeles film industry. This is a source of shame for the young Elliot, who is mocked by other boys for "living in a 'poor' house" (30). And yet he maintains that "wealth is one of the most important defining factors of self-worth and superiority" (102). Since his parents cannot get rich, he tries instead to *experience* himself as rich. He insults others as "low-class" (55, 89–90), and revels in temporarily entering hyperaffluent circles. When his mother receives tickets to a private concert "held for extremely wealthy people," or his father gets invited to a "red carpet premiere," Rodger finds confirmation of his sense of himself as unconstrained, always able to control the facts. But this does not last: "I loved attending exclusive events; it made me feel special. . . . I tried to pretend as if I was part of a wealthy family. I should be. That was the life I was meant to live. *I WOULD BE!*" (102).

Race is another highly salient social category for Rodger. His father is white and British, and his mother is Malaysian of Chinese descent. His mixed-race background

makes him feel watched and judged by the racist eyes of his peers: "I am half White, half Asian, and this made me different from the normal fully-white kids that I was trying to fit in with" (17). To rectify this vulnerability, he employs the same strategies he applied to class. Rodger embraces a white-supremacist outlook, selectively identifies with his British ancestry, and lashes out at racialized men.[30] He contrasts himself with his Latino roommate: "I am a beautiful, magnificent gentleman and he is a lowclass, pig-faced thug" (90). He puts down a black acquaintance: "I am descended from British aristocracy. He is descended from slaves" (84). But, once again, his sense of control does not last. His stories about his own superiority fall apart when he sees "racially inferior" boys gathering admiration by skating or acting confidently (33, 84). Faced with societal prejudice, Rodger does not challenge it, but embraces it. Standing up against racism and classism would require some acceptance of his existence as an object, bound by some facts. Instead, Rodger asserts himself as essentially a transcendent subject, always able to control all things, including his position in these hierarchies.

In obsessing about rank and status, Rodger turns resolutely inwards. First, he locks himself into an isolating, irresolvable conflict with others. He needs confirmation of his sense of himself as a great actor, but the unpredictable judgment of others is unbearable to him. All social situations become a competition that he *must* win. Because he does not, he feels acutely jealous and envious of everyone (16). He leaves rooms crying in frustration, ends friendships, and spends more time alone. Second, Rodger stops doing things in the world. He dedicates himself to nothing, refuses to get a job, drops out of college. Because he sees life mainly as a competition that he cannot stand to lose, he flees risk altogether and ends up as a passive thing shut in his room. He even turns to paradoxically nonactive ways to try to accomplish himself, like self-help books, or playing the lottery to become a millionaire (78, 104). These are ways of trying to win *by magic*, of being acclaimed as a hero without heroic deeds. Needless to say, none of these schemes work. Rodger becomes living proof that to try to be a sovereign subject is precisely not to be a subject at all (Mussett 2006, 282; Bauer 2015, 48).

IV. "Hot Blonde" Others

Where do women fit into the story? Early in Rodger's childhood, girls are just ordinary friends (Rodger 2014, 5, 7). However, in elementary school, they become part of a "separate reality" (13). When they show up again, they are enigmatic bestowers of status: "getting girls" is integral to gaining the respect of other boys (11). But Rodger quickly learns that, more than just a trophy, a girl is someone who can *herself* make you feel like a winner. In middle school, he "was one hundred-times more satisfied from getting a hug from a pretty girl than getting a high five from a popular boy. It was a new experience that enraptured every fiber of [his] being" (28). Gaining "female validation" is uniquely satisfying (13). It is itself a conquest—like climbing a "Big Rock"—and a recognition of that conquest—like a "high five." This is a conception of woman as Other, as a natural thing to be conquered and, at the same time, a docile freedom that admiringly smiles back. She is an escape from hierarchical struggle, a promise of glorious rest and heroic victory once and for all. Navigating the world with a "beautiful girlfriend" becomes, then, Rodger's ultimate dream. "I pictured her in my mind all the time; her cascading blonde hair, her beautiful face, her sensual body . . . Everything. I imagined us walking hand in hand through the college, looking at the magnificent view of the mountains in the distance as the sun sets behind them. That would be heaven" (69, see also 75–76, 79, 85, 94).

Rodger's descriptions of the ideal girlfriend are always vague and brief. This is because, as an Other, she is a device to shore up his sense of himself. The only thing that matters is how she makes *him* feel. Given this, it is significant that the "cascading blonde hair" is her only distinctive characteristic. As Beauvoir herself noted, this fixation on styled blonde hair is a common cultural trope associating femininity with Nature in American culture.[31] To have this woman is then to also have the "mountains in the distance." But her hair is long and blonde for yet another reason. If the Other is to provide ultimate victory, she must provide Rodger with control over the gaze of others along lines of race and class. She must be a repository for *his* socially situated dreams of transcendence over the salient facts of *his* life. Because American blondeness strongly encodes whiteness, Rodger fixates on it: "white girls are the only girls I'm attracted to, especially the blondes" (Rodger 2014, 121; hooks 2015, x, 158–59; Hobson 2018, 7–10). The long blonde hair also evokes the stereotype linked to sororities like UCSB's Alpha Phi, where Rodger finds "the kind of girls I've always desired" (Rodger 2014, 132). This sorority femininity is culturally associated with being "thin, white, and cute," but also, importantly, with being conspicuously affluent (DeSantis 2007, 21–24, 115; Davis 2018, 7; Ispa-Landa and Oliver 2020, 908).[32] Rodger's Other is then an embodiment of Nature and a symbol of whiteness and wealth. To have this imagined sorority girl would be a complete experience of acknowledged mastery over Nature, race, class, and reality itself.

One could object that white femininity in America has been traditionally viewed as the *opposite* of Nature: as "pure" and "civilized," in contrast with "natural" and "primitive" black womanhood (DuBois and Dumenil 2019, 281–82). Given this, how can these hyperwhite women embody Nature and be Others? On Beauvoir's picture, the Other embodies *ambiguous* Nature. She, like Nature, can be pure or dirty, tamed or wild, beautiful or terrifying, to-be-transcended or already-transcended. She is "both physis and antiphysis; she personifies Society as well as Nature; through her the civilization of a period and its culture is summed up" (Beauvoir 2011, 200). Woman as Civilization is a negative form of woman as Nature but remains an Other. It is therefore plausible to read historical distinctions between white and black American women as distinctions between two sides of Nature. One side is beneficent and fully controlled and another is threatening and needs to be controlled: black women are "obstinate mules" and white women are "obedient dogs" (Collins 1986, S17–S18).[33] Note also that, within the colonial imaginary, these distinctions between white and black womanhood were far from stable. White women were sometimes seen as threatening "savages" (McClintock 1995, 54, 107). And black women were sometimes seen as beautiful and delicate "Black Venus[es]" (Sharpley-Whiting 1999; Hobson 2018, 17, 21). This instability is itself symptomatic of their Otherness and the ambivalent oscillation that remains at its core.

The idea that what Rodger is after is this blonde, Beauvoirian Other sheds light on his bizarre approach to romantic conquest. Like other incels, he is remarkably passive. He is not at bars hitting on women, he disdains "pick up" skills and paying for sex (Rodger 2014, 117, 120, 127; Nagle 2016). He does not even approach women. Instead, he sits alone on park benches and goes for walks, "in the desperate hope that I might possibly cross paths with some pretty girl who would be attracted to me" (Rodger 2014, 64). He does not want an object to be taken, nor a vassal to be at his beck and call. What he needs is something more complicated: an Other who can judge him and confirm his being. He wants to see a fixed image of himself as a great man in the eyes of this other consciousness. For that, it is important that *she* choose him, that he "feel her love" (85). Her spontaneous choice, her freely given admiration, is part of the acknowledgment he seeks.

But how could Rodger expect any woman to give him this kind of validation just by sitting around? At least as a child he understood that the admiration of others needed to be gained by showing off card collections. Now, women are supposed to be attracted to him for no reason. This is yet another symptom of their Otherness. As Rodger gets older and does less and less with his life, his need for admiration becomes harder to satisfy. This is precisely why he comes to have "an absolute need" of woman as Other. Only she can recognize him as a "god" now. "A man is judged by his fellow men by what he does, objectively and according to general standards." But a woman's regard is different, "it allows itself to be charmed" (Beauvoir 2011, 202–3, 200).[34] Woman as Other holds the unique promise of validation without achievement. She can praise him without turning him into an object of appraisal. In this sense, she is another form of magic, like the lottery.

However, invested with this power, woman as Other becomes both the be-all and *the end-all* of existence. If her regard can bestow ultimate triumph, it can also bestow ultimate failure. She cannot be a subject without the risk of negative judgment creeping back in. This leads Rodger to have an increasingly "intense fear of girls" (Rodger 2014, 42). Consider his description of passing a woman on a beach:

> she was like a goddess who came down from heaven. . . . *I was scared.* I was scared she might view me as nothing but an inferior insect who's [sic] presence ruins her atmosphere. Her beauty was intoxicating! And then, just as we passed each other, she *actually looked at me.* She looked at me and *smiled.* . . . I had never felt so euphoric in my life. *One smile.* One smile was all it took to brighten my day. The power that beautiful women have is unbelievable. (76)

The gaze of the Other is so powerful that Rodger's desire becomes ambivalent, involving an almost religious "fear of her judgment" (99). The smile from a goddess is a high accomplishment because it is freely given to those who are worthy. But if a smile leads to euphoria, a frown can lead to the depths of despair.[35] In Rodger's first example of women's "cruel" treatment, he accidentally bumps into a girl who curses and pushes him back. "It made me feel like an insignificant, unworthy little mouse . . . and I thought it was because *she viewed* me as a loser" (32). Feminine reactions become then unbelievably momentous. They are the doing and undoing of men like Rodger.

The reaction we see most often from these blonde, attractive women is indifference. They go about their lives, taking no notice of Rodger. However, because these are Others, their indifference is an intolerable rejection. Invested with all this importance, their lack of response makes Rodger's sense of himself as sovereign crumble. He has not been anointed by them as a living god, secretly destined for greatness. What is even worse, he sees their admiring smiles directed at "lower" men. This undercuts one of his key strategies to re-assert sovereignty: his effort to reposition himself in a white-supremacist hierarchy by contrasting himself with other men. This is why he cannot stand to see a blonde woman talking to "an ugly black boy," or "an inferior Mexican guy" (84, 87). And he is particularly enraged to see "white girls" pass him, "a beautiful Eurasian," for a "full-blooded Asian" (121).[36] If the choice of the feminine Other is a conferral of ultimate worth, then the "inferior" have become the elect. His world is turned upside down and his dreams of being confirmed as pure transcendence are destroyed.

When confronted with this disappointment, many people would rethink their attitude toward life. But Rodger is so unwilling to take on the risk of being a subject in

the world that he just keeps going down a spiral of self-alienation. Whenever he hits rock-bottom and starts doubting his god-like nature, he retreats into the temporary "sanctuary" of online computer games. There he can experience a clear acknowledged mastery over a virtual world and renew his sense of sovereignty (39, 74).[37] By the end of his manifesto, it seems too late to step back from this entrenched delusion. He is cut off from the world, with no friends, and no accomplishments. There is no alternative source of meaning to start rebuilding a sense of himself as something other than a fallen god. The Other and the magical victory she could bring are his only way out.

We can now see how Rodger arrives at his declaration of "war on women."[38] First, recall that, within the myth of woman as Other, fear and desire are always intertwined. In making the Other such a powerful figure by having an absolute need of her, Rodger also amplifies her threatening side. Second, recall that men can only confirm themselves as sovereigns through a feminine Other insofar as they can conquer her, thereby experiencing themselves as pure subjects in relation to her. But, for Rodger, there is no hope left of taming this "hot" blonde Other. She is now only an *amplified* and *uncontrollable* threat. She is no longer a radiant savior goddess, but only a destructive "praying mantis" (Beauvoir 2011, 262). Rodger's only way to control the uncontrollable, to triumph over this great threat, is to destroy her (Rodger 2014, 112). His extreme violence is his way of finally accomplishing himself as sovereign through woman: "on the Day of Retribution, I will truly be a powerful god" (135).[39] Rodger is then what Beauvoir calls a "false hero" who, "to convince himself he goes far and flies high, always looks back, at his feet; he despises, he accuses, he oppresses, he persecutes, he tortures, he massacres" (Beauvoir 2011, 228).

"Hot", blonde sorority girls are first in Rodger's firing line. If they were the be-all of life, now they are the end-all for precisely the same reasons. In this mode of extermination, they continue to be Others. They are still a choosing subjectivity—one that Rodger can resent in a distinctively second-personal tone. As "the main instigators of sex," "they control which men get it and which men don't" (Rodger 2014, 136). But, alongside this logic of agency and moralistic blame, there is also a logic of immutable and natural evil (89). Women are "flawed creatures," "wired" wrongly, and "the ultimate evil behind sexuality" (136). This is because they also embody ambiguous Nature. If before they were its promising, beautiful face, now they are its dark and threatening side.

Indeed, this association with the natural world explains why, at the end of "My Twisted World," the most desirable women become "vicious, stupid, cruel animals" (177). This characterization of the Other as an "avid and devouring beast" is precisely one of the tropes Beauvoir associates with masculine disappointment (Beauvoir 2011, 208). Rodger goes on to depict women as capable only of "animal-like thinking," "completely controlled by their primal, depraved emotions and impulses," attracted to "beast-like men," and "beasts themselves."[40] They should not be given any rights in a society that sets itself above Nature and that is "civilized." They "must be quarantined" in order to attain a "pure" world (Rodger 2014, 117, 136). Women as Others become then a troubling "object of disgust and reverence at the same time" (Direk 2011, 67).[41] They are a profoundly threatening, unruly, contagious Other: a plague that can be resented. Against such a threat, Rodger casts himself as a civilizing force, transcending Nature, heroically reclaiming mastery over the world. He becomes the "wronged, avenging hero," "fighting evil forces against the odds" that incel communities have come to idolize as a martyr (Bates 2020, 13).[42]

V. Unbecoming Sovereign

On this Beauvoirian reading, incel violence is not a reactionary form of backlash against feminism and the sexual revolution. It is the predictable implosion of a profound form of self-alienation. There could never be a woman that satisfied Rodger because his desires are unsatisfiable. What he wants is not a woman, a relationship, or a sexual encounter. What he wants *from* women is a way of being acclaimed and adored, while also escaping the perils of being judged by others. That is something no real person can provide. Only "Woman," as a paradoxical myth, can give him this hope. However,

> such a dialectic turns the erotic object into female black magic, turns the female servant into a traitor, Cinderella into a witch, and changes all women into the enemy: here is the ransom man pays for having posited himself in bad faith as the sole essential. (Beauvoir 2011, 208)

In desiring women as chimerical Others, Rodger eventually turns them into his most haunting "enemies" (Rodger 2014, 125–26). This is the price he pays for his vanity. In seeing himself as sovereign, he becomes engaged in the doomed pursuit of a mirage.

This Beauvoirian account has two major advantages. First, it gives us a more complete analysis of incel violence by filling in the gaps left by other feminist explanations. Unlike objectification, it explains why incels are attracted to women as choosing subjectivities, and why they seek to punish them. For Rodger, it is important that women freely choose him to confirm he is special. When hope of this confirmation vanishes, this freedom licenses ascriptions of blame. Unlike entitlement, the Beauvoirian model can tell us why incel attacks target women excelling by patriarchal standards and why they are not just retaliatory, but also exterminatory in tone. The Stacys are contemporary Others. They are both alluring and threatening, distinct consciousnesses that appear to be fully conquerable. But when one loses hope of taming them, the only way to assert oneself as sovereign through them is annihilation. Note that, like objectification and entitlement, this Beauvoirian account remains committed to seeing incels as part of a broader landscape of gendered violence. Its focus on ambivalence highlights the continuity with perpetrators of intimate partner violence. These are often men who also oscillate between contradictory attitudes: they "fear women's power even as they dominate them, and beat them even as they idolize them" (Caputi 2004, 184–85).[43] Serial sexual murders are another form of highly ambivalent violence that, as Jane Caputi has argued, represent an assertion of god-like masculine control (185fn3, 182–206).[44] In this way, the Beauvoirian model continues to frame incel violence as "a vivid symptom of a much broader and deeper cultural phenomenon" (Manne 2020, 18).

The second advantage of an account in terms of Otherness is that it gives us a deeper understanding of what we should do to tackle incel violence. Objectification strategies insist on the need for men to see women as fully human, and entitlement approaches push for a vehement assertion of gender equality.[45] Beauvoir would certainly agree that the way men see women matters and that a more gender-equal world changes that. However, the problem lies not just in how men see women, but in how they relate to themselves and to the world. The embrace of the myth of woman as Other is rooted in a more fundamental rise in masculine self-alienation. And that is what we must ultimately confront. For Beauvoir, sovereignty is a form of bad faith bound to be appealing

to any human being.[46] But men disproportionally take up this attitude because of the way societies and cultures are organized. Therefore, we must ask ourselves: what socio-cultural conditions encourage and enable men like Rodger to adopt this delusion of sovereignty and inhabit it so deeply?

The answer is bound to be complex. Some of it will have to do with how our cultural mythology still perpetuates the "marvelous hope" of a magical triumph without risk, especially through heterosexual love. For example, the early 2000s "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" trope in popular movies was arguably a contemporary Other, a feminine archetype that existed only "to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures" (Rabin 2007).[47] But other cultural narratives that encourage a sovereign self-image are less explicitly gendered. Think of the myth of becoming rich overnight, peddled by self-help books like *The Secret*, which claims you can realize all your dreams effortlessly by visualizing them. This is the book nineteen-year-old Elliot Rodger received from his father, who was confident it would help him develop "a positive attitude." What it actually did was feed the fantasy of success by magical means that was at the heart of his misogynistic violence (Rodger 2014, 78).

Part of the explanation for this rise in masculine self-alienation will also involve material conditions. Beauvoir herself speculates that a feminine Other is a "luxury": "it is understandable that woman is divinized in a country that is rich and where the citizens are uncertain about what meaning to give to their lives: this is what is happening in [1940s] America" (Beauvoir 2011, 272, 161). Angela Nagle has pointed to more specific factors such as our "toleration of a computer-enabled detachment" and an "extended adolescence of videogames, porn, and pranks" (Nagle 2016).[48] Certainly, in the case of Rodger, his parents' financial assistance meant he was never forced to work. If his livelihood had depended on accepting the judgment of others, he might have learned to deal with it. The "sanctuary" of online games was also crucial. Once he could play from home, "his social life ended completely" and he became very bored at school (Rodger 2014, 40–41). Without this escape from the real world, he might have had to figure out a way to live in it. The Beauvoirian emphasis on self-alienation highlights, then, how seemingly innocuous social arrangements shape the men who end up hating women.

Finally, what does Beauvoir have to say to incels *already* in the grips of this delusion of sovereignty? Importantly, quite a lot. Although Rodger was fully consumed by self-alienation, it is not too late for many men to live better lives. According to Beauvoir, this requires a kind of "conversion." They must renounce the vanity of viewing themselves as fallen gods, and assume the risk of existing as human beings (Beauvoir 2011, 159–60). This involves moving away from an appropriative, conquering attitude toward a stance of openness and reciprocity. It requires cultivating a healthy sense of competition and fair play, of personal responsibility, humility, "friendship and generosity" (159–60; Direk 2011, 70). It also means foregoing the certainty of a world with fixed hierarchies—including those based on race and class—and viewing interpersonal relations as always to be made and remade. To relinquish sovereignty, a man needs to accept that, in addition to being a freedom, he is part of Nature and of other people's plans, that he is a body and a history that can be evaluated.[49] Importantly, he needs to accept that there is no action without judgment, and no praise without risk.

For incels this "conversion" may be particularly difficult. They may have to undo deeply established habits. But this is a change squarely in the interest of these men. To be anyone at all, they must relinquish their aspirations to be essentially heroes and instead gather the courage to exist in the world: to stick to a class, to get a job,

to talk to people. Otherwise they will remain, like Rodger, mired in envy, jealousy, and emptiness. Crucially, relinquishing sovereignty will also mean the end of their ambivalent fixation on women. If there is no Nature to master, there is no need to incarnate it. If life with others is not a ceaseless struggle, there is no need to escape it. If one is engaged in meaningful projects, there is no need for a miracle to accomplish oneself. Without masculine alienation, there is no need for woman as Other. And it is only by giving up this pursuit of mythical goddesses that these men can stop hating women and actually talk them, and have a shot at a romantic and sexual relationship.[50] The key to both ending incel violence against women and exiting the nightmare Rodger inhabited is waking up from this self-destructive masculine fantasy.

Notes

1 The term *incel* was coined in the 1990s by a Canadian woman who created an involuntary celibate online space. In interviews, she has distanced herself from subsequent developments (Baker 2016; Zimmer 2018).
2 I gathered this demographic information from online surveys conducted by moderators of the forum incels.co. It is partial, has not been systematically collected, and relies exclusively on self-reporting. Incels.co's 2020 poll attracted 665 respondents: 82% were between eighteen and thirty years old, 81% were from Europe or North America, 70% lived with their parents, and over 65% identified as middle- or upper-class. Fifty-five percent identified as white/Caucasian, and 45% identified as Black, Latino, Asian, Indian, Middle Eastern, or Other/Not Sure—results that have added "nuance" to common perceptions of incels as white (ADL 2020). Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro also note that four of the best-known incel attackers, "Rodger, Harper-Mercer, Minassian, and Cruz . . . were either multiracial or do not conform to the white, Anglo-Saxon ideal of the violent, far right" (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 573). See Burnett 2020 on "Blackcels"; see Paradka 2018 and Chang 2020, 7, 14 on nonwhite incels.
3 For a more comprehensive taxonomy of incel-related attacks, see Bates 2020, 42–48; Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020.
4 Rodger has become revered as a "saint" and "martyr" in incel circles. Other attackers are often described as "going ER [that is, Elliot Rodger]" (Astrupgaard et al. 2020; Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 570; Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021, 1684).
5 Another example is Rodger's description of his friend James, who is also a virgin and understands his anxieties (Rodger 2014, 60). As Rodger turns hateful toward women, James distances himself. Rodger wonders why his friend is not as angry as he is. When confronted about his virginity, James says "he didn't pay attention to it, and focused on his strengths" (75).
6 Similar concerns have led to the coining of the term *femicide*, which refers to the misogynous killing of women by men. The term highlights that certain forms of lethal violence need to be investigated "in the context of the overall oppression of women in a patriarchal society" and need to be understood as part of a "continuum of sexual violence" (Radford 1992, 3–4). Another way to put this feminist point is to say that incel killings of women are femicides.
7 These two models are often run together: for example, Radford 1992; Kini 2018; Tolentino 2018; and Bates 2020, 28–29 on "femicide" more broadly. However, they are separable and possibly incompatible, as Manne 2018 has argued.
8 For discussion of what capacities may be denied in this kind of objectification, see LeMoncheck 1985; Nussbaum 1995; and Langton 2009.
9 Other illustrative passages in Rodger's manifesto include (my emphasis): "Life will become a bitter and unfair struggle for self-worth, all because girls *will choose* some boys over others. . . . they dominate the boys *girls deem* unworthy" (Rodger 2014, 25). "How dare those girls *give* their love and sex to those other men and not me" (134).

10   For a similar point regarding incel communities online, see Maxwell et al. 2020, 1864.

11   Other illustrative passages in Rodger's manifesto include (my emphasis): "I have felt worthless, and it's all girls' *fault*" (Rodger 2014, 94). "It's all girls' *fault* for not having any sexual attraction towards me" (127). "I will *punish* all females for the *crime* of depriving me of sex" (132).

12   Some online incel communities exalt traditional marriage and decry feminism, but this has not translated into the targeting of women defying patriarchal expectations or of feminist activists (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 573; Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021, 1679–80). This sets incels apart from cases like Marc Lépine, the perpetrator of the 1989 École Polytechnique massacre, who targeted women training as engineers and identified them verbally as "feminists." See Caputi and Russell 1992 for an entitlement-based analysis of this attack.

13   For example, members of an incel forum quickly described the Toronto 2020 attack as "good news," speculating that "she [the victim] may be a Stacy since she works in a spa" (Bates 2020, 55). In this meme, all other women are collapsed onto the unattractive "Becky": a feminist who goes to school, works for minimum wage, and wishes she were a Stacy.

14   Tina Chanter has argued that this Beauvoirian "emphasis of the acute ambiguity that is characteristic of the representation of women anticipates in significant respects the movement that later theorists, following Julia Kristeva, have uncovered as abjection" (Chanter 2000, 140). See Direk 2011 for further development of this reading. See Chang 2020 for an analysis of the way in which women are constructed as "abject Others" in online incel communities.

15   Women also try to resolve this tension in a problematic way. Feminine self-alienation tends to involve a paradoxically active renunciation of the drive to transcendence (Bauer 2001, 176; 2015; Knowles 2019; Garcia 2021).

16   See McClintock 1995, 21–23, 25–28 for a reading of this masculine ideal in narratives of colonial expansion and Mann 2014 for an analysis of the US war on terror as tapping into and mobilizing this masculine aspiration to sovereignty.

17   When sovereign subjects think of themselves as *being* transcendences, they give "the verb *to be* . . . a substantive value, when in fact it has the sense of the Hegelian dynamic: *to be* is to have become . . ." (Beauvoir 2011, 12).

18   I use "alienating themselves" and "self-alienation" to track Beauvoir's language and emphasis on men's active role in adopting this attitude of sovereignty. For example, "he thinks himself free, but he alienates his liberty in the interests of his ego" (Beauvoir 2011, 226, see also 86, 183, 226, 254). This contrasts with her more frequent use of the passive voice in relation to women, to say they are alienated *by* their situation. Thank you to Manon Garcia for helpful discussion on this issue.

19   Beauvoir is here adopting "a well-known Hegelian premise according to which the self-relation of self-consciousness is mediated by its relation to another self-consciousness. A self-consciousness can be for itself, can have an identity for itself only if it is for another, that is, it finds itself in a relation of recognition with another self-consciousness" (Direk 2011, 60). See also Bauer 2001, 185–87 and Mussett 2006, 279.

20   Beauvoir is here explicitly drawing on Hegel's master–slave dialectic, as a dynamic from which women as "Others" are excluded (Direk 2011, 53, 60). For a congenial and detailed analysis of the relation between *The Second Sex* and Hegel's master–slave dialectic, see Bauer 2001, 172–99 and Garcia 2021, 111–22. Cf. Lundgren-Gothlin 1996; Mussett 2006; and Vintges 2017.

21   Note the important distinction in Beauvoir between "Other" and "other": between absolute alterity and relative alterity. We are all relative others in that we all stand in reciprocal relations of alterity to each other (Beauvoir 2011, 7). An *Other* stands in an absolute relation of alterity, where no reciprocity is possible.

22   Why do men regard women, rather than other men, as embodying Nature? Beauvoir points to women's greater involvement in reproduction as the origin of this association (Beauvoir 2011, 262, 26, 78–79; see also Vintges 1995, 53). Ortner elaborates on this, adding that women's social roles and psychic structure reinforce this link (Ortner 1972, 73–83). For evidence of a longstanding cultural association between women and the natural world, see Merchant 1980; Ruether 2003.

23   Beauvoir is here connecting the domination of Nature and of women in a way that anticipates later ecofeminist and ecowomanist authors for whom she was a key influence (see references to Beauvoir in Griffin 1978; Spretnak 1990, 5; Biehl 1991, 14; Glazebrook 2014). For critical ecofeminist engagements with Beauvoir, see Plumwood 1986; King 1989; Plumwood 1993. For a defense of Beauvoir against these critiques, see Morgan 2017. Colonized people and land have also been associated with Nature in the European imaginary. For insightful analyses of how that association has interacted with

woman-as-Nature, see Ruether 2003, 353; McClintock 1995, 18–74. The idea of a cultural feminization and racialization of Nature has been fruitfully used to analyze the position of African American women (Riley 1993; Williams 1993) and indigenous women in North-America (Smith 2015, 55–78; Simpson 2017, 87–88).

24 Janet Biehl has criticized ecofeminists for failing to acknowledge this ambiguity. "The rich and complex dialectical insights of de Beauvoir's passage, in which women and nature have a 'double visage,' are reduced to a single visage—as forces outside culture, to be feared and dominated" (Biehl 1991, 13). For a discussion of how women take up the ambiguity of Nature in making themselves Others, see Beauvoir 2011, 656–58.

25 This erotic ambivalence can be found, for example, in pornography (Griffin 1981, 34, 38–41), and in narratives of colonial conquest of "feminized" lands (McClintock 1995, 25–28). For a helpful comparative analysis of Beauvoir and Bataille's thinking "about the ambiguity of the object of man's sexual desire," see Direk 2011, 53; Lloyd 2013.

26 Beauvoir interprets many norms of feminine beauty as attempts to meet this desire by embodying "the wondrous blossoming of life while concealing its mysterious disturbances" (Beauvoir 2011, 176–78). This dynamic is visible, for instance, in contemporary trends of "natural" and "no makeup" makeup (Cosmetics Business 2020; Jowett 2020).

27 John Stuart Mill makes a similar observation: "Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. All men, except the most brutish, desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favourite" (Mill 1970, 141). Thank you to Charlotte Knowles for pointing out this parallel between Mill and Beauvoir.

28 Beauvoir herself explains how the myth of woman as Other as a general model can turn into attitudes resembling objectification in her discussion of Montherlant (Beauvoir 2011, 218); and entitlement, in her discussion of Claudel (243).

29 Beauvoir elaborates this point in her discussion of Montherlant (Beauvoir 2011, 215, 236).

30 We see a similar pattern in another incel attacker, Chris Harper-Mercer. His mother was African American, his father was white and British. In his manifesto he claims that "the black man is the most vile creature on the planet" (Harper-Mercer 2015).

31 "Rémy de Gourmont wanted women's hair to be loose, free as the streams and prairie grass: but it is on Veronica Lake's hair that the waves of water and wheat could be caressed, not on a mop of hair totally left to nature" (Beauvoir 2011, 178).

32 The archetypical "sorority girl" is sexually "inviting, provocative, and available," but also "virginal, monogamous, chaste, and virtuous." This mixture of "Girls Gone Wild" and immaculate white dresses gives her a "paradoxical sexual identity" perfectly suited to the role of Other (DeSantis 2007, 73). Although these socially normative stereotypes may not apply to all sororities, they aptly describe UCSB's Alpha Phi at the time of Rodger's attack (UCSB Alpha Phi 2014).

33 It is telling that "civilized" white women were often said to have lost their "femaleness" or their erotic appeal, just like fully tamed, nondangerous Others in *The Second Sex* (Griffin 1981, 26; Fausto-Sterling 1995, 41; Beauvoir 2011, 204).

34 Rodger is arguably what Beauvoir calls an "individualist": a man who sets a high value on his "vital qualities . . .; his virility, charm, seduction, tenderness, and cruelty" (Beauvoir 2011, 202). After all, he has no other accomplishments. For individualists, a loving woman becomes absolutely necessary: only she can see and praise these hidden virtues that have no correlate in the observable world.

35 For a similar set of cases found in the forums of online incel communities, see Maxwell et al. 2020, 1864–65.

36 "I always felt as if white girls thought less of me because I was half-Asian, but then I see this white girl at the party talking to a full-blooded Asian. . . . How could an ugly Asian attract the attention of a white girl, while a beautiful Eurasian like myself never had any attention from them? I thought with rage" (Rodger 2014, 121). Hatred of interracial couples is common to other attackers, like Harper-Mercer and Scott Beirle (Bates 2020, 46). See also Paradkar 2018.

37 Rodger's description of his favorite game, "World of Warcraft," is illustrative: it "was like stepping into another world of excitement and adventure. . . . it was like living another life, a more exciting life. My life was getting more and more depressing at that point, and WoW would fill in the void. It felt refreshing and relieving" (Rodger 2014, 39).

38 Rodger plans on killing other men, couples, and random people. After all, he is railing against existence itself (Beauvoir 2011, 213). But, the centerpiece of his "Day of Retribution" is his "War on Women" (Rodger 2014, 132). See also Bates 2020, 51.

39 Another way to put this, following Bonnie Mann, is to say this violence performs the "shame-to-power conversion" which is "the core structure of [Beauvoirian] sovereign masculinity" (Mann 2014, 117).

40 See Rodger in Garvey 2014: "Well, now I will be a god compared to you, . . . I will slaughter you like animals." Online, incels use the same images: "the fact that women still prioritize brute strength just shows that their minds haven't fully evolved"; "women are disgusting vile parasites" (Nagle 2016; Bates 2020, 14; see also Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021, 1675; Chang 2020).

41 We can glimpse this attitude earlier in Rodger's descriptions of his first experiences with masturbation, pornography, and female nudity as traumatizing and disgusting (Rodger 2014, 30–31, 38–39, 46–47).

42 For a similar analysis of the killing of goddesses in ancient and contemporary myths, see Caputi 2004, 18, 182–85. This need to "take control over their lives and exact revenge" pervades much of the conversation within incel communities online (Astrupgaard et al. 2020; Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 566).

43 Manne eloquently notes this continuity: "if an incel *does* start having sex, or gets into a relationship, who will he turn into? . . . an incel is an abuser waiting to happen" (Manne 2020, 19–20).

44 Figures like Ted Bundy are regularly praised by incels online (Astrupgaard et al. 2020).

45 For example, Tolentino wishes incels were more "willing to look for humanity" in women (Tolentino 2018); whereas Manne has stressed we should give up on conciliatory tactics and work for gender equality under the assumption that "a good portion of the dominant social class have a vested interest in maintaining men's superiority" (Manne 2018, 291; 2020, 184–92).

46 This basic human appeal of sovereignty as an existential attitude is made clear in Beauvoir's description of some women who come to adopt it, particularly as mothers (Beauvoir 2011, 308, 419).

47 Classic examples of the "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" include *Garden State* (2004), *Elizabethtown* (2005), *500 Days of Summer* (2009). More recently, the Manic Pixie seems to have been replaced by the dystopian "algorithm-defined fantasy girl" and the "sexy female robot." These tropes cast men as inventors, discoverers, as loners saved from their misery by femininized AI systems, or as struggling against "femme fatale" robots (Rose 2015; Alexander 2017).

48 This suggests some important parallels with the Japanese phenomenon of acute social withdrawal among young people known as "hikikomori" (Saito 2013).

49 Another way to put this is to say that incels must assume their human freedom. "Freedom [for Beauvoir] comprises anti-sovereignty with others as a form of Mitsein in which one can be oneself to the fullest extent in a form of being-with-others, including with one's own body and with the naturally surrounding world" (Morgan 2017, 188). Beauvoir's view overlaps here with ecofeminist and ecowomanist injunctions to reconceptualize ourselves as *part* of Nature (Morgan 2017). Rosemary Ruether calls this a "conversion" from "alienated, hierarchical dualism to life-sustaining mutuality" (Ruether 2003, 354–55). Shamara Riley talks of it as "a reformulation of everyone's relationship to nature by socially reconstructing gender, class, and ethnic roles" (Riley 1993, 193–94, 202, 203).

50 "The myth of Woman substitutes for an authentic relationship with an autonomous existent the immobile contemplation of a mirage. . . . Man would have nothing to lose, quite the contrary, if he stopped disguising woman as a symbol" (Beauvoir 2011, 272–73).

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