



THE NEW INQUIRY

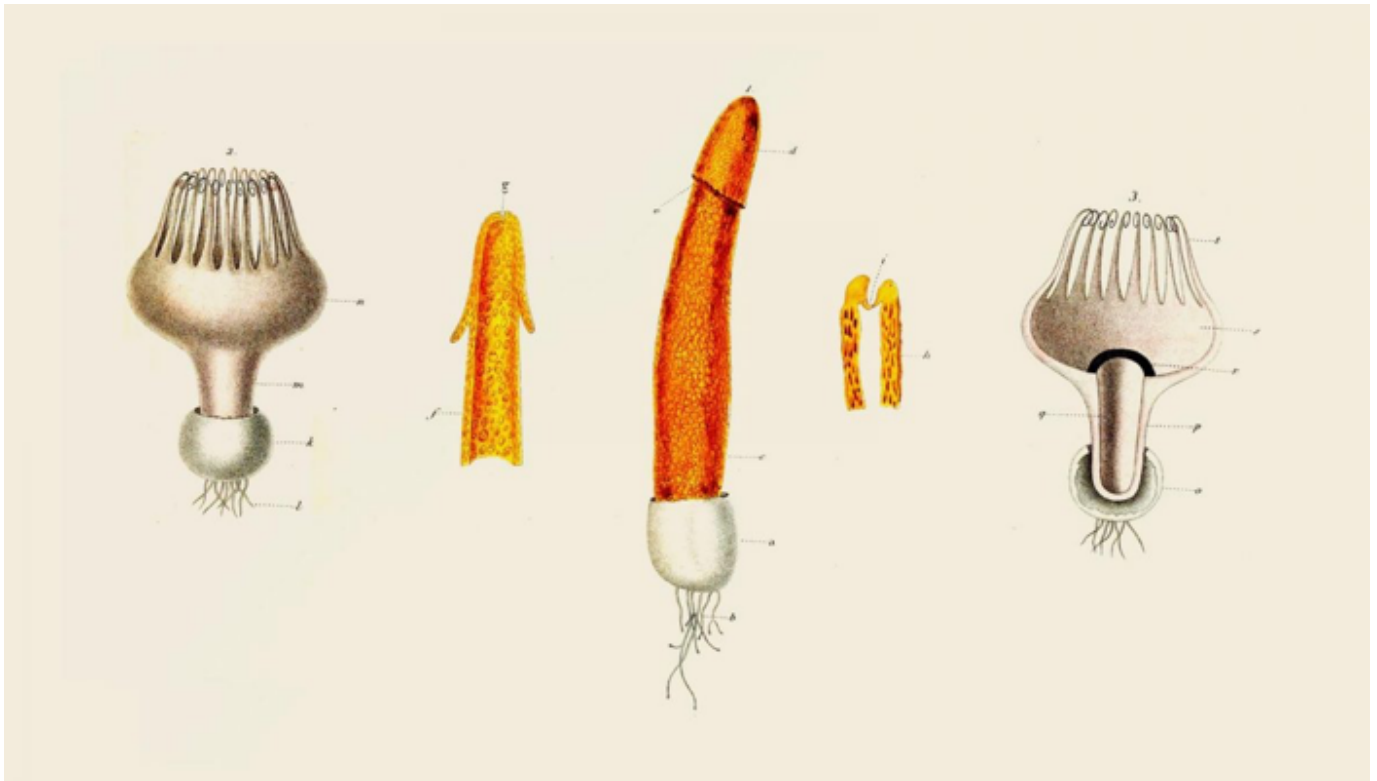
SUBSCRIBE

FEATURES

On Heteropessimism

Heterosexuality is nobody's personal problem.

By [INDIANA SERESIN](#) OCTOBER 9, 2019



“HETEROSEXUALITY always

embarrasses me,” Maggie Nelson admits in *The Argonauts*, a book once so rabidly popular among women and queers that my first copy was swiped from my bag at a dyke bar in 2016. Nelson’s confession has always struck me as diagnostic of our current moment, in which indictments of heterosexuality have become something of a meme. Yet when I asked her about it during a Skype call held by a sexuality-studies workshop for graduate students, she backtracked. Denying that she is embarrassed by heterosexuality in general, Nelson claimed that she is only humiliated by her *own* heterosexuality, by moments in her life when she has entertained—or suffered from—a romantic attraction to cis men.

At the time this caveat struck me as both unnecessarily defensive and disingenuous. Of all people, Nelson knows her queer theory, and thus knows that her own heterosexual experience only comes into focus via the cultural delineation of heterosexuality from other (less embarrassing?) forms of intimacy and attachment. It doesn’t make sense to extricate your own straight experience from straightness as an institution—if you are embarrassed by one, you are necessarily embarrassed by the other. Heterosexuality is nobody’s personal problem.

What I now see is that Nelson’s caveat is typical of heteropessimism, a mode of feeling with a long history, and which is particularly palpable in the present. Heteropessimism consists of performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience. Heteropessimism generally has a heavy focus on men as the root of the problem. That these disaffiliations are “performative” does not mean that they are insincere but rather that they are rarely accompanied by the actual abandonment of heterosexuality. Sure, some heteropessimists act on their beliefs, choosing celibacy or the now largely outmoded option of political lesbianism, yet most stick with heterosexuality even as they judge it to be irredeemable. Even incels, overflowing with heteropessimism, stress the involuntary nature of their condition.

Social media is a playground of performative disidentification, and heteropessimism thrives there. One recent surge of online heteropessimism was triggered by the Straight Pride event in Boston (an event that, like so much of the right-leaning internet, is simultaneously less substantial and far more sinister than most people seem to believe). At the same time as the City of Boston granted organizers a permit for the event to take place, they denied them the right to fly a newly unveiled Straight Pride flag, which—as social-media users jumped over themselves to point out—tellingly resembled a black-and-white-striped prison uniform.

“Heterosexuality is a prison!” a chorus declared, vocalizing one of heteropessimism’s central maxims. Many of those who seized the opportunity to mock Straight Pride and its appropriately drab flag were, unsurprisingly, queer, yet a sizable number of straight people could also be found in the fray. A quick Twitter search of the phrase “heterosexuality is a prison” reveals that it is attached just as often to complaints made from *within* heterosexual experience as to queers thanking their lucky stars they were born gay.

Confronted by Straight Pride, many are keen to emphasize that they are not that kind of heterosexual, that they are, in fact, *ashamed* of being straight, and that, not to be dramatic, they see heterosexuality as a prison within which they are confined against their will. (The prevalence of the prison metaphor could be taken as a reassuring indication of abolitionism going mainstream or a worrying reminder of how easily incarceration is still trivialized in the popular imagination.) Their disavowals are akin to white people making jokes about “stuff white people like,” a connection that makes sense given the sinister intimacy between Straight Pride and white-supremacist organizing. Yet while trying to redeem oneself from whiteness or heterosexuality through performative distancing mechanisms might seem progressive, the reality is usually little more than an abdication of responsibility. If heteropessimism’s purpose is personal absolution, it cannot also be justice.

PERFORMATIVELY detaching oneself

from heterosexuality is particularly appealing for women, and the reason why is encapsulated by one of heteropessimism's memetic antecedents: the overly attached girlfriend. This early meme is less a portrayal of actual behavior than a goofy male nightmare, the suffocatingly overcommitted partner against whom freewheeling men like to define themselves. Interestingly, the meme originally emerged from a video parodying Justin Bieber's 2012 hit "Boyfriend," which begins with the now famous romantic threat "If I was your boyfriend, I'd never let you go." As is fairly common in straight culture, a negative trait like obsessive jealousy—which in reality is one of the most commonly cited triggers of male-on-female domestic violence—is repackaged and sold as a female trait. If the OAG was a manifestation of men's heteropessimism, women reacted by declaring themselves absolutely and flamboyantly unattached—to men and to heterosexuality in general. [A proliferation of memes parading](#) this lack of attachment emerged in the OAG's wake, quickly becoming a foundational mode of women's heteropessimist expression.

In this sense, heteropessimism is, to borrow Lee Edelman's phrase, an "anesthetic feeling": "a feeling that aims to protect against overintensity of feeling and an attachment that can survive detachment." Heteropessimism's anesthetic effect is especially seductive because it dissociates women from the very traits—overattachment and "the overintensity of feeling"—for which straight culture is determined to make us ashamed. That much heteropessimist sentiment is delivered in joke form coheres with Henri Bergson's idea that comedy delivers "a momentary anesthesia of the heart." Unlike traditional comedy, however, heteropessimism is anticathartic. Its structure is anticipatory, designed to preemptively anesthetize the heart against the pervasive awfulness of heterosexual culture as well as the sharp plunge of quotidian romantic pain. During the media storm surrounding Brett Kavanaugh's hearing, for example, the comedian [Solomon Georgio tweeted](#) (to the tune of over 23,000 retweets and 142,000 likes): "Today is a reminder that if homosexuality was a choice, there would be 2, maybe 3, straight women left after today." This sentence, which circles back to the same word on which it began, betrays the confusion between universality and

specificity embedded in heteropessimism. Kavanagh is a “reminder” of a preexisting fact—that no woman would choose to be straight—yet this fact is somehow also produced by “today,” by the particular awfulness of the present.

LIKE most online subcultures, heteropessimism occupies a contradictory relationship to the market. Quite often framed as an anti-capitalist position, heteropessimism could be read as a refusal of the “good life” of marital consumption and property ownership that capitalism once mandated. Yet this good life, which was always withheld from marginalized populations, is now untenable for almost everyone. If the couple was the primary consumer unit of the past, today this has collapsed, or more accurately been replaced by a new dyad, the individual consumer and her phone. It is hardly news that the goal of the big hookup apps is to keep people single. Tinder has made this surprisingly explicit in its first ever brand campaign, which features an exuberant, seemingly carefree blonde woman accompanied by the words “Single does what single wants.” Stay single, stay wanting, and let the data of your desire accumulate like so many layers of gold.

Heteropessimism has helped stimulate this individualizing turn, not just by draining the hetero couple form of its appeal but because dissatisfaction with heterosexuality, despite being sold as universal, always seems to operate on the level of the individual. Collectively changing the conditions of straight culture is not the purview of heteropessimism. In this sense, heteropessimism actually reinforces the privatizing function of heterosexuality, even as it is mass distributed through culture as a viral meme. Under a heteropessimistic rubric, women might not view themselves as competing with one another within the cutthroat dating “market,” but in metabolizing the problem of heterosexuality as a personal issue the possibility of solidarity remains foreclosed.

This is an acute problem. Social movements such as #MeToo or the South African protest against intimate-partner violence #MenAreTrash demonstrate

the frightening urgency with which heterosexual culture needs to be revolutionized. Heteropessimism might seem like a starting point of that revolution, but in reality its anesthetizing force has had the ironic effect of stalling some of the momentum of these movements. If “heterosexuality” becomes shorthand for misogyny, the proper object of critique falls from view. To be permanently, preemptively disappointed in heterosexuality is to refuse the possibility of changing straight culture for the better. This is, of course, similar to the charge often leveled against Afro-pessimism, a school of thought that takes antiblackness to be the transhistorical structuring force of the world. Both Afro- and heteropessimism are reactions to perceived immutability, but beyond this their resonance is mostly morphological. The pessimism in heteropessimism is more literal, more basic (in both senses of the word) than it is in Afropessimism. Partly for this reason, heteropessimism is far more obviously prohibitive of social change.

Unlike Afropessimists, heteropessimists bear responsibility for exactly what they identify as irredeemable, and this responsibility cannot evaporate *via* disavowal, however much they might like it to. A certain strain of heteropessimism assigns 100 percent of the blame for heterosexuality’s malfunction to men, and has thus become one of the myriad ways in which young women—especially white women—have learned to disclaim our own cruelty and power. Like most lesbians, I have found myself on the receiving end of approximately 100,000 drunk straight women bemoaning their orientation and insisting that it would be “so much easier” to be gay. Sure, it probably would be! That “men are trash” is not something I am personally invested in disputing. Yet in announcing her wish to be gay, the speaker carelessly glosses over the fact that she has *chosen* to stay attached to heterosexuality—to remain among the (slightly more than 2 or 3) women who are, despite everything, still straight.

WOMEN are not the only heteropessimists. From the indignant fury of the incel to the married man complaining about his “old ball and chain,” men clearly subscribe to heteropessimism even if, like all feelings,

they are not exactly encouraged to express it. To be clear, men's heteropessimist claims tend to be neither ethically nor logically equivalent to those made by women. Instead, they are a kind of funhouse distortion of feminist complaint. Nowhere is this perversion better illustrated than on Facebook, where the efforts of men's-rights activists have led administrators to classify "men are trash" as hate speech and suspend the accounts of those who use the phrase. (Users may post "women are trash" with impunity.)

Heteropessimism has become a framework through which men process both demands for gender equality and the quotidian experience of romantic harm as evidence of a global female conspiracy. One of the most prominent male heteropessimist memes asserts that the #MeToo climate has made dating too dangerous—for men. The most zealous male heteropessimists—so committed that they are mocked by other male-supremacist groups for actually choosing to act on their heteropessimism—unite under the delightful banner of Men Going Their Own Way. MGTOW maintain that women are sly, parasitic, and essentially evil, that heterosexuality is wholly beneficial to women and severely dangerous for men, and that the only solution is for men to abstain from marriage, reproduction, and (according to some) dating, sex, and even masturbation.

The result is a strange parody of feminism. In place of heterosexual relations, MGTOW are encouraged to form homosocial self-care communities that will both shield and heal them from romantic trauma, ensuring a kind of prolonged anesthesia of the heart. The movement's heavy reliance on the Internet makes it difficult to know how substantial it is in reality. Its members are prolific meme makers, and online forums are their consciousness-raising site of choice. Yet even if MGTOW became a prominent force in reality, in choosing to self-segregate, this group actually render themselves the least dangerous of male heteropessimists. Far more disturbing are those who've come to believe that contemporary culture cheats them out of their "right" to possess women—and choose to act on this belief.

IN a talk at the 2019 Duke Feminist Theory Workshop, Lauren Berlant

identified heteropessimism as a product of contemporary tectonic shifts in social power: “As we are living now, when privilege unravels it goes out kicking and screaming, and people lose confidence in how to be together, uncertain about how to read each other, and incompetent about even their own desire . . . as the incels, braincels, and many new sex-negative feminists exemplify.” Thus far, this is the only explicit acknowledgment I’ve found of the link between these feminist and anti-feminist traditions of heterosexual negativity.

Such a theoretical lacuna is unsurprising. Heterosexuality has long been a neglected object of study, elbowed out of sexuality studies right after the field emerged by the sexier and cooler project of queer theory. Queer theorists look smugly at heterosexuality over their shoulders as the thing that they have—thank God—left behind. In doing so, they remain outdatedly attached to a moment in which heterosexuality was widely understood to be an idealized form of life. In Jane Ward’s otherwise razor-sharp *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men*, the sociologist chooses to define straight people not by the sex acts they pursue but by the fact that “they enjoy heterosexual culture. Simply put, being sexually ‘normal’ suits them. It feels good; it feels like home.” This flattening account of straight identity, which fails to accommodate even the *possibility* of heteropessimism, is a far cry from our current reality.

Compared to the heady possibilities of the queer world to come, heterosexuality appears unbearably drab and predictable (the “same old story” as Skepta puts it in a [recent heteropessimist anthem](#)). Indeed, in the moment just before feminist theorization of heterosexuality all but totally fizzled out, a pre-*Gender Trouble* Judith Butler wrote that “precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself.”

Spinning on its wheels, endlessly repeating, going nowhere—heteropessimists and queer theorists alike are convinced that this is heterosexuality’s permanent fate. I think they’re wrong, that there’s evidence heterosexual culture is changing. But even if it weren’t, we would have to believe it could,

because tens of thousands of women are currently dying of it [every year](#), murdered by their husbands, boyfriends, or exes. (That [almost all mass shooters have histories of domestic violence](#) makes it obvious that heterosexuality also poses a fatal threat to anyone, of any gender, who happens to be in a movie theater, at school, in the office, at a mall.) Yes, universal queerness and the abolition of gender may be the horizon toward which we are eventually moving—but what happens in the meantime?

Particularly for women, radically transforming heterosexuality might begin with honest accounts of which elements of heterosexuality are actually appealing—the house is clearly on fire, but is there anything worth saving? Such accounts are totally foreclosed by heteropessimism, and must therefore be drawn from conversations and narratives that—even if only momentarily—transcend a heteropessimist register.

One such conversation can be found in the writer Harron Walker's podcast *why do i like men*. In episode one, guest Larissa Pham echoes the ridiculers of Straight Pride: "Heterosexuality is a prison . . . heterosexuality is awful." Pham posits heterosexuality as a form of wayward, masochistic desire; she tells Walker that she likes men "'cause you don't know what's good for you . . . and you're drawn to that which destroys you." Later, Pham reverts to the familiar implication that no woman would choose heterosexuality: "I don't think you can choose attraction."

Yet over the course of the conversation Pham does cite reasons why she finds men desirable, such as "big arms," "penis," and "the way men smell . . . most men." In subsequent episodes, other guests offer their own ideas about men's appeal. Theda Hammel suggests that women are drawn to men because intimate proximity to a man is affirming: "The reason that a woman likes men—or a trans woman maybe in particular likes men—is not necessarily because men are that likeable . . . but just that they bring out qualities that you like in yourself, by virtue of being different from you." For all their obviousness, these observations are quite rarely voiced. Hearing them spoken so plainly exposes how heteropessimism has worked to silence articulations of women's

desire.

why do i like men is a half joke—you can hear the smirk in Walker’s voice as she delivers the question at the beginning of each episode—but it is also a sincere inquiry. In asking and reasking the podcast’s eponymous question, Walker pushes through heteropessimist anesthesia and reawakens her own vulnerability. In this light, heterosexuality is not a terminal diagnosis but becomes a possible site of experiment and change.

For a long time, heterosexuality’s normalization allowed it to endlessly repeat, immune from any substantial change. Today, heteropessimism might actually obscure the extent to which heterosexuality *is* changing—even as it is also causing it. Without an immutable object of critique, the logic of heteropessimism falls apart. Perversely, this has created a renewed investment in the consistency of heterosexuality, a reinscription of heterosexuality’s tired features, even as this investment takes the disguised form of negative feeling. In this light, heteropessimism reveals something about the way we can remain secretly attached to the continuity of the very things we (sincerely) decry as toxic, boring, broken. Faced with the possibility of disappointment, anesthesia can feel like a balm.



SUBSCRIBE \$2 PER MONTH

ENTER YOUR EMAIL

CONTINUE
