Feeling straight: heterosexual fatigue in 'Cat Person'

Within days of publication, Kristen Roupenian's short story 'Cat Person' (2017) had been shared widely across the internet and dubbed the first "viral" short story. The genre of the short story enables writers to respond promptly to cultural events and to explore emergent features of the present. As Adrian Hunter points out, "the short story is somehow 'up to speed' with the realities of modern life" (3). This certainly seems to be the case with 'Cat Person', which was published at a moment of significant cultural anxiety around heterosexual relations. Popular feminist activism was centred on calling out the prevalence of (primarily though not exclusively heterosexual) gendered and sexual violence, while the movement's detractors had begun to express scepticism. In the *New York Times*, Daphne Merkin asked "[w]hat happened to women's agency?" and made the case that the (2017) #MeToo movement represented a return to a "victimology paradigm" for women and a "re-moralization" of sex. She suggests that expressing sexual interest is something "inherently messy and, frankly, nonconsensual". In this context, 'Cat Person' became a lightning rod for debates about the nature of consent and the tricky landscape of heterosexual dating.

This paper sets out to establish 'Cat Person' as a literary vehicle for a particular feeling that I call *heterosexual fatigue.* My conception of heterosexual fatigue builds on work by Elisabeth Kelan, in which she argues that the repeated insistence on gender inequality in the workplace in the face of enduring inequalities causes "gender fatigue", where women lose "the energy to acknowledge and potentially oppose gender discrimination" (206). I locate heterosexual fatigue within contemporary discussions of "heteropessimism" (Seresin) and "tragic" heterosexuality (Ward), which broadly describe the continued attachment of straight people to the promises of heterosexuality, despite a growing awareness of its internal problems. For

Jane Ward, straight culture is characterised by the fact that "boy's and men's desire for girls and women is expressed within a broader culture that encourages them to also hate girls and women" (27). This "misogyny paradox" and the persistence of gendered and sexual violence sit uncomfortably alongside the relentless positivity and enthusiasm that women are encouraged to cultivate, particularly in relation to their own sexual agency (Ibid). To absolve themselves of responsibility for the state of straight culture, the writer Asa Seresin argues that many straight people express heteropessimism in the form of "performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about the straight experience". Heteropessimists are keen to distance themselves from the "awfulness" of heterosexuality and frame their own continued attachments as a kind of "prison" (Seresin). I argue that 'Cat Person' illuminates how the invocation of contradictory discourses around women's sexual agency and consent produce heterosexual fatigue – a flat, non-cathartic feeling, marked by a kind of paralysis. This highlights the impossibility of reconciling the affective demands of neoliberal femininity with the persistent dread of heterosexual culture.

Throughout the story, the threat of violence is portrayed as an intrinsic, normal, and almost unremarkable part of sex and dating for straight women. After Robert (her date) picks Margot up in his car, it occurs to her that "he could take her someplace and rape and murder her; she hardly knew anything about him, after all" (Roupenian). The flippancy with which Margot considers that Robert may want to harm her and with which he says, "'Don't worry, I'm not going to murder you,'" shows how the possibility of gendered violence is a normalised undercurrent to everyday life (Ibid.). The "brief wild idea" Margot has that Robert's house might be "full of horrors: corpses or kidnap victims or chains" highlights the ways in which rape myths obscure the possibility and the prevalence of gendered violence in the public

imagination (Ibid.). Where rape is viewed as an unlikely occurrence – what Stevi Jackson calls the "myth of the stranger in the dark alley" – it suggests that women's fears of rape and violence are borne from paranoia and that a rapist is unlikely to be a 'regular' man and much more likely to be a "sex-starved, crazed lunatic" (27-28). The persistence of this myth directly contradicts statistics that suggest as many as 8 out of 10 rape victims know their attacker.[1]

But it is not only the threat of violence that affects Margot. She is also concerned with Robert's feelings. She decides not to back out of the sexual encounter because to do so "would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon" (Roupenian). This can be related back to the threat of potential violence, since men who have their feelings hurt may respond with aggression, but it is also a concern relating to Margot's sense of her personal value. She does not want to be perceived as "spoiled and capricious" or difficult – "as if she'd ordered something at a restaurant and then, once the food arrived, had changed her mind and sent it back" (Ibid.). As Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Marina Levina argue, "white women gain capital by inviting male desire – and by *not* being difficult, disruptive" (6, emphasis mine). Women are presented as active – they are the ones "inviting" – yet simultaneously passive – "not being difficult" (Ibid.). In this way, 'Cat Person' depicts a clash between Margot's own lack of desire and the affective economy in which Margot stands to lose value by failing to sustain male desire. The option of leaving or backing out is closed off to Margot. She must be tactful, considerate of Robert's feelings (and his sex drive) in a way that he is not considerate of hers, and the idea of stopping what she has begun is "overwhelming" (Roupenian). Margot's decision is shaped by a patriarchal context in which

[1] "Perpetrators of sexual violence: statistics", RAINN, https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence. Accessed: 22 Oct. 21

male pleasure is a priority, and as a woman, her sense of worth is entangled with her ability to fulfil that pleasure.

Much of the heated discussion about 'Cat Person' focuses on a central scene in which Margot has sex with Robert when she does not want to (see Grady, Khazan). In hetero sex, the onus is nearly always placed on women to verbalise their desires and confirm their (un)willingness to partake in sexual activity. As Katherine Angel writes, "women's speech bears a heavy burden: that of ensuring pleasure; of improving sexual relations, and of resolving violence" (8). The responsibility is placed on women to know what they want, articulate it effectively and be consistent. This leaves no room for doubt, backtracking, changes of heart, or of not being fluent in one's own desires. 'Cat Person' portrays Margot as an assertive, confident young woman. Her independence is shown by the fact that she lives away from home, is studying for a college degree, and earns her own money. She is shown to be an active, desiring sexual agent by, for example, flirting with customers for tips, initiating sexual activity with Robert by kissing him and inviting herself back to his house. In this way, she is situated as someone who has the power and agency to resist an unwanted sexual encounter, and therefore her continued participation reads as consent. In other words, Margot is presented as someone who is more than capable of saying no to sex she doesn't want – yet she does not.

Margot's lack of desire is portrayed clearly: "she tried to bludgeon her resistance into submission" and "she began to have trouble breathing and to feel that she really might not be able to go through with it after all" (Roupenian). This scene has become a site of contention: does it depict sexual assault or 'just' regrettable sex? After the event, Margot is shown to feel violated: "sick and scared" and "overwhelmed with a skin-crawling loathing" and "self-

disgust and humiliation" (Roupenian). Yet Margot does not communicate her reluctance to Robert verbally. In this way, the encounter resists the simplistic categorisation of consent as something uncomplicated and blurs the lines between consent and non-consent. This ambivalence draws attention to the complex nature of sexual negotiations, which are obscured by what Lola Olufemi calls the "happy face" of consent (96). The upbeat insistence that consent is easy to navigate, simple to understand and therefore "*the* locus for transforming the ills of our culture" flattens the power dynamics and cultural scripts that shape women's sexual decision-making and their ability to communicate about the decision-making process (Angel 7).

Melissa Febos explores the murky space between consent and assault, writing that she has "often wished for a different word, one that implies profound, often inhibitive change, but precludes the wound and victimization inherent in *trauma"* (197-198). This suggests that consent and trauma are mutually exclusive – that it is impossible to consent to traumatic sex – which brings the problems with consent into sharp focus: its dichotomisation of sex as either consensual *or* traumatic stifles our ability to speak about experiences that are both. To bridge this gap, Febos suggests the term "empty consent" to articulate experiences of sex in which permission is granted but which are completely devoid of desire (222). This might include sex work and consent that was given under conditions of coercion or perceived threat. It might also include sex with a date, or even a loving partner, in which one has said yes when one means no. The notion of empty consent pushes back against the rigidity of the consent binary and clears space for the unpacking of more complex sexual encounters – such as the one portrayed in 'Cat Person' – that cannot be neatly categorised.

Though Febos doesn't use the word "trauma" in relation to her own experiences, the dissociation she describes shares similarities with that of a trauma survival mechanism. She writes of a "dimming", an "out-of-body feeling, the sense of consciousness detached from the corporeal self, perhaps watching it as one would figure in a diorama" (198). There are similarities with the description of Margot's experience of sex with Robert in 'Cat Person', in which she feels like "a doll made of rubber, flexible and resilient, a prop for the movie that was playing in his head" (Roupenian). The descriptions of detachment and distance between the self and the body highlight a kind of anaesthesia, an attempt to escape the situation in mind, if not in body. As Febos writes: the "frozen self doesn't feel the affect of that self, though it is recorded in the body" (198). Such feelings can be read through the lens of heteropessimism, which Seresin describes as a "mode of feeling" which is "designed to pre-emptively anesthetize the heart against the pervasive awfulness of heterosexual culture". Yet while for Seresin, heteropessimism typically consists of "performative disaffiliations", heterosexual fatigue signals a loss of energy to oppose the inherent problems of heterosexuality, even performatively.

Although Margot thinks that having sex with Robert was "the worst life decision", she then goes on to marvel at herself, "at the mystery of this person who'd just done this bizarre, inexplicable thing" (Roupenian). The use of words such as "mystery" and "inexplicable" suggests a degree of confusion or distance between Margot's feelings and her actions, which reinforces the idea of detachment between the body and the self. Although Margot acknowledges that the sex was terrible, she still holds the experience at arm's length. Margot's navigation of hetero sex is inseparable from the affective demands of neoliberal femininity, which foregrounds the cultivation of positive feelings, such as happiness, confidence, resilience and self-determination. Feelings that do not fit with the celebratory

narrative of women as strong and empowered, the "winners in the new gender order" are repudiated (Gill, "Surveillance", 152). In particular, expressions of vulnerability and victimhood are viewed as a sign of personal fault or weakness. This idea is closely linked to a strand of anti-victim "feminism" (such as that espoused by Merkin), which argues that feminist activism such as rape awareness campaigns encourage women to see themselves as helpless, vulnerable, and unsexual, and that 'bad sex' or 'regrettable' encounters are an inevitable part of heterosexual dating. This viewpoint suggests, as Angel writes, that the solution to the injustices that women face lies not in collective action but in individual strength, by cultivating the persona of "the strong woman who can overcome it all – who can shrug off injuries and be tougher; be, frankly, less of a baby" (23). This imperative to strength, resilience and positivity is particularly salient when we consider Margot's complex affective response to unwanted sex. The difficult experience is quickly repackaged as something funny and communicable. We see Margot's negative feelings emerge ('"We should probably just kill ourselves," she imagined saying'), before being immediately transformed into a story for an audience, her imaginary boyfriend "who would think that this moment was just as awful yet hilarious as she did" (Roupenian). Yet Margot's construction of the experience as something funny for her imaginary boyfriend (and herself), is undercut by feelings of despair as she comes to the conclusion that "there was no such future, because no such boy existed and never would" (Roupenian). The use of humour to reframe difficult experiences resonates with Akane Kanai's observation that young women navigate the contradictions of neoliberal femininity by "limiting their articulation of managing this burden to humorous, upbeat quips" (60). I argue that we can read the character of Margot as someone who has internalised this disavowal of victimhood and vulnerability and as such, cannot entertain the possibility that the sex she had with Robert was not entirely consensual. By reframing it as something humorous, she is able to maintain distance from the experience

without playing into a victim narrative. To admit vulnerability would suggest a personal failure or lack and an inability to embody the ideal of psychological strength, confidence and power. Caught between the enforced positivity of neoliberal postfeminism and the terrifying possibility of her own lack of agency, Margot becomes frozen with exhaustion, trapped between conflicting pressures that are impossible to navigate.

We might ask why Margot remains invested in heterosexuality given her abysmal experience. Sara Ahmed writes that the "promise of happiness" directs us towards certain things that we believe will direct us towards the good life, and that the good life is almost inseparable from the "historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledom" (90). Heterosexual love, and therefore the straight culture that directs people towards it, are positioned as certain things that will make us happy or drive us towards a happy ending. Additionally, by conforming to standards of heteronormativity, a person can accrue social value. As Ward points out "[s]traightness is a means through which people can access some (unearned) cultural and institutional rewards vis-à-vis the marginalization of their queer counterparts" (2). The hopefulness of their initial flirtation suggests that both Margot and Robert are deeply attached to the idea that heterosexuality will bring them rewards, in the form of either happiness or status. For example, when her parents ask about who she's messaging, Margot tells them, '"His name is Robert, and I met him at the movie theatre. We're in love, and we're probably going to get married"' (Roupenian). Though there is a degree of implied irony here, which suggests that Margot intends this as a joke, the invocation of heteronormative fantasies of the good life demonstrates Margot's investment in such fantasies. The relationship begins with such hopefulness and the typical narrative arc of a romance propels the story forward, but the climax is never reached.

It would be too easy – and somewhat counterproductive – to view Robert, or men in general, as emblematic of all that is wrong with heterosexuality. While 'Cat Person' encourages us to attend to grey areas and contradictions, the narrative mode of the story is focused on Margot and describes her thought processes in third-person detail; Robert is only revealed to us through Margot's ever-changing interpretation of him. We know very little about him and what we do know is always filtered through Margot's worldview. Yet what we have access to suggests that Robert does not find straight culture easy to navigate either. The conflicting messages he sends to Margot at the end of the story, which veer from "I miss you" and "you looked really pretty" to "whore", recall Ward's misogyny paradox and suggests that Robert is also having trouble navigating the contradictions of straight culture (Roupenian). As Seresin writes, "if 'heterosexuality' becomes shorthand for misogyny, the proper object of critique falls from view". While in this paper I have focused on the ways in which the concept of heterosexual fatigue emerges in the description of the character of Margot in 'Cat Person', I do not mean to suggest that it is a feeling exclusively felt by heterosexual women. The ubiquity of heterosexuality in contemporary culture means that its exhausting problems affect people of all genders and sexualities.

While heteropessimism is primarily performative, heterosexual fatigue works slightly differently. It doesn't reinscribe the toxic logic of straight culture as heteropessimism does, and in fact, it doesn't *do* much at all. It is a static feeling, one that results from the exhaustion of being pulled in multiple directions and having one's experiences of sexism and fears of sexual assault denied or minimised. The neoliberal postfeminist requirement that women perform a confident, empowered (hetero)sexuality neatly skirts around the numerous problems that straight culture presents women, whilst simultaneously offering itself up as a solution to those problems. The narrative of 'Cat Person' exposes the contradictions at the

heart of heterosexual culture and shows how the effort required to navigate those contradictions is overwhelming and leads to fatigue. While 'Cat Person' does not portray feelings that are motivated towards change, I argue that the publication and the writing of the story itself might be read as an act of affective resistance. By elucidating the affective rules and regulations that shape the negotiations of heterosexual relationships, we are encouraged to reckon with them, and that itself might point the way towards change.

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