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Hacking ‘the Natural’: Seduction Skills, Self-Help, and the Ethics of Crafting Heterosexual Masculine Embodiment in ‘Seduction Communities’

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Close relationships between men and women have been theorized from feminist, psychoanalytic, and political economic perspectives. In seduction communities, dating coaches and pickup artists act as expert mediums in scripting norms of heterosexual courtship between men and women. Based on an ethnographic case study of intimate labor between coaches and male clients in seduction communities in New York City, this article follows men in these communities as they experience emotional and affective states of flow, inhibition, and embodied abjection in learning and practicing seduction skills. Observing how these men embody contradictory cultural norms of self-help—including ideas of freedom, dependency, and addiction—in ways that reproduce a range of social, economic, and gender-based inequalities, this article suggests three things. First, that apprenticing in techniques of heterosexual seduction is about masculine self-fashioning; second, that practices of self-help in seduction skills-training complicate heteronormative masculine identities by creating intimate spheres of dependency and self-disclosure among men; and third, that seduction communities strategically graft culturally-situated ideologies of labor as alienable and sexuality as inalienable onto cultural ambivalences about communication as instrumental or expressive in ways that enable the commodification of expertise in intimate relationships.

Introduction

Don Giovanni clearly did not need any training in seduction skills, but many American men feel they need help. In nearly every major city of North America there exists a ‘seduction community’: a community of men who train each-other to pick-up women. These men are instructed by a dating coach or ‘pickup artist,’ and they

socialize with other men to overcome their social inhibitions with women and in many cases to transform their personal identity—from what they call an AFC (‘average frustrated chump’) to pickup artist or PUA. Along with digital means to meet strangers including dating websites, these communities have emerged over the past 10 years from a virtual subculture to becoming a globalized industry in seduction training that reaches from Berlin to Beijing.

This paper explores one instance of how, within precarious¹ social and economic circumstances, members of the American middle-classes have turned to post-secular techniques of the self that integrate commodification into the pursuit of personal regeneration through new social and experiential forms.² In global cities such as New York City, new service sectors and specialists of intimate labor have sought to fill these demands by supplanting the instability of a fraying social fabric. In this context, pickup artists appear as an element of the service-sector economy, marketing themselves as experts of what Arlie Hochschild calls ‘emotion work’: that is, as Hochschild says, “trying to change expressive gestures in the service of changing inner feeling.”³ By examining how men in seduction communities seek to overcome their embodied inhibitions, this paper explores how different patterns of homosocial collaboration alternately produce and unravel the fiction of equal access to desirable masculinity. Based on original ethnographic research, this article argues that by codifying relations of cooperation, competition, and inequality between men, seduction communities help men to achieve an ambivalent sexual freedom by fashioning themselves as objects for a female gaze as it is imagined in the context of emotion work practiced between men.

Using reproducible scripts and repertoires for surveilling and assessing the performance of capacity and debility in seduction brings together contrasting cultural ideas of instrumental communication and authentic self-expression. Belaboring this cultural contradiction at the site of gender identity, seduction communities enroll men in continual processes of labor and self-invention that reflects changing ethics of selfhood and intimacy in late modernity. These men, wanting at once to feel freedom and to experience intimacy, reconcile contradictions between authenticity (demands

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- 1 C. Lane, *A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence, and the New World of White-Collar Unemployment*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press 2012. R. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co 2000. B. Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, New York, Harper Collins 1990.
 - 2 J. Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*, New York, Harper Collins 2009. M. Di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home: Anthropologies, Others, American Modernity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2000.
 - 3 A. Hochschild, *Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure*, ‘American Journal of Sociology’ 1979, Vol. 85, No. 3, p. 562.

to individualism as self-mastery) and technique (the contingency of heterosexual performance) in self-fashioning by training in seduction skills as a form of 'passing'⁴ to achieve masculine gender roles that validate them. In the process, this article finds that seduction communities reproduce the embodied inhibitions they seek to solve, denaturalize the social construct of 'hegemonic masculinity' through the failure of its actualization as an identity, and pave the grounds for the commodification of expertise in intimate relationships by creating charismatic and enduring relations of power, knowledge, and intimacy between male dating coaches and their clients.

Research for this paper took place in New York City over a period of 12 months, from December 2014 through December 2015, and was supported by a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for anthropological research. The project deployed mixed methods including participant observation, interviews, and archival and social media research. The case studies discussed in this article are drawn from research conducted at two 'bootcamps,' multi-day training programs in which one or two dating coaches train and supervise groups of three to ten men, who subsequently tend to become involved members of the coach's training community. In keeping with IRB procedures⁵ for conducting studies with human subjects, all names of informants in this research have been anonymized to ensure their confidentiality.

The Seductions of Self-Fashioning

It was a Thursday night in November, and I was seated with two men and their dating coach in the booth of a grill on the Lower East Side of New York. It was the start of a weekend-long training course in seduction skills, called a bootcamp. The dating coach had just introduced himself, and outlined his goals for the weekend. He said, quote, "Tell me one fantasy you want to achieve. If I do nothing else, this weekend I want to help you get there." He then gave these men their first assignment. He said, "Before we get to the bar, I want each of you to approach three women in the street and just get their attention. It doesn't matter what you say." His student-trainees—including an undergraduate student at New York University and a Harvard-educated doctor—glanced nervously around the table. This practice of what the coach called 'throwing words' was drawn from methods of improvisational (or 'improv') stage

4 'Passing' as a concept has been developed in critical race and gender studies, and refers to techniques of etiquette and self-presentation by which members of minority groups seek to pass as members of a different, often dominant social category of identity.

5 The Internal Review Board (IRB) is an organization in the United States that is designated to monitor and review research (including medical, scientific, and social scientific) involving human beings in order to protect their rights and welfare.

acting, designed to push the men out of their comfort zone and lower their inhibitions, and thereby instilling an attitude of ‘indifference to outcome’ in their interactions with women as a mode of cultivating autonomous agency. This program would culminate two days later with hypnosis by a sex therapist, as well as the Saturday night exercise, where the men would be taught skills to express their sexuality around women through physical gestures: touching, hand-holding, seemingly accidental strokes of the arm, and so-called ‘hand-flirting.’ The female trainer who assisted the coach was an actress from Montana; the previous assistant, a Brazilian fitness enthusiast, had resigned her position on the program due to the fact she had started dating the dating coach herself.

If we turn to the text of an e-book published in 2007, titled *Magic Bullets*,⁶ we get to grips with the communicative practices that are prevalent in these courses. In the text of *Magic Bullets*, the author and dating coach Nick Savoy elaborates a curriculum of practices, speech-acts, and cognitive rationalizations designed for optimal seduction. A central belief-system in this text is what Savoy calls the ‘emotional progression model.’ Nick Savoy describes the emotional progression model in five stages: ‘opening,’ ‘transitioning,’ ‘attraction,’ ‘comfort,’ and ‘seduction.’ He explains the stage of opening thus:

*In opening you create mutual attraction before you build comfort. Hold off on the “what’s your name?” and “what do you do?” questions as well as the really deep conversations until it’s obvious that you are both interested in each other.*⁷

On transitioning, he writes:

*The point of the transition is to get from talking about your friend’s birthday or secret admirer to having a normal conversation about all sorts of things. **Making statements is a strategy.** [Statements like], “You look like you’d be a schoolteacher,” will get her to elicit information without you having to ask.⁸ (Emphasis added.)*

On attraction:

Tease her—give her a nickname. Tell good stories. Tell your stories as if they are emotional journeys, not recitations of facts. Don’t do anything that would be

6 N. Savoy, *Magic Bullets*, Los Angeles, Love Systems 2007.

7 Ibidem, p. 14.

8 Ibidem, p. 15.

interpreted as hitting on her. Once she has shown some signs of attraction ([like] touching you, laughing at your jokes, staying and talking to you for 20 minutes or so), then you can move to Qualification. When she is giving you signs that she is interested in you, switch gears... Indulge your curiosity about her... Ask her 'screening questions' like, "so what do you do for fun?" When she tells you things that you are attracted to, compliment her on them.⁹

And on the stage of comfort, Savoy has this to say:

Concentrate on getting to know each other across a wide variety of topics as opposed to talking about one subject in detail. Begin touching her playfully and initiating more intimate physicality as the night goes on. Start [for instance] with playful pushing, tapping, thumb wrestling, and then into more intimate stuff like hand holding and kissing... it should be a smooth, upward transition that is comfortable for both of you.¹⁰

This interactional model strategizes techniques of social suggestibility by apportioning stages of flirting, self-disclosure, and intimacy. Hedging against the risk of what Erving Goffman terms 'losing face,'¹¹ they attempt to rationalize, manage, and prevent infelicities in social interaction. For pickup artists, rationalizing marginal and ephemeral qualities in social interaction creates the illusion of control. By creating a universally-valid rubric of emotions and expressions, seduction names a category of behavior these men use to invest heterosexual dating within a managed, rationalized, and ultimately therapeutic ethos that legitimizes an entrepreneurial approach to sexual intimacy in transient attachments. They believe that their performed playfulness—using gestural estrangement-effects such as throwing words—will become habitual and automatic action by practiced repetition over time. They hope that this process of conditioning the self will allow them to embody new identities as charismatic men.

This preliminary overview also suggests that seduction communities teach attributes of what critics term 'hegemonic masculinity' in the West. As a concept, hegemonic masculinity names a set of cultural ideologies which promote male domination and female subordination through overt and tacit practices across

⁹ Ibidem, p. 16.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 17.

¹¹ E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Boston, Anchor 1959.

a spectrum of social institutions, sex roles, and gendered identities.¹² Behaviors that collectively constitute an ideal type of hegemonic masculinity may include risk-taking, violence and aggression, competitiveness, emotional restraint, and toughness. Relying on many of the same discursive practices used by twelve-step and addiction-recovery programs,¹³ men in seduction communities seek to recover from what they call ‘nice guy syndrome’¹⁴ in their relations with women by cultivating appetites for risk-taking, independence, and the rejection of dependency and victimization. At the same time, however, dating coaches and pickup artists implement flexibility into their codes of seduction to account for the inevitable uncertainties of any human interaction: inopportune intrusions and *faux pas*, which pickup artists call ‘state breaks.’ Consistent with neoliberal theories of agency,¹⁵ the individual here is treated as a conscious manipulator of systems to grant or withhold intimacy according to what pickup artists call ‘calibration’: surveillance of one’s speech—for the purpose of improving or correcting it. As I seek to show in the following sections, crafting hegemonic masculine selves by performing commodified techniques of seduction is not a simple achievement.

The Ethics of Laboring in Masculine Embodiment

Seduction, as a social practice, interrogates an affective domain between feeling and cognition, including ecstasy, hypnosis, fascination, and also inhibition and stupor. Seduction thus names a relation of power, at the same time as it inhabits an uneasy relationship to some foundational cultural concepts in the West, including freedom, autonomy, consent, and personhood itself. From Don Giovanni to Kierkegaard, masculine frailty has often been understood in the West through narrative quests of self-formation that seek to expunge the mark of heterosexual incompetence. In parts of the non-Western world, errant masculinity has been disciplined through cultural beliefs in spirit possession and witchcraft.¹⁶ In modern Western countries, social

12 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* 2nd Ed, Berkeley, University of California Press 2005.

13 E. S. Carr, *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2010.

14 The “nice guy” has been developed into a stigmatized figure in Dr. Robert Glover’s book *No More Mr. Nice Guy*. Glover, in the footsteps of relationship therapists, writes against “codependent” relationships as ones in which partners abet one-another’s immature behavior, addiction, or irresponsibility. “Codependent” individuals, Glover suggests, are those who rely excessively on others’ opinion or approval of them. R. Glover, *No More Mr. Nice Guy*, Philadelphia, Running Press 2003.

15 Ilana Gershon describes the “neoliberal self” as a business, managed as a bundle of skills. I. Gershon, *Neoliberal Agency*, ‘Current Anthropology’ 2011, Vol. 52, No. 4.

16 P. C. Johnson, *An Atlantic Genealogy of ‘Spirit Possession,’* ‘Comparative Studies in Society and History’ 2011,

constructions of hegemonic masculinity have traditionally secured privilege for heterosexual males by erasing associations between men's bodies and their reproductive capacities.¹⁷ With regard to punitive dispensations of power, dependent or impotent masculinities have often been oppressed by state-sanctioned legal, medical, and carceral interventions to stifle "sex panics."¹⁸

Since World War II in the United States, economic transformations and rising divorce rates in the U.S. have conceived domestic intimacy as a scene of expert knowledge and therapeutic intervention.¹⁹ More recently, social trends of going solo²⁰ may signal broader desires for withdrawal from committed domestic intimacy.²⁰ These cultural shifts have gained traction amidst epidemiological challenges in public health that seek to regulate safe sex by adjudicating risk and responsibility between sex partners. Sanctioning responsibility in sexual practices has revealed competing cultural beliefs around sexuality as the basis for political identity or, contrastingly, as consumer-based lifestyle. As the emergence of gay families, feminist and queer theory, and LGBTQ activism have shown, the surveillance and malleability of sexuality may have liberating dimensions for choice in gender identity.²¹ Claiming to challenge binary sexual orientations as an oppressive genesis of gender identity, these social movements have suggested that it may be heterosexual and gender-normative people—especially middle-class heterosexual men—who most feel the need to pass in their socially-approved gender and sex roles.²²

If seduction exists as a trans-historical modality of patriarchal power and male domination, the existence of communal and commodified pedagogies that teach seduction as a mode of self-fashioning seems to stand at odds with the project

53 (2). R. Behar, *Sexual Witchcraft, Colonialism, and Women's Powers: A View from the Mexican Inquisition*, [in:] *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, ed. A. Lavrin, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press 1992. V. Crapanzano, *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1985. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1976.

17 S. Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private*, New York, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux 2000.

D. Savran, *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1998.

18 G. Serughetti, *Gli Uomini che Pagano le Donne*, Rome, Ediesse 2013. G. Rubin, *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, [in:] 'Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader', 2nd Ed, ed. R. Parker, P. Aggleton, New York, Routledge 2007.

19 C. Celeslo, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the 20th Century United States*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press 2008.

20 E. Klinenberg, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*, New York, Penguin 2013.

21 M. Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, Durham, Duke University Press 2011. D. Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*, Durham, Duke University Press 2007.

22 J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham, Duke University Press 1998. E. K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*, New York, Columbia University Press 1986.

of hegemonic masculinity to naturalize sexual potency. In other words, it seems paradoxical that men should raise their own sexuality as problematic in order to acquire power. To be sure, learning social skills has long been linked to self-fashioning in the domain of aesthetic self-presentation.²³ In the U.S., self-presentation became linked to economic success through self-help, and in this way defrayed contradictions of masculinity as both a contingent accomplishment and a felt condition of self-possession and political identity in the American public sphere, according to folk models of binary sexes. Yet the shift in late-capitalist democracies from an ethics of rights to an ethics of technique²⁴ has revived old fears about the effects of modernization on virtuous conduct in intimate relationships and gendered subcultures.

Seduction communities are thus one example of the postmodern intervention of expertise in gender identity. Debates about appearance and authenticity are raised in ethnographic studies of hyper-masculinity:²⁵ i.e. in sports,²⁶ body-building subcultures,²⁷ tattooing,²⁸ fashion,²⁹ and youth culture. More pointedly, the popularization of body enhancement through the surgical alteration of muscles and limbs,³⁰ as well as using drugs for low-testosterone,³¹ anabolic steroids, and anti-anxiety medication,³² goes beyond what is considered therapeutic intervention and suggests gendered implications for men's insecurities over their bodies. In the post-fordist era of economic deregulation, new configurations of expertise, therapeutic intervention, and social dependencies have configured new 'counterpublics'³³ around marketplaces of male enhancement. Enabling risk prognoses through expert quantifications of behavior, these social technologies enable new interdependencies at the same time that they

23 S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2005. J. Ardit, *A Genealogy of Manners: Transformations of Social Relations in France and England from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1998. C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1992.

24 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, New York, Vintage 1990.

25 Hypermasculinity refers to exaggerated displays of stereotypically masculine attributes, including excesses of aggression, physical strength, and sexuality.

26 L. Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2006.

27 A. Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction*, Albany, SUNY Press 1993.

28 F. Mascia-Lees, P. Sharpe, *The Marked and the Un(re)marked: Tattoo and Gender in Theory and Narrative*, [in:] *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text*, ed. F. Mascia-Lees, P. Sharpe, Albany, SUNY Press 1992.

29 B. Schiermer, *Late-Modern Hipsters: New Tendencies in Popular Culture*, 'Acta Sociologica' 2014, 57 (2).

30 A. Edmonds, *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil*, Durham, Duke University Press 2010.

31 M. Gutmann, *Men are Animals: Category Politics and Biological Distress in Mexico City and Shanghai*, Lecture delivered at CUNY Graduate Center, Dept. of Anthropology, February 24, 2014.

32 A. Lakoff, *The Anxieties of Globalization: Antidepressant Sales and Economic Crisis in Argentina*, 'Social Studies of Science' 2004, Vol. 34, No. 2.

33 M. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York, Zone Books 2005.

embed gendered forms of power in perceptions of health, normality, and desires for self-transformation to allay fears of social “misfitting.”³⁴

The medicalization and pathology of disabilities in masculinity has invoked the work of expert techniques in rehabilitation, in the process destabilizing the social power relations invested in naturalizing heterosexual masculine identities by relations of cathexis. Seduction communities suture the performance of heterosexuality to the paradoxes of self-help and so-called ‘makeover culture’³⁵ through the objectification of skills in social relationship. As such, these communities embody contradictions in liberal thought between property (an alienable result of skills in labor) and intimacy (as a redemptive condition of union between two people). This points to a broader cultural contradiction in liberalism which posits a categorical difference between labor, and the products of labor as alienable commodities, and sexuality as an inalienable self-possession.³⁶ Mainstream narratives use this assumption of qualitative opposition (most famously appearing in the form of the ideological division between public and private spheres of gendered work) as a basis for perceiving techniques of sexuality as a fundamental alienation of selfhood. Such assumptions have been used to discipline or stigmatize sexualities that are not reproductive, heterosexual, monogamous, or so-called ‘vanilla.’³⁷

In seduction communities, however, this ambiguity is useful. They approach it in pragmatic fashion by deploying two contrasting modalities of self-help:³⁸ one is rationalizing and technocratic—exemplified by training programs with names like *Date against the Machine*, *The Girlfriend Activation System*, and *Execute the Program*—and the other is expressive and romanticized, exemplified by names such as *The Fearless Experience*, *Ars Amorata*, and *The Authentic Man Program*. Universally, these programs recommend that prospective paramours should visualize themselves as strategists. Respectively, adherents tend to understand their heterosexual self-fashioning either through rationalizing techniques of seduction as a mode of sexual conquest (the former) or by working on self-development in order to sharpen their embodied expression of “authentic” masculinity (the latter). Believing in a transactional relationship between inner and outer self, the game of seduction as a communal enterprise among men enables a series of self-projects and personalities for pickup artists, by engaging them in what Erik Hendriks calls practices of

34 R. Garland-Thomson, *Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept*, ‘Hypatia’ 2011, Vol. 26, Issue 3.

35 C. Heyes, *Cosmetic Surgery and the Televisual Makeover*, ‘Feminist Media Studies’ 2007, Vol. 7, Issue 1.

36 V. Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2007.

37 G. Rubin, *ibid.* J.O. Davidson, *The Rights and Wrongs of Prostitution*, ‘Hypatia’ 2002, Vol. 17, No. 2.

38 M. McGee, *Self Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*, New York, Oxford University Press 2007.

‘ascetic hedonism.’³⁹ As Hendriks puts it, using commodified routines of working at play in sexual seduction allows these men to fold an erstwhile Protestant work ethic into ascetic forms of self-discipline in the pursuit of hedonistic social goals.

In seduction communities, men experience seduction training as an involution of the protestant ethic of salvation through work. Despite its pretense to self-empowerment, this training paradoxically seems to produce inhibitions. This is because the masculine subject who emerges from the ritual space of the boot camp is transformed into an agent who must constantly beware the constraining force of fear, deploying techniques of self-help in order to slacken its yoke. The key metaphor of calibration in seduction training appears, consequently, not only as a matter of monitoring one’s embodied expression. As I will show below, calibration appears as an instance of what Margot Weiss calls ‘working at play’:⁴⁰ it works to gloss over the matter of agency, which appears as a fraught and contradictory relationship between technique and authenticity in learning seduction skills, and which manifests through the affective labors⁴¹ of seduction training that are practiced between men in seduction communities. Specifically, calibration names the affective labor of seduction training through which a resolution of this paradox is forever sought, but hardly found.

In the following two sections, I seek to show that men in these communities experience culturally-based ambivalences around norms of self-help—including ideas of freedom, dependency, and addiction—in ways that complicate understandings of hegemonic masculinity. Examining the embodied effects of seduction skills—an affective spectrum from serotonin-induced flow-states to abject depression and burnout—illuminates the contradiction between technique⁴² and the belief in autonomy and expressing one’s authentic self. I show how stress, fatigue, and depression come to the surface as men struggle and fail to account for human realities of interdependency and emotional and corporeal vulnerability they experience in striving to embody hegemonic masculine identities through seduction training, examining the cultural meanings and unexpected utilities that men ascribe to these emotional states.

39 E. Hendriks, *Ascetic Hedonism: Self and Sexual Conquest in the Seduction Community*, ‘Cultural Analysis’ 2012, p. 11.

40 M. Weiss, *Working at Play: BDSM Sexuality in the San Francisco Bay Area*, ‘Anthropologica’ 2006, Vol. 48, No. 2.

41 M. Hardt, *Affective Labor*, ‘Boundary 2’ 1999, Vol. 26, No. 2.

42 What Tom Boellstorff, via Aristotle, calls *techné*.

Capacity and Debility in Homosocial Performance: the 'Natural' and the 'Social Robot'

As much as they value the identity and lifestyle of the pickup artist, equally many men who practice seduction techniques place high value on the experience of achieving a 'flow state'⁴³ in their social interactions. Action in a flow-state seems effortless and automatic, involving a lowering of inhibitions. In the process of practicing seduction techniques, men report that their psychosomatic relation to their own bodies is transformed. Participants report that the effect of PUA socialization can induce a state of trance; they recall feeling high, or altered states of consciousness. One informant named Max described this state as 'being in the zone': a felt attunement, cognitive absorption, or flow, where space and interpersonal alterity seem to recede. As Max described it to me: "There's a flow to it. Pickup puts you into a zone. It's all about body language... That sense of time distortion, that sense of ease when all your other troubles go away because you're focused; and that sense of self-mastery that comes with knowledge and confidence in your skill set... it frees up a lot of mental space on your hard-drive."

Embodying gender norms embedded in the protestant ethic,⁴⁴ users of seduction communities encounter varying degrees of difficulty in interactions with women and with their own emotions. Writing about the genesis of identity among technically-proficient software hackers, Gabriella Coleman calls this difficulty 'material resistance'; she writes that "adept craftspeople, such as hackers, must build an abundant 'tolerance for frustration' (Sennett 2008 in Coleman), a mode of coping that at various points will break down, leading, at best, to feelings of frustration, and at worst, to anguish and even despair and burnout."⁴⁵ Max confides that performing interpersonal seduction techniques can become addictive, and even debilitating in the long run. As he puts it, "It gets addicting. You can take it too far. You can get to the point where flow becomes the only sort of experience you can tolerate, and you can't handle mundane experience anymore, and all of a sudden it's like, 'oh my god, I have to quit my job.'" A dating coach named Jake elaborated the point: "We had one guy like that recently, who had a massive need for validation. He would just plow, plow, plow, plow. He took all these pickup workshops, and he's like 'I can approach anybody

43 Borrowed from the literature on the psychology of performance, "flow" has been described by authors such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as an optimal state of performance in which one is absorbed in a given practice, and in which emotion and cognition are harnessed to the purpose of completing the task at hand. M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York, Harper & Row 1990.

44 M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York, Routledge 2001.

45 G. Coleman, *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2011, p. 11.

anytime, anywhere.’ But he wasn’t feeling any emotion. He was like a social robot, just a machine.”

The idea of calibration suggests that material resistance is in fact necessary to achieve embodied flow-states. Problematically, however, a subjective willingness to face material resistance also characterizes the numbing burnout that affects the ‘social robot.’ Jake’s anecdote about his client reveals that an unfeeling tolerance for uncertainty in social interaction—a tolerance for what pickup artists call state breaks—easily becomes willful ignorance: an addicting, numbing habit rooted in techniques that self-medicate through compulsive habits of approaching women. The experience of flow in flirting and charismatic embodiment thus brings with it an uncanny double, the fear of a loss of class status through abject embodiment which Max figures as unemployment. As a commodified skill, therefore, seduction brings with it an inherent ambiguity that appears in Max’s quote as a metaphorical castration and an existential failure. The genesis of what Jake terms the ‘social robot’ represents a tipping point where the ethics of technique usurps the agentic, empowered, and expressive work of self-development: hyper-masculinity becomes perverse, literally emasculated.

This feared *other* is counterposed to the fetishism of the ‘natural,’ a man who embodies masculinity effortlessly and without need for expert skills training. In the comfortably bland interior of a hotel suite in Arlington, Virginia, I listened as a dating coach named Jake illustrated the following scenario to the men in his dating boot-camp: “Picture a ‘natural.’ Does a natural walk around figuring out how to attract women? No. He just knows he’s going to attract women, it’s part of his make-up.” Mike, his assistant, replied by portraying his childhood in rural Virginia: “I was fortunate enough to grow up in like, redneck middle-of-nowhere, so it was like, if you’re a pussy, you’re fucked. Because for the guys that I grew up with, that was unacceptable. The guys didn’t tolerate any shit other than masculinity. And so, you figured it out real quick.” With ambivalent nostalgia, Mike connects the natural to intimate peer socialization. In so doing, he links the idea of masculinity as a natural resource to whiteness, as well as to the kind of masculinity that is born only from the physical, contingent labor of rural places.

The natural seducer, a person who learned to embody masculinity at a young age, is a precious archetype that appears tantalizingly beyond the reach of those men who train themselves in seduction communities. Yet the very choice in redemptive masculine self-fashioning these men take on confronts them with the specter of emasculating commodification. In the hotel suite, I watched as Jake began to ‘tune’ his clients, working with their bodies and their affects as they conversed with a female

trainer—named Jen—who had been hired to help the men model confident behaviors in their interactions with women. The first man taking his turn to approach the model was Ted, an Englishman. Ted strode up to Jen and uttered a greeting, “Hi.”

Jake [to the audience]: “So, how do you [audience] feel in your body? What’s the first feeling you guys get?”

Andy: “Umm, [it feels like he has a] tight throat.”

Jake: “Did he feel awkward, did he feel connected?”

Rob: “[He felt] Forced.” Ted concurred, saying that “it felt forced.”

Jake now coached Ted: “Honestly, that ‘hi’ was better than I thought it was gonna be. So, you did a good job. Yesterday you were so riddled with nervousness, that’s what I was expecting—I was expecting all that to come back, and it didn’t, so that’s good. So go ahead and step in a little closer... Just look in her eyes. Look into her left eye. Now, I want you to feel your heart right here, as much as you can [taps Ted’s chest, above his heart]. I know you have trouble being aware of your emotions. So what I want you to do is relax. You’ve been to the movies right? You can’t control a movie, right? You can’t control actors, right, if you were a director. So if you were to ask an actor to do something, you just have to surrender and watch and hope they do what you asked them to do. Same thing here—ask your heart to open. And just watch, what does it do? You may not notice anything, but ask anyways. And then ask it [heart] to connect to her. And become aware of this part of your body [points to Ted’s chest]. Shake your right hand for me. Stay in the container. Stay looking here, don’t look away—that [looking away] is a tension break. Ok, become aware of yourself, right here [points to his trachea]. There we go, that’s what I want. Now, ask the stomach to open a little bit, just like a crack in a window. Now take a tube, like a little straw about yea long, and put it right down here, and imagine you can drain out all that pressure that’s in your stomach. Just let it keep draining. Can you feel the anxiety? Now, I want you to come back into your full throat, and ask your body to open up to her. Nod your head down. Start to create awareness from here to here [points to his upper trachea and chest]. The anxiety builds, it will go away. Now ask the heart to open a little more. [Addressing the men in the room] Did you guys see how he softened? [To Ted] Say ‘Hi’ one more time.”

Ted: “Hi.”

Jake: “Now hum for me.”

Ted: “Hmmmmmmm.”

Jake: “Open your eyes. Your hum can come down... Down, down, down... There you go. Down at the bottom. [To the room] Strong, strong defenses on this one [guy]. Now say another ‘hi.’”

Ted: “Hi.”

Jake: “[to Ted] Where do you put anxiety?”

Ted: “In my head. It [just] stopped.”

Jake: “There we go. [To the room] He’s going to break very soon.”

Meanwhile Jake has put on some soothing, hypnotic music playing in the background, like a meditation or a spa soundtrack. He addresses Ted, “Allow the music to strengthen your heart. Now say ‘hi’ to her.”

Ted: “Hi.”

Jake: “Now hum for me. Stay awake. Now, will you say ‘hi’ to her?”

Ted: “Hi.”

Jake: “It’s still forced. So we’ll come back into place.”

Jake’s language erodes the difference between reason and passion, act and representation, and between self and collectivity. Ted’s stiffness surfaces as he confronts a felt dissociation between his mind and his body, a dissociation which manifests as shame around the public revelation of repressed emotion. As Jake tunes Ted’s expression and Ted calibrates his own feeling, male emotion is expressed through the performance of empathic technique. We are left with a question: is Ted expressing himself, or conforming to the demands of a charismatic performance?

Freedom and Inequality in Embodying Authentic Masculinity

The erosion of boundaries between labor and leisure in late capitalism reveals that the self is engaged in constant processes of self-making and boundary-regulation. Acting as an expert medium, the dating coach seeks to extract “natural” masculinity from his client’s body through a virtuoso performance of fine-tuning expression, and transferring emotions, by reading and naming interpersonal feelings. Almost like an evangelical pastor,⁴⁶ Jake’s rhetoric works to create a subcultural reality of beliefs, outlooks, values, and aspirations in his audience. Said differently, there is an ethical value to the intended reception of his diagnosis of Ted’s inhibition, as members of the group are intended to become moral agents disposed to take action based on the immaterial labor of embodiment they have just witnessed. Jake asks Ted to surrender. As he proceeds to speak, Jake and Ted appear to be no longer in control. Rather, Ted’s body is doing things—the heart and the stomach are “opening”; anxiety is “draining” and “building” like a fluid, unconscious process. Jake points to an internal landscape of intensities and thresholds. Ted’s persona appears, by the end, as merely a wall that

46 S. Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2001.

is about to break. By reading into Ted's body and suggesting feelings, Jake's language in itself works as a seduction that bypasses disputation by the ritual sequence in which it is phrased. On close inspection, Jake's clairvoyance hedges against the risk that his performance may fail.

This becomes clearer when we consider that Jake's language overrides the premise of agency as consent in two ways: first, by leading Ted to invest affective intensity to private parts of his own body; and second, by the inference that this hermeneutic form of self-reflexivity can enable him to seduce women in his daily life outside of the dating workshop. Jake imagines the body of his client as a landscape of clues, of forces, barriers, and flows. By repeating and estranging the felt reality of the body and its basic interpersonal functions—such as breathing, feeling, and saying “hi”—Jake engages in working at play to legitimate seductive masculinity. The persuasive force of his words comes as he rhetorically positions himself in the gap between directing Ted's awareness through attentional cues and observing Ted's ability to feel his body and share that feeling with Jen. The idea of the 'natural' is a necessary fiction: it sutures over the contradictions of agency that coalesce in the idea of calibration that Ted is asked to perform, while pointing to what is ineffable, contingent about empathetic communication and in face of which one can only surrender. The contradiction that the 'natural' seeks to explain is that authentic masculinity exists, much less that it can be embodied through the mediation of expert technique among men who evaluate, touch, and mimetically incorporate each other's bodies.

The “natural” ability to attract women is signified, more importantly, by an ethical willingness to surrender, submit oneself, and engage in ritual supervised exercises in emotion work. As apprentices under the compassionate dominance of a dating coach, men work in the mirror of an idea of femininity that serves the purpose of allowing them to bond with each other through discourses of shared vulnerability.⁴⁷ The persona of the competent seducer is an aspiration, achieved through bodily and mental schemas that distinguish capacity and debility in the performance of heterosexuality, and through the willingness of men to transform this 'work' into practices of surveilling oneself and others. The function of the seduction community is therefore not just to train men in heterosexual seduction, but also to constitute social relations that rationalize embodied states of alterity and inequality through mutual acts of evaluation, intimacy, and desire among men.

⁴⁷ Social rituals of male bonding through the deferral of sexual gratification with desirable women have been studied in the sex-work industry, both in developing economies and in metropolises of the Global North.” See K. Hoang, *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*, Berkeley, University of California Press 2015. Also see A. Allison, *Nightwork: Sexuality, Pleasure, and Corporate Masculinity in a Tokyo Hostess Club*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1994.

Men in these groups are aware of the irony that their achievements in embodying hegemonic masculinity make them objects of desire to other men. The fear that homosociality becomes confused with homosexuality—the fear that calibrating the expression of sexuality replaces the sexual object-choice of a woman—is displaced through the construction of social hierarchies around a man’s ability to capably survey the difference between the ethical labor of self-expression and the instrumental work of persuasion (the specter of the ‘social robot’) in seduction. Homosocial interactions among members of seduction communities therefore act as what Jasbir Puar calls ‘switchpoints of bodily capacity.’⁴⁸ Here, men are trained to embrace the risk of ‘material resistance’ as proof of their calling to masculinity: whether this resistance lies in the intractability and opacity of a social milieu, or within the alterity of one’s own body. In this process, men experience seduction as an involution of the protestant ethic of salvation through work. It is no surprise, then, that seduction training also seems to produce inhibition; the masculine subject emerges from the ritual space of the bootcamp as an agent who must constantly be aware of the constraining efficacy of fear and resort to techniques of self-help in ways of being “obliged to be free.”⁴⁹

The calling of seduction is one which unites the therapeutic idiom of expressive personal communication with the corporate idiom of instrumental, efficient communication.⁵⁰ The improvisational work of calibration—tacking back and forth between laboring at technique and working to express oneself—points to broader transformations in the importance of skills in public and private contexts. Broader changes in political economy and ‘informational capitalism’⁵¹ are distilled, managed, and made operable as a problem with masculine gender. As theorists of neoliberal economic arrangements suggest, the self has been reconstituted as the seat of “human capital” and performance-tracking through new realities of economic precariousness and the dematerialization of value. No longer simply useful in career-advancement and strategic alliance-making, learning soft skills (including self-presentation and social networking) are turned into ethical codes of self-conduct. They reflect ontological shifts in how the self is reimagined as a “bundle of skills”⁵² who must train herself not just to confront insecurity, but to love it.

The authentic man these communities seek to collectively produce, then, is a function of class relations: he is the man who *chooses* voluntary participation in

48 J. Puar, *Coda: The Cost of Getting Better: Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints*, ‘GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies’ 2011, 18 (1).

49 N. Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, New York, Routledge 1990, p. 258.

50 B. Urciuoli, *Skills and Selves in the New Workplace*, ‘American Ethnologist’ 2008, Vol. 35, No. 2.

51 M. Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell 1998.

52 B. Urciuoli, *op. cit.*

commodified forms of intimate embodiment work practiced with other men. By creating triangles of desire between himself, his client, and his female model, Jake implicitly references (and helps to instantiate) a pattern of male friendships, mentorships, entitlements, and rivalries that depend on the changing meaning of maleness in reconfiguring class relationships. As Eve Sedgwick writes, “we are in the presence of male heterosexual desire, in the form of a desire to consolidate partnership with authoritative males in and through the bodies of females.”⁵³ In this realm, prestige-making action—such as the ability to take risky actions that are closer to the “authentic” masculine self because they destabilize the comfortable mask of socially-scripted identity⁵⁴—appears against the backdrop of repetitive, habitual, and never-ending labor on the self.

In this world, moreover, ethical behaviors are actions that bear a relation of integrity or congruency to one’s personality. Ethical violations of consent in heterosexual intimacies appear simply as incongruent (or contingent) effects, behaviors that fall to the wayside of proper exercises in calibration. The fiction of equal access to natural masculinity is sustained through an ideology of meritocracy, or the ideal of equal access to mastering technique by engaging in work on the self. Equal access through meritocracy is embedded in scripts and repertoires of surveilling and assessing the performance of capacity and debility in other men. Yet examples of failure in the purportedly meritocratic exercise of seduction skills—exemplified first by Max’s reading of flow as a debilitating state, and then by Ted’s inability to receive the transference of his coach Jake—reveals the fact that men are unequally positioned to access or act upon the forms of hegemonic masculinity that seduction skills encourages. In such conditions, the ethical character of the person may suffer as he becomes engaged in an endless process of labor on the self which instrumentalizes his social relationships to the goal of achieving a fraught and paradoxical liberation.

Conclusion

By revealing ways in which the line between work and play has been blurred in late capitalism through the idea of soft skills, the embodiment of seduction as a skill-set

53 E. K. Sedgwick, *ibidem*. p. 38.

54 Anthropologists like Clifford Geertz and Caitlin Zaloom have pointed out the ways in which masculine spaces apportion status, privilege, and masculinity according to feats of risk-taking in rule-bounded games of chance. These games of chance are seen to reveal more closely one’s true identity in counterpoint to social identities that are imposed from the outside. See C. Zaloom, *Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2010. C. Geertz, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, [in:] ‘The Interpretation of Cultures,’ ed. Clifford Geertz, New York, Basic Books 1977.

introduces men to a new, different space of enchantment in late modernity. Seduction skills can have a liberating affective force for men who seek to master its craft. In equal measure, however, they may haunt him with the specter of aborted intimacies by confusing the ethical goals of self-expression and self-presentation. Seduction communities proliferate domains of skill within a glittering backwater, the displaced effluence of an endless paradox of authenticity and technique in securing utopian possibilities of life and thriving. Despite their privilege and their pursuit of flow, many participants also experience the underside of their search as a feeling of perpetual debility: the pursuit of a horizon of self-actualization that is always-already deferred into the future.

In trying to solve the riddle of precariousness and material resistance, these groups also recreate class, race, and gender hierarchies that neoliberal economic arrangements depend on by qualifying masculinity as skilled or un-skilled according to a person's ability to spend money and time in projects of self-fashioning. This labor, and the homosocial communities it engenders, may foreclose a broader awareness of inequalities and possibilities for defining common grounds for emancipatory collective politics. This labor also defuses the possibility of imagining collective futures of being-otherwise, instead making ethical problems into challenges of technique that a man is called upon to master. I propose that we are better served by opening new theoretical pathways to understanding men and their social dependencies—ways in which, as Judith Butler puts it, “the self must be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself.”⁵⁵ After all, seduction communities seek to create a value for men that can never be proven: how to make them feel like men.

Abstrakt

Hakując „naturalność”. Umiejętności uwodzenia, samopomoc oraz etyczne aspekty ucieleśniania męskości w społecznościach uwodzicieli.

Teoretyzowano już bliskie relacje między mężczyznami a kobietami z różnych perspektyw: feministycznej, psychoanalitycznej oraz polityczno-ekonomicznej. W społecznościach uwodzicieli trenerzy randkowania oraz artyści podrywu – z angielskiego „pickup artists”, skracane jako PUA – wchodzą w rolę ekspertów-pośredników w budowaniu norm uwodzenia dla heteroseksualnych mężczyzn. Bazując na etnograficznej analizie pracy trenerów z klientami w ramach społeczności uwodzicieli w Nowym Jorku, niniejszy artykuł sugeruje trzy rzeczy. Po pierwsze, że u podstawy nauczania technik heteroseksualnego uwodzenia leży tworzenie męskiej tożsamości; po drugie, że mężczyźni doświadczają ambiwalentności przekazu kulturowego dotyczącego norm samopomocy

⁵⁵ J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York, Routledge 2004, p. 7.

– m.in. w kwestii takich idei jak wolność, zależność oraz uzależnienie – i że ma to wpływ na sposób w jaki kształtują swoje ciała, wypowiedzi oraz tożsamości, które mają być obiektami pożądania dla kobiet; po trzecie, że ćwiczenie się w zakresie uwodzenia komplikuje heteronormatywne męskie tożsamości poprzez tworzenie się pomiędzy mężczyznami intymnych sfer zależności i odsłaniania własnego 'ja'. Ten artykuł podąża za męskimi trajektoriami nauki umiejętności uwodzenia i pokazuje, że w ramach owej nauki mężczyźni czerpią z przeciwstawnych retoryk dotyczących autentyczności ekspresji oraz auto-prezentacji, których celem jest poradzić sobie z całą gamą opartych na normach płciowych nierówności społecznych i ekonomicznych, przy okazji odtwarzając je.

