



Dr Rachel O'Neill

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## Author Interview: Q&A with Rachel O'Neill on *Seduction: Men, Masculinity and Mediated Intimacy*

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*In this author interview, we speak to Rachel O'Neill about her recent book, **Seduction: Men, Masculinity and Mediated Intimacy**, which offers an ethnographic study of the 'seduction industry'. In the interview, she discusses the seduction industry as part of a continuum of mediated intimacy, the ways in which neoliberal rationalities are shaping masculine subjectivity today, how the book relates to contemporary discussions surrounding consent and women's sexual agency and the particular challenges of undertaking this fieldwork.*

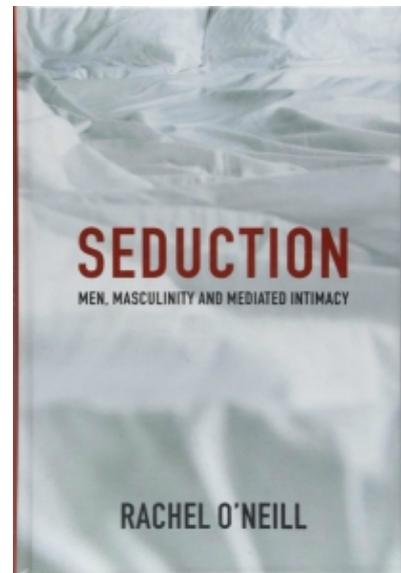
*If you are interested in this interview, you can read a review of **Seduction** on LSE RB [here](#).*

Q&A with Rachel O'Neill, author of *Seduction: Men, Masculinity and Mediated Intimacy* (Polity, 2018)

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**Q: Could you introduce the 'seduction industry' and what you sought to explore in your book?**

The seduction industry offers instruction and advice to heterosexual men seeking greater choice and control in their intimate lives. While the practice of seduction is nothing new, this industry elaborates a distinctive system of expertise. Its central organising premise is that interactions between women and men are subject to certain underlying principles that, once understood, can be readily manipulated.



Those who participate in this arena are often referred to and refer to themselves as 'pickup artists' or 'PUAs', though many are ambivalent about these terms. Seduction training itself takes a wide variety of forms, from instructional handbooks and video tutorials to evening seminars and weekend workshops. There's an emphasis on experiential learning, or learning by doing. Almost all training programmes include an 'in-field' component where trainers observe students interacting with women – typically without women's awareness – and evaluate their performance. Interactions are choreographed according to a flexible but predetermined script, from the initial 'open' through to the 'close'.

The question at the heart of the book asks: what makes seduction so compelling to those who participate in this sphere? It enquires into the psychic investments, relational patterns and material realities that draw men to this arena – rather than assuming their motivations are somehow self-evident. At the same time, I seek to locate the seduction industry within the broader cultural moment of which it is part, and to interrogate the economic, social and political arrangements that animate this moment. The research was ethnographic, encompassing media analysis, participant observation and interviews, conducted in London.

As a project, *Seduction* is very much concerned with questions of culture and subjectivity as well as power and sexual politics. It's also a specifically feminist project, one that avoids reductively caricaturing the seduction industry so as to offer a more nuanced analysis of contemporary gender relations. Readers will not be in any doubt that I am critical of the seduction industry – the concluding chapter

is titled 'Against Seduction' – yet the research I undertook demonstrates that this cultural formation is very much a product of our times.

**Q: Indeed, in the book you describe the seduction industry 'not as a *deviation* or *departure* from current social conventions, but as an *extension* and *acceleration* of existing cultural norms'? Could you explain why the seduction industry is part of a continuum of 'mediated intimacy' today?**

There can be comfort in the idea that the seduction industry is a contained and limited entity, particularly for those who are concerned about the kind of advice it makes available. In reality, its boundaries are highly permeable, such that techniques and practices elaborated in this setting frequently manifest elsewhere. Tactics such as 'negging' and 'peacocking', for example, have become so commonplace as to be cultural clichés.

More than this, the seduction industry reflects and reproduces much broader social and cultural patterns. It's predicated on the same kind of fix-it self-help logics that predominate today across a wide variety of fora, promising that life circumstances can be transformed through sheer force of will. It colludes in the idea that women and men are essentially different species and reifies some of the most generic articulations of heterosexual relationality. It perpetuates a view of masculinity as something that can be achieved by gaining sexual access to women's bodies.

Where others have categorised the seduction industry as a subculture, I approach it instead as a site of 'mediated intimacy'. I borrow this term from the social and cultural theorist Rosalind Gill, who first deployed it in an **analysis** of sex and relationship advice in women's magazines. What interested Gill was how this advice exhorted women – always already presumed to be heterosexual – to *work* on their sexual selves and *invest* in an intimate skill set.

This is precisely the dynamic at play in the seduction industry; the key difference is that the advice is specifically directed to heterosexual men and encompasses not only written guidance but practical instruction. Approaching the seduction industry as a site of mediated intimacy directs attention to the many continuities that exist between this system of expertise and ideas about sex and relationships that circulate more widely. In a move also taken by Gill in **recent work** with Meg-John Barker and Laura Harvey, it allows for a consideration of how intimate life is patterned by media far beyond that which is explicitly advice-orientated.

Where much of the scholarship on mediated intimacy focuses on media texts, *Seduction* goes beyond a concern with representation to examine how mediated intimacy is lived and experienced. I'm especially interested in the multiple meanings that attend the word 'mediate'. In conventional usage, this refers to a process of bringing things together – as in, arbitrate or liaise. However, the Latin root '*mediatus*' – meaning 'placed in the middle' – directs us to think about interceptions and impediments. To talk about intimacy as 'mediated' means giving consideration to the ways in which expert discourse – while promising to enable intimacy – very often serves to occlude it.



**Q:** You stress that the seduction industry is entwined with neoliberalism, exploring 'how neoliberal rationalities centred on management and entrepreneurship shape the intimate subjectivities of heterosexual men'. Could you give some examples of this entrepreneurial logic? What is the value of trying to understand how 'neoliberalism gets under men's skin', as you put it?

One of the reasons seduction is so compelling to many men is that it frames intimate relationality as a skill that can be developed. Attraction, intimacy, trust, desire – these are all dynamics that can be wilfully produced by one party over another. The industry thus promises to dispel the uncertainty and anxiety that so often go along with finding and forging sexual relationships, by providing guidelines that can be used to direct any given encounter.

This framing depends upon the import of entrepreneurial logics into the intimate realm. Men must be willing to invest in an intimate skill set, quite literally: a typical

weekend programme costs in the region of £800. In order to realise the promise of choice and control the industry offers up, men have to pay for the expertise it makes available. Many of those I spoke to described their decision to take training courses in unambiguously economic terms; one even showed me his workings, having calculated that a weekend programme offers a better 'ROI' than other practices geared towards casual sex, such as dressing fashionably or working out.

However appealing it may be at first, the idea that attraction is a skill – rather than a dynamic that unfolds more or less spontaneously between people – frequently gives rise to a kind of compulsion. This is because skills, once cultivated, need to be maintained. A number of men I interviewed described acting in ways they knew to be self-destructive. One spoke of ending a relationship with the 'perfect' woman because he was afraid of losing his hard-wrought seduction skills. Another found himself sleeping with women even when he had no desire to do so, again in an effort to maintain the skills he had worked so hard to develop.

For many of the men I interviewed, the desire to *achieve* something in their intimate lives – rather than to *experience* an encounter or be *present* for a relationship – was such that they were chronically dissatisfied. These patterns can be seen as part of a larger dynamic identified by Eva Illouz in *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, which examines how intimate discontent is culturally produced and commercially managed. My argument is that the desires and discontents of these men are not especially unusual: this is what intimacy looks like when overtaken by an aspirational ethos centred on accumulation and upgrade.

In thinking about these dynamics, I find it more useful to talk about *masculine subjectivity* rather than *masculinity* per se. In part, this stems from my disinclination to invoke masculinity as an explanatory device – as in, 'men do X because masculinity'. Instead, I think it's important to foreground the fact that dominant modes of being a man are shaped by dominant modes of being a subject, as scholars working in the tradition of discursive psychology have long argued. In this particular time and place, that means examining how logics of investment and return, opportunity and outcome are being embedded in our bodies and minds.

Where feminist scholars have produced a rich and varied literature on the subject-producing capacities of neoliberalism as they pertain to women and femininity, there is little parallel scholarship on men and masculinities (some notable

exceptions notwithstanding). Closely informed by both feminist and masculinities scholarship, *Seduction* attempts to bridge this distance.



**Q: While the book doesn't include women's voices commenting on their experiences of being seduced through industry techniques – a decision you describe as difficult in the Introduction – do you see the book as contributing to intensified discussions regarding consent and women's sexual agency?**

Absolutely. Consent is a major theme of the book, set within a broader consideration of sexual practice and sexual ethics. This discussion is elaborated at greatest length in Chapter Three, entitled 'Manufacturing Consent' (with an obvious nod to Noam Chomsky). Here I examine the rationalisation and codification of sex within the seduction industry, setting this in the context of a more general systematisation of sex elaborated under Fordism and post-Fordism. I interrogate how the industry claims to have deciphered the 'truth' of female sexuality, a project in which it is actively aided and abetted by evolutionary psychologists.

Seduction is a highly programmatic enterprise, with specific forms of talk and touch prescribed for each 'stage' of an interaction. This sounds somewhat mechanical, but it's important to understand that this mode of sexual conduct is not devoid of emotion, but laden with it. For example, one popular model advises adherents to borrow scripts and scenarios from romantic comedy films, on the basis that every woman 'wants that movie moment'. Seduction centres on the instrumentalisation of feeling, manifest in orchestrated displays of spontaneity and cultivated performances of authenticity. It is, in Illouz's terms, a truly '**cold intimacy**'.

One of the central knowledge-practices within this system of expertise is 'LMR' or 'last minute resistance', which refers to the supposedly 'token' resistance women put up prior to sex as well as the practical means by which this can be 'overcome'. LMR can be seen as the lynchpin of all seduction practice, not only because it is so widely discussed and deployed, but also because it fully encapsulates the idea that interactions can be deliberately engineered to achieve a predetermined outcome.

It's worth stating that, in negotiating this system of expertise, men I interviewed didn't simply accept seduction knowledge-practices unquestioningly. They thought about them, turned them over in their minds, tried them out in real time. And yet, by and large, there was a tendency to buy into these knowledge-practices – a tendency which held even when men regarded certain practices as morally suspect, which some did.

In interviews, a number of men recounted instances where they had disregarded women's refusals of sex, on the basis that – endowed with supreme knowledge of female sexuality – they know what women 'really' want. This is not, or should not be, surprising. Because this system of expertise frames women as naïve or duplicitous in articulating their sexual desires, it effectively authorises men to direct and control all aspects of heterosexual sex – even and especially where women resist their advances.

Drawing on scholarship on moral psychology and epistemic injustice, I argue that seduction facilitates a specifically *masculinist* mode of sexual conduct, where women are regarded chiefly as technical problems – as in, 'how do I get her to do X'. Further to this, there is a diminishing or emptying out of relational capacities and ethical obligations, as men are encouraged to pursue their own selfish self-interest. I set these dynamics in the context of the wider feminist literature on heterosexuality, which demonstrates that experiences of manipulation and coercion are commonplace for women who sleep with men. In doing so, I demonstrate that seduction relies on and reproduces extant power imbalances whereby men's wants and desires are routinely prioritised far above those of women.

In terms of wider conversations currently taking place, my sense is that while the MeToo movement has facilitated greater attention to particular patterns of harassment and abuse within specific industries, it has rarely allowed for broader questions to be posed about heterosexuality *sui generis*. Indeed, as Jack

**Halberstam** notes, heterosexuality has scarcely been mentioned. Part of my purpose with *Seduction*, while researched and written before the advent of this movement, has been to demonstrate that heterosexuality as an institution is patterned by systematic inequalities. It is precisely insofar as the seduction industry serves to maintain this institution – ‘patching the system’, as I put it – that we should be concerned by its operations.

**Q: *Seduction* ends with a ‘Postscript’ where you reflect extensively on the difficulties of undertaking this particular fieldwork and your experiences delving into this world. It makes for a powerful, and at times upsetting, conclusion – did you always intend to include this material? What prompted you to position it at the book’s close?**

I knew from the outset that I would write about my experiences of undertaking this research. For one thing, this kind of reflexivity is a crucial component of ethnography, serving as a way to make oneself accountable to readers. For another, the question of what it was like to do the fieldwork is the single most common question I’m asked about this project.

In the Postscript, I admit that this question has become cause for a certain discomfort – which I realise is not especially generous, as people presumably ask because they’re interested to know about my experiences. And yet there can be something prurient about the question, not least as it is often followed by another more intrusive query: ‘Did any of these men try to seduce you?!’ The exclamation point here is necessary, as the question is very often posed with an air of incredulity, as though such a prospect were genuinely risible.

This latter line of questioning parallels the tendency whereby women being interviewed about sexual harassment in a given industry or organisation for radio or TV segments are so often asked: ‘Have you experienced this?’ The question, once posed, results in a double bind. If the speaker replies that she has not experienced harassment, this is taken as evidence that the problem is not so widespread as she purports. Alternatively, if she says that she has been harassed, her expertise – as an activist or academic, for example – is discounted and converted into the unreliable testimony of someone with an axe to grind. In both cases, sexual harassment ceases to be intelligible as a systemic problem, as attention is displaced onto the individual.

And yet my research practice is guided by the principle that, first, feminist research has some basis in women's experiences ([Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002](#)) and, second, that the experiences of the researcher are the means by which she becomes a knowing subject ([Skeggs 1997](#)). I didn't want to disavow the fact that in undertaking this research as a woman – and as a particular kind of woman – I came to understand the seduction industry in a specific way (which is not to say that any other woman would have come to the same conclusions as I do). Moreover, I wanted to challenge the idea that research *about* men is best undertaken *by* men, an old men's studies notion that unfortunately persists in new guises.

In terms of the placement of this material, I took inspiration from two brilliant ethnographies of gender and sexuality: *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* by Elizabeth Bernstein, and *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* by C. J. Pascoe. Both include detailed expositions of the research process, separated out from the main empirical chapters and placed towards the end of the manuscript. This organisational structure appealed to me immediately, as it seemed to provide a means of putting some distance between myself and the research, or between the research process and the research findings. Of course, readers will engage with the book in any order they choose. Nevertheless, being able to bracket my fieldwork in some way made it easier to talk about a period of my life that was characterised by a general sense of unease, punctuated by acutely painful episodes.

Again, this comes back to the problem elaborated above: that knowledge produced by women is so often regarded as a matter of 'experience' rather than 'expertise'. In reality, it's both. And while this shouldn't be a problem for academics, especially in the social sciences, it very often is. Moreover, where women acknowledge injury, they too often come to be seen as unreliable knowers and narrators. Thus, while I wanted to write myself into the research, to include myself as part of the story, I didn't want to have to place this front and centre. My hope is that, however people choose to read the book, the Postscript serves to convey the ambiguities and ambivalences as well as the complexities and contradictions that attend feminist fieldwork.

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Rachel O'Neill is LSE Fellow in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research examines how gendered subjectivities are forged in and through wider cultural currents, with a particular focus on dynamics of power and sexual politics. *Seduction* is her first book.

*This interview was conducted by Dr Rosemary Deller, Managing Editor of the LSE Review of Books blog.*

*Note: This interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author



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