Sugar Babies: an Antisocial Analysis of Psychic Imperialism and Its Dissolution in Market Exchange

by

Chiara Bercu
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How would our lives be better if human relations were something other than the collusion of ego-identities, if the shared project was not the consolidation of selfhood, but its dissolution?

– LEO BERSANI, INTIMACIES.
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INTRODUCTION

This past year, The Atlantic published a video titled “Why Are Young People Having Less Sex?”1. In a rather anxious display of infographics, the video informs viewers that those in the digital generation are moving away from the sort of deep and meaningful connections that have forever charted our social world. The percentage of young people dating has dropped dramatically, and “real intimacy” has become “elusive”2. “In this modern era,” the narrator explains, romantic pursuit has been “cordoned off” into a virtual space, brought under threat by a deluge of media platforms and the heightened availability of porn3. Indeed, the percentage of men who reported masturbating in a given week has “doubled,” and for women “tripled,” since the 90s4. People no longer feel “the incentive to go out into the real world”5; instead, they can stay at home and safely masturbate behind the screen, relieved of the vulnerability and sacrifice that meaningful relationships require. As the video comes to a close, we’re told that in spite of it all, coupledom remains a “stronger predictor than ever of happiness”6. If we could only save the digital generation from their tech use, in other words, it seems we could restore authentic intimacy and ameliorate the well-being of young people.

1 Kate Julian, “Why Are Young People Having Less Sex?” The Atlantic, ibid, online text.
2 ibid, online text.
3 ibid, embedded video, 0:59.
4 ibid, 0:53.
5 ibid, 1:06.
The Atlantic’s video imports longstanding concerns about mediation and its incursion on social life, the anxiety about which has escalated with the proliferation of smartphones and social media platforms. In an ever-mediated social world, it seems nothing is “real” anymore; no one cares about knowing what’s under the surface or behind the screen. What’s more, people are becoming too selfish to be able to form the relationships that matter most to our social world – those that demand that we put ourselves at risk, that we sacrifice, that we care about others’ depths and hold ourselves accountable for them. The moral panic about mediation centers on formidable questions about authenticity and love: Are we being our “true” selves online? Are we getting (or even trying to get) to know others’?

The answer in both cases is of course no. As media critics like Howard Gardner and Katie Davis argue, digital culture is making us ever more “isolated”7. Though media technologies may have once had the potential to help us “form deeper relationships, ponder the biggest mysteries of life, [and] forge a unique and meaningful identity,” we tend to fall short of using them that way8. Media technologies have made us averse to the “risk” and vulnerability” that real intimacy requires9 – and in failing to build connections with people, it seems we’re only hurting ourselves. If we weren’t so caught up in the superficiality of virtual realms, we could be growing and forging real meaning in our lives. In fact, an underlying danger of social alienation seems to

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8 ibid, 9.
9 ibid, 119.
be that we’re no longer learning from the people who challenge our “worldview”\textsuperscript{10}. If we don’t “put ourselves out there” and connect with others, we’ll never be able to “put ourselves in their shoes”\textsuperscript{11}. What we need is to expose ourselves to people who are different from us so that we can get to know them and expand our sense of empathy.

Critics’ anxieties about depth – about whether we’re accurately representing our own or caring enough about others’ – are exacerbated by the ceaseless expansion of capitalist markets. As burgeoning neoliberal discourse contends, capitalism has nestled into “every human domain and endeavor,” pervading even the most treasured realms of private-sphere life\textsuperscript{12}. To the extent that the market deals in surfaces, its incursion threatens to make an artifice of our social world and disfigure the ethics of mutuality, authenticity, self-disclosure, and sacrifice that it depends on. The commodification of something like intimacy has therefore incited a range of countervailing discourse about depth and animated desires to reconstitute the bounds of what’s “authentic.” As The Atlantic video portends, we need to rescue love from the market’s austerity before it altogether devastates the relationships we hold dear.

In fact, the things that media critics abhor about virtual platforms seem to be the very ways in which they resemble markets: their superficiality, their abundance, the impersonal bonds they facilitate. In a marketized platform, we don’t have to care about other people, and we can get away with treating them like objects to be used

\textsuperscript{10} ibid, 93.
\textsuperscript{11} ibid, 119.
and “discarded at whim.” The meaningless abundance of the market instantiates a rather promiscuous relational landscape, one that seems utterly antithetical to the “monogamously partnered, procreative, married, straight” bonds that found normative relationality. What’s more, the market-like superficiality in virtual realms rouses an unmistakable ontological concern; with so much surface, we’re made to wonder about the depth we think lies beneath.

It’s platforms like Seeking Arrangement that are the bane of critics’ anxieties and an utter terror to the ethics they defend. Seeking Arrangement (SA) is an online social networking site for “sugaring,” a kind of “mutually beneficial,” paid partnership between sugar babies (the ones being paid) and sugar daddies or mommies (the ones paying). While other social media merely resemble market exchange, SA is quite literally a virtual market, though its users transact their payments outside the platform. The moneyed component of SA exchanges takes critics’ concerns about market incursion a step further and escalates their anxiety about the endangering of social ethics. What’s more, platform’s threat is made worse by the heteronormative dynamic that governs its exchanges, which raises concern over power imbalances along axes of age, gender, and socioeconomic status. As the company itself purports, the average age of a sugar daddy in the U.S. is 40 years old, while the average sugar

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baby is 25, with both parties exceeding other categories of membership. If the stigma that attends that age differential isn’t enough to offend critics, the waged element of the relation certainly pushes them over the edge. In fact, the platform’s rhetoric seems to plainly imitate, if not encourage, a market experience: the taxonomized search criteria, the unending queue of profiles, the general primacy of the image. It’s the flagrant commodification of intimacy on SA that makes the platform so threatening, inciting multifarious backlash from second-wave radical feminists, contemporary media critics, and exponents of modern love alike.

Platforms like Seeking Arrangement have been repeatedly taken to task for facilitating the sort of “antisocial, anti-intimate behavior” that antagonizes the social collective. Insofar as the romantic and sexual dyad is upheld as the paragon of normative relationality – and the blueprint of caring and accountable citizenship – the figure of the prostitute is wholly anathema to social life. Given its classification as the “world’s oldest unregulated” profession, it seems prostitution has been a longstanding “obverse of the sovereign body” and the ethic that sustains it. Its marketized sexual exchanges fall decidedly “outside the bounds of what anthropologist Gayle Rubin famously called ‘the charmed circle’ of socially sanctioned sexuality,” the boundarying of which serves to reinscribe the preeminence of normative romance. Indeed, it’s the impersonality of sexual markets

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17 McGlotten, Virtual Intimacies, 7.
20 McGlotten, Virtual Intimacies, 2.
that makes them the perfect foil to dyadic intimacy and allows for a continual enlivening of its ethics.

Given their imposition of both market and mediation threats, the impersonal relations on Seeking Arrangement pose a rather incalculable danger to social life. What could be more disruptive to the congenial ethics of the social than meaningless, mediated, transactional sex? What could be more upsetting than the desire to relate that way, or (god forbid) the pleasure that might come from it? Upon closer consideration, the deluge of moral and affectual responses to the platform may offer privileged insight into the social world and the violence that holds it in place. Indeed, it’s in reading against the uproar surrounding Seeking Arrangement – against the normative underpinnings of critical and redemptive arguments alike – that we might glean something of social collectivity and the imperialism it propagates. As antisocial and psychoanalytic meditations on relationality suggest, it seems there’s unseen political value in SA’s short-lived transactions – whose impersonalizing of social bonds may potentiate an exciting alternative to the violence of intersubjectivity.
ANXIETY

“By the time you’ve seriously dated a couple of people, slept with them, and left them or been left by them – that is, before you ever make it to the altar – there is ‘scar tissue’ on your heart.” – JILLIAN STRAUS, UNHOOKED GENERATION: THE TRUTH ABOUT WHY WE’RE STILL SINGLE.

“We want relationships to be balanced. We give our members a place for this to happen.” – “ABOUT US,” SEEKING ARRANGEMENT.

“Consumption is a social relationship, the dominant relationship in our society – one that makes it harder and harder for people to hold together, to create community.” – STUART AND ELIZABETH EWEN, CHANNELS OF DESIRE.

At a Sugar Baby Summit at the Time Warner Center last May – a conference addressed to the “strategy behind living the sugar lifestyle” – Seeking Arrangement founder and CEO Brandon Wade reported that the site has reached 20 million members worldwide, 60 percent of them in the U.S. alone. Wade maintains that the site has “‘helped facilitate hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of arrangements that have helped students graduate debt-free,’” claiming that the allowance for a sugar baby averages at $3,000 a month – at which rate a baby will earn $20,920 more than she would have at a full-time minimum wage job. The outer bounds of sugar allowances, some sources report, can even be as high as $10,000 monthly.

Given their semblance to prostitution, it’s seems strange that Seeking Arrangement can get away with openly acknowledging – let alone advertising – the money

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transacted in its exchanges. How is it that sugaring is legal? In looking more closely at the legislation pertaining to sexual commerce, it seems the legality of the sugar arrangement is exactly as tenuous as you might expect.

Brandon Wade claims that sugar daters are merely more forthcoming than their unpaid counterparts about “what they can bring to the relationship, and what they expect in return.” Sugar arrangements, he insists, are “simply more explicit and transparent about the bargains struck in the traditional model of dating” and are therefore only marginally different from your average romance. Indeed, the platform seems to pride itself on participants’ candidness about expectation, an honesty enshrined in the site’s tagline: “Relationships on Your Terms.” In establishing a verbal or written contract, sugar daters are able to cultivate what SA calls a “mutually beneficial” relationship, one customized to the participants’ preferences and expectations.

In fact, Seeking Arrangement seems to allow for more “bargaining” and customization than one might have thought possible, as the cornucopia of search criteria indicates. Among other categories, members can exert preference over ethnicity, age, body type, relationship status, height, level of education, and hair color. Babies can even filter daddies by their net worth, which is offered on a sliding scale from $100,000 to “more than $100 million.”

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a range of relationships sought after on the platform: whether allowance- or gift-based, physical or nonphysical, committed or uncommitted, virtual or in-person. Terms for these arrangements are written into their own taxonomy: duration, level of discretion, frequency, “lifestyle” expectation, degree of involvement. While some users pursue longer-term arrangements – many of which center on mentoring, travel companionship, or cohabitation – others use SA for short-lived transactions, which the site calls NSA or “No Strings Attached” arrangements (shown below).

As the centrality of NSA arrangements on the homepage illustrates – imaged evocatively as a snipping of the tie between members – there’s a considerable market on SA for detached and transactional exchanges. Despite Wade’s ready likening of sugaring to normative romance, it appears the relationships facilitated on the platform
are actually quite variable – some of which may radically impersonalize the love relation he aims to defend.

The variety of SA’s search criteria seems to reflect the broader panoply of contemporary markets, whose goods anticipate and respond to every “stutter” of consumer desire. As media critics bemoan, contemporary capitalism threatens to overtake every aspect of the social world, subjecting even the most venerable intimacies to the market’s austerity. Relations like sugaring testify to the ever-expanding purview of capital and its cultivation of the “homo oeconomicus”, a market actor who budgets the intimate as they might whatever else. As the site itself advertises, SA’s optimization of intimacy allows its users to finally “stop wasting time” with the trial-and-error of real-world dating and helps them to place limits on the labor that social bonds require. The site’s rather shameless budgeting of intimacy seems to corroborate critics’ fears about its disfiguration of social ethics; sugar dating unshackles users from the open-ended commitments of intersubjectivity, encouraging them to prioritize their own needs instead.

The social dangers of Seeking Arrangement seem all the worse for the market it’s presumed to facilitate. In the uproar against the platform, the transactions imagined in critics’ arguments tend to be those of a flooded seller’s market, in which laborers are forced to compete in exploitative conditions at the whim of the buyer’s price. Indeed, the labor market that they envision is undoubtedly worthy of concern, given the

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28 Seeking Arrangement, “About Us.”
readiness with which it lends itself to the large-scale subjugation of workers – a condition Marx describes as that which “completes the despotism of capital”.

In the flooded market critics imagine, daddies have dangerous sway over the social and economic welfare of the baby. “A lack of options leaves a person with very few choices,” writes Verily Magazine contributor Megan Murphy on sexual commerce. “The reality is that the vast majority of women and girls in prostitution end up there through force, coercion, poverty, grooming, and various systemic failures and injustices,” a reality she sees as the antithesis of “empowerment.” In a tropic account like Murphy’s, the prostitute is imagined as a victim of exploitative circumstance, whose position in the market has left her no choice but to sell her body at the client’s price. What Murphy’s argument seems to demand is some kind of collective, systemic intervention – a mission driven by the imperative to restore women’s agency and realign their sense of “empowerment.” While arguments like Murphy’s are clouded by rhetoric of victimhood and salvation, their underlying contention seems to be with the labor conditions they imagine of sexual markets. Their concerns raise the question: is Seeking Arrangement flooded or not?

The platform’s requirements for registration call attention to the various barriers users face for entry into SA’s “market,” which help give a sense of the landscape and distribution of its users. There are graded levels of membership and legitimacy that daddies strive for in order to make themselves viable. All daddies must pay to

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register, with the lowest level of membership starting at $90 monthly\(^{30}\), with an additional $25 for an optional background check certification\(^{31}\). For $210 per month ($2,520 annually), a daddy can become a “Diamond Club” member, with “his income and net worth verified and his profile featured at the top of the home page”\(^{32}\) – an accreditation that SA promises will get him “up to 20X more responses” from babies\(^{33}\). Paying a higher premium for their account allows Diamond Club members to demonstrate their financial capacity – which, like the background check, makes them more desirable candidates for an arrangement. What’s more, the premium seems to distinguish “real” daddies from the “fake”; as user “ClassicSD” writes in an online discussion about the rising cost of membership, “90 doesn't bother me. I'd prefer they raise it even more, to keep out Splenda daddies”\(^{34}\).

While every daddy pays for membership, the majority of SA’s babies join for free. In fact, the primary barrier babies face is an educational rather than financial one: babies who register with a “.edu” email address automatically get Premium Membership, while those do not are forced to pay for the same status. Though in one sense the educational barrier highlights part of what’s prized in a baby (that she’s college-educated), her ability to authenticate the status with a payment demonstrates that the


\(^{34}\) Reddit, “SA is now auto renew at $90/mo” on “Sugar Lifestyle Forum.” reddit.com, https://www.reddit.com/r/sugarlifestyleforum/comments/8yw1og/sa_is_now_auto_renew_at_90mo/ (accessed March 2, 2019).
market for babies is not, in fact, as flooded as critics would like to think it is. If SA had enough “.edu” babies to be a college-educated guarantor, as it would surely like to be, the platform wouldn’t have to offer the payment circumvention at all.

Indeed, the numerous financial barriers and forms of vetting that daddies face – over and above those of babies, whether students or not – seem to conjure a radically different landscape from the kind imagined in critics’ concerns. Far from being a victim of exploitative circumstance, it seems the baby is the one with the leverage, whose positionality more closely resembles that of a seller in a seller’s market.

Notwithstanding critics’ misgivings about labor conditions, however, the fact of their tireless fixation on SA seems suspect. Given the profusion of exploitative markets under capital, why the disproportionate public, political, and pop cultural concern about sexual labor specifically? If labor conditions aren’t the problem, what is?

On Seeking’s blog, Brandon Wade advertises the sincerely termed “Mentor Daddy,” describing him as a “caring, concerned, considerate, well connected” guy, who’s “eager to propel you right up the corporate ladder.” Unlike the rote “pragmatism” of NSA arrangements, mentorship offers the baby a special sort of “warmth” and “sentiment.” Mentor daddies are the “Mr. Rogers” of Seeking’s platform, and they’re “welcome” to you if you want them, Wade cajoles readers. SA mentors not only care about their baby but actively shepherd her growth; in fact, the selling point of the relation seems to be its promise of long-term nurturance, where the value of the
mentor’s guidance is seen as a function of the time he invests in her personal and professional development.\(^{35}\)

As his recommendation of the “Mentor Daddy” illustrates, Wade seems eager to evince the long-term and romantic nature of SA relations—an exhortation that speaks volumes of the danger critics perceive of the platform. Wade has made many efforts to terminologically distinguish sugaring arrangements from sex work, in personal and formal accounts alike—among them a statement he released in the wake of the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act (SESTA) last April, whose legislations have intensified anxiety around virtual sexual commerce and instituted punitive regulations of its markets. In his statement, Wade publicly admonished prostitution and issued a call-to-arms for those soliciting sexual services on the platform.\(^{36}\) Shortly after, a disclaimer appeared at the bottom of SA’s webpage, which reads:

**Disclaimer: Seeking.com is not an escort service.** Seeking in no way, shape or form supports escorts or prostitutes using our website for personal gain. Profiles suspect of this usage will be addressed by the Seeking Misconduct Team and banned from our website.\(^{37}\)

Wade’s public reproach of sex workers—who use the site for their “personal gain,” as opposed to some form of mutual interest—evidences the social danger of SA and the legal precarity of its exchanges, the nature of which has come under intense scrutiny.


\(^{36}\) Brandon Wade, “Address to the Sugar Community regarding FOSTA and Backpage Shutdown,” YouTube Video, 5:08, April 10, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWnP6M1ujE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWnP6M1ujE).

since FOSTA-SESTA legislations. In disavowing sex work, Wade not only attempts to abate the moral stigma of prostitution – whose impersonalizing and objectifying tendencies threaten the core of the social ethic, as we’ll consider more closely later – but allows sugaring to circumvent its legal ramifications. In formally distinguishing SA from a prostitution service, albeit tenuously, Wade has been able to maintain immunity under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA), which has (up until SESTA) protected third-party websites like SA from the potentially illicit activity of their users. Without CDA immunity, SA seems to have become even more barefaced in its appraisal of normative intimacy and the social values that attend it.

Despite SA’s endorsement of long-term companionship, however, the legality of sugar arrangements still rests on rather precarious determinations about what does or does not count as “prostitution.” Sexual exchanges are indexed under three categories of transaction in the Model Penal Code (MPC), whose template informs variegated state legislation on sexual commerce. “Category One” transactions are tropic cases of prostitution: the relationship is a blatant exchange of sex for money without any sort of social companionship, where allowance is exchanged per meeting, as opposed to on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. Category Two and Three relations, on the other hand, account for different forms of longer-term companionship – the former a paid partnership without sex and the latter a partnership with it. In Category Two exchanges, sex and money are seen as merely “incidental to the companionship that


ibid, 945.
the relationship offers,” such that their relations fall outside the domain of prostitution laws40. As a hybrid of the other exchanges, a Category Three relation seems to pose the biggest challenge for prosecutors, who have to stage a “fact-specific inquiry” into the arrangement to determine its legality – a verdict contingent on the quality of the members’ “romantic feelings” for each other41. Without romance, Category Three relations risk being nothing more than a protracted form of prostitution. Indeed, Wade’s insistence on longevity and connection isn’t just sweet – it’s an attempt to situate sugaring in the right Category.

Given the MPC’s classifications, the legality of sugaring exchange appears to hinge on something notoriously immeasurable (love) – a condition that imports the legal sanctioning of normative relationality. Romance isn’t wholesome, in other words; it’s a metric by which we prosecute, a measure both of love and of punishment. As the Penal Categories illustrate, romance sows the line between good and bad sociality, one vigilantly defended by the ethics of care, mutuality, and selflessness that found our social world. Given their threat to these tenets, the surface-level and short-lived exchanges made possible on Seeking Arrangement pose an intolerable danger to the social – a provocation so severe it’s criminal.

As Murphy intimates, it’s the baby who’s made victim by the rote transactions in SA’s market. Indeed, arguments like hers raise a seemingly rhetorical concern: Could there be a relationship more disposed to violence and exploitation? In looking more closely at love, it seems this may be exactly the question we should be asking.

40 ibid, 946.
41 ibid, 947.
LOVE

“Hatred of the world, as Freud writes in ‘Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,’ ‘always remains in an intimate relation with the self-preservative instincts.’ The impossible demand upon a world in which I am nowhere to be found, where self-recognition would always be a mistake, is that the world provide exact replications of myself, that in fact it be erased and replaced by the specular mirage of a universalized selfhood.”

– LEO BERSANI, “SOCIABILITY AND CRUISING.”

“Legibility is a condition of manipulation.” – JACK HALBERSTAM QUOTING JAMES C. SCOTT, THE QUEER ART OF FAILURE.

“By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them.”

– HANNAH ARENDT, THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM.

Relationships on Seeking Arrangement seem to fall between two poles: those that resemble a stripped-down, market transaction and those that involve long-term coupledom. In her dissertation on sugar dating, Mia DeSoto analyzes a variety of profiles of daddies on SA, whose preferences give voice to the range of relations sought after on the platform. Below are two quotes from DeSoto’s sample, featuring Sugar Daddy #6 and #42 respectively, whose narratives seem to exemplify the two poles of sugaring exchange.

Sugar Daddy #6:
“No strings attached…. I'm not looking for a soul mate on here. I use this site as a way to have a straightforward relationship where emotions don't get confused -- we have an arrangement”42.

Sugar Daddy #42:
“I will be there to help you every stage of your transformation… I will look upon you at each phase of this personal growth, as a gardener does his prized rose… My joy will be in seeing you develop and grow.

As I near the end of my first six decades on this planet. I feel that I’ve earned the right to… indulge my ‘sweet tooth’…the desire to help a deserving lady to become the complete woman she needs to be”43.

As accounts like Murphy’s make obvious, guys like Sugar Daddy #6 exemplify all that’s wrong with Seeking Arrangement: its transactionality, its instrumentalization of the baby, its facilitation of indifference. Such relations threaten to violate and exploit the baby, whose personhood he need not be accountable or “attached” to. Sugar Daddy #42, on the other hand, is Wade’s perfect mentor: a guy who not only cherishes his baby as a “prized rose” but devotes himself to her tending. Daddies like him are the emblems of the platform; they show that there’s hope for love on Seeking Arrangement, whose relations promise growth and transformation for the “deserving lady.”

Depth and mutuality seem to be rather inviolable features of our social relationships, and are presumed to catalyze our “growth” with other people, like Sugar Daddy #42 claims. In a social world founded on care and accountability, it seems we have to know each other’s “depths” to best love each other. But what is it that we demand of another in knowing them deeply, and what compels our fixation on knowing them this way? Upon closer consideration, it seems the prosociality inhered in intimate relations – that which compels the daddy to “look upon” the baby and garden her depths – may be more worthy of concern than the impersonality of brute transaction.

In Against Love, Laura Kipnis takes a closer look at the expositive demands of the love relation. “Advanced intimacy,” she writes, rests on the “widespread if somewhat

43 ibid, 32.
metaphysical belief in our own interiority” and on the presumption that “whatever is [inside] is clamoring to get out”\textsuperscript{44}. Intimacy would be nothing without our “acts of ritual self-exposure,” Kipnis claims, or “the sharing, the hearing, the changing” that come with them\textsuperscript{45}. These demands seem to be the very “backbone of the modern couple liturgy,” and as integral to romance as confession to the church\textsuperscript{46}. To the extent that we value the authenticity of our love relation with other people, all of the opaque parts of them are intolerable to us. Kipnis helpfully envisions this pursuit of depth in terms of physical incursion: “Lovers fashion themselves after doctors wielding long probes to penetrate the tender regions,” she writes. “\textit{Try to think of yourself as just one big orifice: now stop clenching and relax}”\textsuperscript{47}. Here Kipnis offers an evocative image of love’s penetration and the coercive demands that attend it (just “relax”). Like “doctors,” lovers are trusted to care for the self, where whatever discomfort we experience with them is presumed incidental to remedy. In her rendering of love, Kipnis challenges the sanctity we presume of exposure – whose demands she situates at the very bedrock of the loving relation. As Kipnis details, our desire to penetrate another’s depths may not be as innocuous as we think.

In his genealogy of Catholic confession, Michel Foucault takes Kipnis’s arguments further in highlighting the hegemonic utility of exposure, whose coercion imports the violence of the social ethic. Intersubjectivity, he argues, burdens us with “the infinite task” of disclosing our depths\textsuperscript{48}; only through the laying-bare of their “truth” can

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\item[\textsuperscript{44}] Laura Kipnis, \textit{Against Love: A Polemic} (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 75.
\item[\textsuperscript{45}] ibid, 76.
\item[\textsuperscript{46}] ibid, 77.
\item[\textsuperscript{47}] ibid, 76 (emphasis added).
\item[\textsuperscript{48}] Michel Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality} (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 59.
\end{itemize}
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individuals partake in the sort of mutual accountability and care that found the social project. In fact, this sort of self-exposition is so natural and liberating that it hardly needs facilitation. Foucault explains:

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom. To the extent that we have come to believe in our “truth,” Foucault details, the very fact of it demands its exposure, an imperative coerced by the truth’s seeming “affinity” with freedom. Indeed, the expositive “obligation” Foucault describes seems foundational to the collective and liberal mores we hold dear, among them participation, mutuality, and sacrifice. As Foucault intimates, we are presumed to become ourselves, and exercise our freedom, through expression – whose exposition seems natural, if not divine. What’s more, we’re made to see truth as our ultimate means of resistance against power, whose authority we understand as repressive and impersonalizing. The bona fide goodness of the truth, in other words, seems to obscure its coercion.

It’s in our failure to confess, Foucault intimates, that we can truly lay bare the forces that demand our exposure. If it is “not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative,” Foucault writes, “the confession is wrung from a person by violence or

\[49\] ibid, 60.
threat,” and “driven from its hiding place in the soul.” The expositive demands of confession manifest in every realm of the social, from “the most defenseless tenderness and the bloodiest of powers” alike. As Foucault suggests, it’s our refusal to confess – and the panic it incites – that reveal the inestimable value of exposure to the social project.

The wide serviceability of confession testifies to the diverse mechanisms of control that govern social actors, whose disclosure of “truth” seems to support the forces that subject them. As Adam Phillips writes in Missing Out: “All tyrannies involve the supposedly perfect understanding of someone else’s needs,” where the exposition of subjects prefigure their management. In Interact or Die, Brian Massumi further problematizes exposure in considering what he calls the “soft tyranny” of interactive subjection:

Interactivity is not neutral with respect to power. In fact, according to Foucault, among the most invidious of regimes of power are the ones that impose an imperative to participate, particularly if the imperative is to ‘truly’ or ‘authentically’ express yourself. You are constantly interpellated. You are under orders to be yourself – for the system. […] This is generative power, a power that reaches down into the soft tissue of your life, where it is just stirring, and interactively draws it out, for it to become what it will be, and what it suits the systems that it be.

Massumi employs Foucauldian logic in arguing for participation as an “invidious” form of subjection – an analysis that seems to disfigure social virtues like authenticity and depth in exposing their service to broader hegemonies. In an Althusserian read of

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50 ibid, 59.
52 Brian Massumi, Detlef Mertins, Lars Spuybroek, Moortje Marres, and Christian Hubler, Interact or Die: There Is Drama in the Networks (NAi Uitgevers/Publishers, 2007), 77.
interpellation, Massumi imports the “hidden agendas” that “the idea of the self can be used to sponsor and maintain”\textsuperscript{53}. Biopolitical mechanisms seem to weasel their way into the “soft tissue” of the subject through knowing, Massumi claims, whose argument mimics Kipnis’s in imaging the physicality of subjective management.

Indeed, the sexual and romantic dyad seems to be a particularly fraught site of the social, one that offers privileged insight into the interpellative demands Massumi describes. “The supreme logic of the couple,” Michael Cobb writes, “has become the way one binds oneself to the social”\textsuperscript{54}. It seems the expositive ethic of love works to cultivate the right kind of subject: one devoted to the social project and the forms of expositive mutuality it requires – among them the “sharing,” “hearing,” and “changing” that Kipnis describes. As the “supreme” site of the social and its ethics, sex is taken up discursively as the “privileged domain in which we encounter otherness”\textsuperscript{55}, whose interchanges magnify social logics and their potential for violence. Consequently, it’s in reimagining sexual relations that we might best figure “resistance to communal imperatives” and the heteronormative structures they uphold\textsuperscript{56}. The impersonality of NSA sugar relations may therefore helpfully disrupt the coercive demands of intersubjectivity and the collective they embolden, as antisocial analyses of relationality illustrate.

\textsuperscript{53} Adam Phillips, \textit{Unforbidden Pleasures} (New York: Picador, 2017), 32.
\textsuperscript{55} Tim Dean, \textit{Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 180.
At stake in questions of intersubjective exposure is the psychic imperialism that demands it, as Adam Phillips elucidates in his reflection on ego boundaries. In invoking Freud, Phillips argues that anything bad, alien, or outside of the primal ego is “‘initially identical’”\(^{57}\) in its threat to the integrality of the self and must be made legible in order to be combatted. Indeed, the ontological boundaries of self and Other are negotiated, and their forms determined, through a violent distinction, one that depends on the Other’s exposure. Phillips expands on this antagonism when he writes, “A world with nothing bad in it would have no outside (and in that sense, therefore, no inside either); the violence here is in the forms of rejection, of expulsion, and, presumably, in the policing of the borders”\(^{58}\). In these terms, the very circumscription of the self necessitates our ceaseless excavation of the Other and mitigation of their threat.

What’s more, this violence tends to disproportionately target individuals who fall outside of the heteronorm, whose psychic consumption functionally “reinscribes” the dominant order, as bell hooks argues in her piece “Eating the Other”\(^{59}\). hooks considers the ways in which epistemological projects fixate on raced, gendered, sexualized, classed differences as points of psychic interest, the consumption of which works to “liven up”\(^{60}\) hegemonic formations. Moreover, such social differences

\(^{57}\) Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 100.

\(^{58}\) ibid, 101.


\(^{60}\) ibid, 21.
helpfully “domesticate”61 the “infinitely distant”62 alterity of Otherness by making tangible its disunion with the self. It’s through our consumption of this difference, hooks argues, that we can mitigate the threat of Otherness and reconstitute the bounds of the self. As an example, hooks cites a conversation she overheard among a group of white boys at Yale, who were explicitly detailing their plans to scout women of color to sleep with on campus. Their objective, she explains, “was not simply to sexually possess the Other; it was to be changed in some way by the encounter.” hooks sees this agenda as driven by a desire to “claim the body of the colored Other […] as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of the masculine norm, for asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects”63. Far from enabling some kind of political transgression, it seems that penetrating the Other’s “frontier” allows the interrogators to reconstitute their supremacy – a project whose violence is functionally obscured by the seeming philanthropy of their desire. Here hooks calls attention to the colonialist legacies of epistemological projects, whose ambitions are so often pastoralized by a rhetoric of “transgression,” care, or love. As hooks illustrates, the penetrative violence of knowing is all the more concerning for its normative fixation on social difference.

Given the imperialist violence of knowing and its utility to hegemonic agendas, how might we combat the ego’s compulsion toward it? Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida take this question on in their defense of “hospitality,” a framework for

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63 hooks, Black Looks, 24.
nonviolent engagement with Otherness. In considering the epistemological violence that governs our processes of meaning-making, these theorists formulate an “ethics of alterity” that depends on the crucial psychic “space” created in suspending “questions of identification with the other”\(^64\). Their work informs an “impersonalist” ethic\(^65\), one that embraces the unknowable, “infinite distance” of Otherness as a channel for amicable, or “hospitalable,” relations\(^66\).

Hospitality envisions psychic contact in terms of physical space and boundary-making. For Derrida, questions of ethical relations with Otherness are always “about answering for a dwelling place, for one's identity, one's space, one's limits, for the ethos as abode, habitation, house, hearth, family, home”\(^67\). His formulation imagines the self in proprietary terms, whose “limits” have to be negotiated in the face of Otherness and the threat of its incursion. Derrida helpfully illustrates our desire for the self as “home,” a place of retreat whose unchanging familiarity gives us comfort and shelter. Psychic boundarying allows us to keep safe the “dwelling place” of the self and protect it from the chaotic inconsistencies of external forces, a rendering that imports the consolation of essence and the role of ethics in its maintenance. If the self is the home we harbor, Otherness is a guest: “Anyone who encroaches on my ‘at home,’ on my ipseity, on my power of hospitality, on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy,” Derrida writes, echoing Phillips’s claims about antagonism. “This other becomes a hostile subject,”

\(^{64}\) Dean, \textit{Unlimited Intimacy}, 26.

\(^{65}\) ibid, 47.


he continues, “and I risk becoming their hostage”\textsuperscript{68}. Derrida animates this anxiety in terms of possession and renunciation, where the driving fear of incursion seems to be that it will jeopardize our ownership of ourselves – that the self will no longer be ours in the way that we need it to be (to protect us from what’s Other). To disempower this fear, we have to learn to peaceably coexist with Otherness – for which we need a model of “ethical relations” to guide us\textsuperscript{69}.

For Derrida and Lévinas, the key to this ethicality is deference. If we want to interface nonviolently with Otherness, we need to foster “hospitality” in our approach to the relation; we need to concede a “place” for the Other in the self and welcome them without question\textsuperscript{70}. Indeed, a truly ethical hospitality would ask nothing of the guest, granting space for “the absolute, unknown, anonymous other” without qualification or return\textsuperscript{71}. Derrida gestures toward the nonviolent potential of impersonality here, though his invocation of anonymity attests more to the indiscriminate generosity of the host than to the merit of psychic distance. For Derrida and Lévinas, a peaceable relation with Otherness hinges on the “glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice” of the host\textsuperscript{72}, whose selflessness makes the whole thing possible. What’s more, the magnitude of this sacrifice confers a sense of

\textsuperscript{68} ibid, 53-55.
\textsuperscript{71} ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Lévinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 64.
virtue on the relation; as Lévinas well knows, “To welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom”73. 

In a departure from hospitality’s familiar ethics – among them selflessness, care, and mutuality – Leo Bersani advances an argument for an impersonal form of intimacy, one that radically disavows the prosocial underpinnings of Lévinas’s and Derrida’s model. While Bersani’s framework seems to maintain the same ambition – in aiming to imagine a way of being where we are no longer held “hostage to the demands for intimate knowledge of the other”74 – his approach is comparatively irresponsible and self-interested. Instead of preoccupying ourselves with (and then deferring to) the other’s needs and desires, Bersani recommends we remain indifferent to those wishes, and advocates for a mode of relating “in which the other, no longer respected or violated as a person, would merely be cruised as another opportunity, at once insignificant and precious, for narcissistic pleasures”75. In order to evaluate Bersani’s endorsement of impersonality, we must revisit the self/Other antagonism – the complexity of whose violence it seems “hospitality” fails to account for.

Bersani locates the very notion of the self at the origin of intersubjective violence: “As soon as persons are posited,” he argues, “the war begins”76. In his logic, the self is not only instantiated through violence, through the boundarying of what is same and Other, but maintained violently through an imperialist consumption of

73 ibid, 85.
75 ibid, 129.
76 Leo Bersani, Is the Rectum a Grave? (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 218.
difference. As Bersani details, the ego’s project is “a defensive move (or a pre-emptively offensive move) against the world’s threatening difference from the self”\textsuperscript{78}, where the idea of the self as some determinable form is alone “a sanction for violence”\textsuperscript{79}. In this rendering, the desire to know another is really a desire to be rid of their difference from the self. Given the antagonistic boundarying of the ego, our very attachment to the self seems to demand the ceaseless penetration and consumption of difference that Phillips details – such that a peaceable relation to Otherness may depend on the self’s very abandonment.

As Bersani illustrates, the ego gets a certain thrill out of destroying the Other’s difference, whose pleasure seems to pose a psychic conflict overlooked in Derrida’s and Lévinas’s model. The ego’s crusade against the “world’s threatening difference” is driven in part by the annihilative pleasure that comes with it, whereby the ego delights in its own expansion. Bersani characterizes the pleasurable transgression of self/Other boundaries as a sort of \textit{jouissance}, a phenomenon Freud describes as the “extraordinary narcissistic enjoyment” of shattering the ego’s bounds\textsuperscript{80}. Rather than an open indulgence of another’s difference, it is the reckoning-away of that difference through a narcissistic expansion and shattering of the self that makes love pleasurable—a feeling Bersani characterizes as the thrill of the ego’s “exploded

\textsuperscript{77} Gayatri Spivak furthers this notion of imperialism in her reflections on marginality: “What is at the center,” Spivak writes, “often hides a repression” of what she calls “an excluded margin” – where the preeminence of an ontological center obscures the continual violence at its margins (“Explanation and Culture: Marginalia,” \textit{In Other Worlds}, 141, 144).
\textsuperscript{78} Bersani, \textit{Is the Rectum a Grave?}, 66.
\textsuperscript{79} ibid, 96.
\textsuperscript{80} Bersani and Phillips, \textit{Intimacies}, 67.
limits”⁸¹. Put differently, it may not be the difference of the Other that we love, but rather our annihilative subsumption of that difference into an inflated sense of self. This, in Bersani’s logic, is the exultation of knowing another in love.

In detailing the psychic violence of loving, Bersani calls attention to the impossibility of amicable – or “hospitable” – engagement with difference. The narcissism that compels the annihilative pleasure of self-shattering threatens the foundation of every theory of love: the assumption that “in love, the human subject is exceptionally open to otherness”⁸². Indeed, this argument imports yet another terror of mediated exchanges: critics’ fear may be not only that such exchanges foreclose an openness to difference, but that they altogether threaten the openness that mutual care and accountability are presumed to foster. Bersani touches this nerve in what might be his most radical provocation to the social: his insistence on the impossibility of loving what is different from the self. In a psychoanalytic rendering, the things and people that we love are only lovable “because they are not other, that is, outside and alien.” “To love what is other is to love what cannot be loved,” Bersani writes, “it is like being force fed, and like being force fed it could only unleash an extreme violence, or the extreme stifling of violent energies called depression”⁸³. In actuality, he claims, “we only love ourselves”⁸⁴.

Bersani’s arguments readily dispense with the hospitable ethic Derrida and Lévinas argue for, whose logic seems to rest on the “double bind” of loving “the very

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⁸² Bersani and Phillips, Intimacies, 74.
⁸³ ibid, 101-102 (emphasis added).
⁸⁴ ibid, 75.
difference that we are driven to abolish. Indeed, Bersani’s upheaval of the prosocial ethics suggest we do away with intersubjectivity entirely. Given his provocation to love, how might we think differently about relations like sugaring and their disruption to the social ethic? What then of the intimacy treasured in social bonds, or the violence we presume of impersonality?

85 ibid, 99.
DEPTH

“The personality as a mere holder of a function or position is just as irrelevant as that of a guest in a hotel room.” – GEORG SIMMEL, THE PHILOSOPHY OF MONEY.

"I cannot confer on myself any quality without mediation or an objectifying power which is not my own." – JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, BEING AND NOTHINGNESS.

“Closeness has come at the expense of distance.” – MICHAEL COBB, “LONELY.”

In his book Modern Romance, contemporary TV icon and alleged sexual assailant Aziz Ansari bemoans the difficulties of single life in a digital era. He asks: if our “romantic options are unprecedented and our tools to sort and communicate with them are staggering,” why is it that so many people are still “frustrated”? With all our options, why is it so hard to find the “perfect person”? In his concerns it seems that abundance is to blame—a charge that pointedly implicates ever-generative platforms like Seeking Arrangement. You can swipe through the entirety of Los Angeles on Tinder, but will you ever find that consummate “match”? Indeed, it’s the fact of abundance that so threatens the pleasure of commitment, as Ansari corroborates in his interviews with more senior lovers. “Old folks actually saw all this choice as a disadvantage,” writes Ansari. When prompted about the many “doors” open to young people on virtual platforms, one of the moms he interviewed claimed

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87 ibid, 28.
88 ibid.
she would “‘hate to be single nowadays,’” and professed the value of having had fewer options. In the era of romance and longevity, she explained:

“You didn’t think about the choices you had. When you found someone you liked, you jumped into a relationship. I don’t think we thought, Well, there are another twelve doors or another seventeen doors or another four hundred and thirty-three doors,” she said. “We saw a door we wanted, and so we took it”\textsuperscript{89}.

Ansari restates the value of commitment in belaboring the many threats abundance poses to social health. With a plethora of choices, we’ve become “cautious” about which one to pursue and unable to act with the decisiveness true love requires. Though criticisms like Ansari’s foreground problematics of our sexual climate, they suggest that it is ultimately our indulgence of these options that prevents us from properly inhabiting the social. In this latent moralization, Ansari brings into relief the self-discipline and -restraint integral to collective ethics: Those who do not adhere to the mores instantiated in the soul-mate dyad fail to proffer the responsibility and civility the social project demands. Ideally, those individuals will learn to “grow and mature”\textsuperscript{90} beyond their shortcomings, though in a social ethos compelled by mediated superficiality that sort of growth seems unlikely.

What then are we to do with the endless frivolity of virtual exchange? Ansari’s ultimate recommendation is perhaps unsurprising: “The key,” he writes, “is to get off the screen and meet these people”\textsuperscript{91}. What we need is to stop “wasting time”\textsuperscript{92} and

\textsuperscript{89} ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} ibid, 29.
\textsuperscript{91} ibid, 245.
\textsuperscript{92} ibid.
learn to “properly invest” in others\(^{93}\) – a claim whose rhetoric ironically espouses the very neoliberal socialization of market logic that he aims to dismantle. His advice for the “hyper-engaged”\(^{94}\) phone user is that they put down the device and attend to the options that surround them in “the real world”\(^{95}\). Like all quintessential critics of mediation, the evocative return to the “real” in Ansari’s argument emboldens the values of authenticity, depth, and intimacy presumed to attend it.

Indeed, the crux of mediation’s threat to the social seems to be its utter destabilization of the essentialist tenets Ansari labors to protect, as Sharif Mowlabocus illustrates in his analysis of media criticism. In a social marketplace like Seeking Arrangement, the mediated nature of exchange invites a host of anxieties in critics about the “authenticity and validity of users” and their intentions\(^{96}\). Provocations of the “authentic” are about more than just the clean transference of self-to-screen: they call into question the essence presumed to substantiate the user’s depths. The rather boundless imaging of a user online troubles the essential “identificatory processes”\(^{97}\) that authenticate their person. As Mowlabocus claims, technology “‘not only mediates but produces subjectivities in the contemporary world’”\(^{98}\), where the discursive power of a given platform invigorates the user it’s taken to represent. Mediation is therefore a two-pronged threat to the social world, endangering relational bonds and the depth they depend on.

\[^{93}\text{ibid, 246.}\]
\[^{94}\text{ibid, 31.}\]
\[^{95}\text{ibid, 246 (his emphasis).}\]
\[^{96}\text{Sharif Mowlabocus, }Gaydar Culture: Gay Men, Technology and Embodiment in the Digital Age\text{ (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 16.}\]
\[^{97}\text{ibid, 92.}\]
\[^{98}\text{ibid, 106.}\]
On a site like Seeking Arrangement, the abundant and highly curated images incite exactly the sort of anxiety Mowlabocus details. Indeed, visual representations pose a unique threat to the social in importing the fallaciousness of essence and the unending mediations that affect it. As Tim Dean puts it, “images corrode rather than secure identity” in rendering explicit its iterative performance. What’s scary about a mediated platform, particularly one as superficial as Seeking Arrangement, is the way that its images bring into question the veritable “essence” and “depth” that lay behind them – the fear being that we may “never find [a given] user’s real identity,” if there ever was one to discover.

Indeed, Seeking Arrangement seems to doubly threaten the authenticity of the self in facilitating mediated and marketized relations – whose modalities share a certain likeness in the threat they pose to essence. Is not “the promise of the virtual like the promise of the market,” McGlotten asks, in that both give us “an unattainable thing” to long for? Like the market, the virtual profile conjures an aspirational form of being – one akin to Gilles Deleuze’s becoming, a formulation of subjectivity as an “assemblage” of transient connections and desires. SA users seem to become themselves through desire, a formation given shape by the rhetoric of the platform. “It is as though [the self],” Adam Phillips explicates, “exists only in its transitions; it exists only in a change, in an aspiring, state.” It’s users’ very assemblage of the profile, in other words – their curation of preference and character – that allows them

100 Mowlabocus, Gaydar Culture, 114.
101 McGlotten, Virtual Intimacies, 9.
102 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 166.
103 Phillips, Unforbidden Pleasures, 46.
to feign an essence – a depth to be desired, laid bare, and loved. Phillips and McGlotten intimate, the “being” seems to be in the practice – an idea made all the more threatening by the heartless and superficial nature of SA’s market.

In “Society of the Spectacle” (1967), Guy Debord further elaborates the threat that surfaces pose to notions of essence and situates the supremacy of the image within the broader arc of capitalist development. He writes:

The first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having — human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing — all “having” must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances. […] Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real.104

Debord charts the deterioration of the self through two main moments in capitalist industrialization, the first characterized as a move from “being into having” – where the self’s “being” came to depend more upon the possession and exchange of commodities than upon some internally consistent nature – and “having to appearing,” where those material objects then took on the phantasmagorical quality of “appearances.” By the second “stage,” capital’s proliferation of surfaces about the social will have altogether foreclosed the realness and depth that once resided in the self. Debord’s inclusion of Ludwig Feuerbach succinctly captures this transformation and the anxiety it incites; “the present age,” Feuerbach writes in The Essence of Christianity, “prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original,

representation to reality, appearance to essence”\textsuperscript{105} – a development Debord describes as the “spectaclist”\textsuperscript{106} nature of capitalism.

Debord’s argument addresses contemporary anxieties about depth and directs media critics’ attention to the danger of capitalist expansion. Capitalism is to blame, Debord argues, for our alienation from one another in a spectaclist culture; the proliferation of the commodity “is identical to people’s estrangement from each other and from everything they produce”\textsuperscript{107}. Indeed, recovering depth – in the self and in relations with others – depends on altogether overthrowing capital and its hold on social life. “The economic \textit{Id} must be replaced by the \textit{I},” Debord insists, whose retrieval is only possible through Marxist “class struggle”\textsuperscript{108} and workers’ “direct” repossession “of every aspect of their activity”\textsuperscript{109}. Debord’s indictment of capital impels mediation critics like Ansari toward a Marxist politic; our only hope for salvaging the social world from the superficiality of the spectacle, Debord claims, is in doing away with capitalism entirely.

Contemporary critics of mediation seem to share in Debord’s anxiety about capitalism, as Ansari illustrates in his preoccupation with “abundance” and the endangering of real-world relationships. Indeed, the symbiotic relationship between capital and mediation seems all the more provocative on virtual platforms, which bring unprecedented forms of superficiality and performance into social life. Jodi Dean considers the nature of virtual self-production in her analysis of

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\item \textsuperscript{105} Debord, \textit{The Society of the Spectacle}, first epigraph.
\item \textsuperscript{106} ibid, thesis 14.
\item \textsuperscript{107} ibid, thesis 37.
\item \textsuperscript{108} ibid, thesis 52.
\item \textsuperscript{109} ibid, thesis 53.
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“communicative capitalism” – which she describes as “‘the commodified self-styling and interactive exchanges’” that allow the user to produce the self “‘in and through fantasies of the market’”\textsuperscript{110}. It’s the performative imitation of the self through market “fantasies” that so upsets critics of virtual platforms and emboldens their attachments to essence, as Mowlabocus details. Like Debord, media critics aim to protect the social world from the incursion of market logic and its spectaclist tendencies.

Yet what do critics stand to gain, one might wonder, from their insistence on the authenticity of the self? And what is it that’s so threatening about its disruption? In light of Bersani’s inculpation of selfhood – whose psychic boundarying he holds responsible for the violence of our intersubjective world – it seems it may be in altogether obliterating the self that we can begin to imagine a nonviolent alternative. Indeed, the threat that virtual platforms like Seeking Arrangement pose to essence could be the very thing that excites their political potential. If there were no self behind the screen – no authentic “depth” beyond the image – what then of the demands to expose it? What then of knowing as the edifice of the relational?

Antiessentialist thinkers like Jean Baudrillard complicate Debordian logic in altogether unsettling the notion of depth. Baudrillard’s analysis of representation employs a Saussurian argument against the value of the sign and foregrounds the particular contentions that visual media – like Seeking Arrangement – raise for notions of the “real.” In what reads as an early intimation of social constructivism,

\textsuperscript{110} McGlotten, Virtual Intimacies, 9.
Ferdinand de Saussure argues for language as a “form” rather than “substance”\textsuperscript{111}, whose signs are “realities that have their seat in the brain”\textsuperscript{112}, despite having no manifest value of their own. Saussure sees the sign as prefigurative of the value we consider native to it, a formulation that destabilizes the very idea of depth and calls to question our attachments to it. In applying Saussure’s emptying of signage to the realm of the visual, Baudrillard argues for what he calls \textit{simulacra}, a framework that similarly disavows essence and foregrounds the generative power of the semiotic. \textit{Simulacra} depends on the “a liquidation of all referentials”\textsuperscript{113} in ontology, whose equivocation gives way to a “radical negation of the sign as value”\textsuperscript{114}. In their attention to representation, Baudrillard and Saussure disaggregate signs from their “substance” and thereby call to question the essence presumed of them. Where media critics are mistaken, Baudrillard suggests, is in trusting that there is a self to be represented at all.

By renouncing the value of the sign, Baudrillard imports consideration of the discursive production of ontological “realities” and the binarisms that hold them in place. The logic of \textit{simulacra} destabilizes ontologies of “the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’”\textsuperscript{115} (3) in exposing how their meaning depends on their relation to one another as foils. These dichotomies speak to the mutual constitution of signified values, wherein “…everything is metamorphosed into its opposite” in order

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\textsuperscript{112} ibid, 15.
\textsuperscript{114} ibid, 6.
\textsuperscript{115} ibid, 3.
to “perpetuate itself in its expurgated form.” Authenticiy, Baudrillard suggests, is merely an illusion produced by what’s “fake.” Indeed, Debord seems to come close to this logic in restating the impossibility of the “real” in a spectaclist culture, claiming: “In a world that is really turned upside down, the true” is just “a moment of the false.” Though he rightfully disempowers the true/false binary here, Debord mistakenly holds out for “truth” in demanding its recuperation from the spectacle. Indeed, his argument presupposes that there is a reality to be represented or “turned upside down” – an assumption Baudrillard overturns in his attention to ontological binarisms.

Joan Copjec furthers Baudrillard’s argument in considering the relation between ontological foils. It is only when we define terms as “having a reciprocal relation,” Copjec argues, “the meaning of the one depending on the meaning of the other, and vice versa, that we incline them – more strongly, compel them – towards union” – though such relations are actually “sustained through violent antagonism.” Beneath every internally consistent fact in our ontological landscape, Copjec argues, are hostile oppositions maintaining its illusion. Given Copjec’s logic, it seems media critics overlook the violence of the self by insisting on its singular essence. Indeed, her rendering seems to harken back to Phillips’s determinations of the self/Other relation, whose boundaries – however natural or inevitable they may seem – require a rather violent negotiation. In light of Copjec’s and Phillips’s arguments, it seems that

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116 ibid, 19.
the essence presumed of a given object – like the self – actually obscures its mutually dependent signification and the violence that holds it in place.

In antiessentialist formulations, it’s the reproduction of ontological signs that creates the illusion of their essence – a fact that makes the market’s superficial abundance all the more threatening. “The real,” Baudrillard writes, “is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these”119, where the iterative production of the real gives rise to the illusion of its essence. Friedrich Nietzsche expands on the constitutive facsimiles of essence – or “truth,” in his words120 – and on the processes of their reproduction. In his rendering, truth gets taken for granted in the same way that “a dream, eternally repeated, absolutely would be felt and judged as reality”121. For Nietzsche, the interminable replications of the “dream” delude us into having a sense of its consistency, and make order out of what Georg Simmel calls the “unlimited variety” of ontological forms122.

In a reality upheld by the replication of signage, the empty superficiality of the surface threatens to spoil the illusion – a risk that seems to elucidate the particular danger of mediated platforms. As poststructuralist formulations of mimesis illustrate, the ceaseless replication of copies seems to reveal the “constructedness of the

119 Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, 2.
121 ibid, 252-253.
original”123 – and expose the “infinitely refracted”124 or “indefinite”125 nature of its essence. Indeed, the abundant images on platforms like Seeking Arrangement exacerbate precisely this anxiety: that there is nothing “real” behind what’s superficial, “no knowable subject hiding beneath the surface, waiting to be uncovered, rescued, cared for, or loved”126.

As Bersani’s analyses indicate, however, it may be precisely this destabilization of essence that potentiates the political value of mediated, market-like relations. It seems it’s in getting rid of the idea of the self that we come closest to resolving the violence of intersubjectivity – a modality epitomized in impersonal relations like those on Seeking Arrangement. Indeed, doing away with essence reveals something invaluable about the demands that come to bear on it: we don’t want to know another because there is something veritable to know about them — we want to know them because our ego cannot tolerate the threat of their indefinable Otherness. It’s only in disbanding the self, in other words, that we might combat the ego’s imperialism – a relation imaged best by the market.

125 Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, 2. 
MARKETS

“Every successful relationship is an arrangement between two parties. In business, partners sign business agreements that outline their objectives and expectations. Likewise, romantic relationships can only work if two people agree on what they expect, and what they can give and receive from each other.” – CEO BRANDON WADE, SEEKING.COM.

“We go to the market to taste estrangement, if only to fantasize what our next attachment might be.” – LEWIS HYDE, THE GIFT.

Host of Vice’s Black Market: Dispatches Tania Rashid covers Seeking Arrangement in an exposé titled “My Experience as an Undercover Sugar Baby”127, a review that underscores the gendered violence and objectification native to the platform. “I felt like a piece of meat, something less than a person,” Rashid writes, “not someone with a soul and feelings.” Throughout the article, it becomes clear that Rashid’s main issue with sugaring was the feeling that she’d been flattened to an object of sexual consumption, an accusation targeted at men’s indifference about her inner self: “None of the men wanted to get to know me on a deeper level,” she claims128. At fault in Rashid’s account of SA is the male users’ disregard of her desires and lack of interest in the particularities harbored within her person. The fear she conjures of the platform is that daddies want nothing more from the baby than their fantasy of her, who’s body (like “meat”) is but a template on which to project their desires.

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128 ibid.
Rashid’s denunciation of instrumental relations testifies to the violence presumed of objectification, whose reduction of the self is taken an unquestionable threat to freedom. Rashid inculpates Seeking Arrangement for having propelled her down a “soulless path” in superficial relationships “governed by money,” where the transactional nature of her exchanges threatened the substance of her person and foreclosed any sort of meaningful romance⁷. In her many references to objectified contact, Rashid images SA as a site of violence whose relations contort the sort of caring mutuality that feminism has long campaigned for. As Rashid lays plain in such criticisms, it was ultimately the fact of moneyed exchange that so upset her – a claim that seems incontrovertible, despite her knowing participation in a waged relation (what, one might ask, did she expect?).

Rashid’s article contributes to a common narrative about sex work, one borne out of the radical feminist polemic of mid-century sex wars. Like the porn abolitionists of their time, radical feminists insisted on sex work as a “form of gendered violence”⁸, whose “masculinist sexual practices” they saw as instrumental in “creating and maintaining women’s oppression”⁹. In their arguments, the commercialization of

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⁷ ibid.
these practices in sex work bring the “violence and coercion” of heterosexual relations to a dangerous level\textsuperscript{132}.

Journalist Nancy Jo Sales recapitulates radical feminist contentions in her article on SA’s role in the “New Prostitution Economy,” published in \textit{Vanity Fair} in August 2016\textsuperscript{133}. Sales gives voice to sugar babies who have experienced marginalization and violence through the app, among them a woman named Alisa, who found that the platform made her feel “worthless.” The daddies “don’t pay attention to your brain, they don’t care what you have to say,” Alisa claims, “They just care that you’re attractive and you’re listening to them.” Like Rashid, Alisa found the transactionality of the app intolerable; she couldn’t stand the superficial and instrumentalizing nature of her exchanges with daddies, who failed to “pay attention” her inner worth and intellect. In quoting an ex-baby named Jenna, Sales lays plain that the ultimate issue with sugaring is that it isn’t “real dating” – the final straw being that daddies would never even “consider a monogamous relationship” with a baby, a claim to reprehensible it seems to need no further discussion.

In their appraisals of love and connection – and their insistence on being known deeply – Rashid and Sales recapitulate the ethic of care and mutuality upheld in criticisms of sexual commerce and mediation alike. As Rashid concludes, the next guy who comes along should care for her “from his heart instead of his wallet.”


Indeed, her innocuous plea for love seems all the more urgent and compelling because of the normative appetency of its request – whose demand works to defend the goodness and consideration of the social collective. Like so many feminist disavowals of sexual commerce, Rashid and Sales’s denunciation of SA’s moneyed exchange stands as a seemingly impenetrable end to conversation. Who would dare defend a sexual market against arguments about the objectification and violence it incurs to women who partake in it?

Since the sex wars of the 60s and 70s, there have been many discursive attempts to redeem the value of sexual commerce, most of which aim to equivocate distinctions between paid and unpaid sex. As scholars like Viviana Zelizer, Teela Sanders, and Elizabeth Bernstein argue, the market may not be as incompatible with intimacy as radical feminists think it is.

In *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Viviana Zelizer spearheads arguments against the public/private distinction upheld in normative criticisms of sexual commerce. Such arguments fail to understand the actual nature of intimacy, she claims, whose relation to the economic is much more nuanced and interdependent than it seems. Zelizer wants us to pay closer attention to “interplay of economic transactions and intimacy”\(^{134}\), whose “mixing, goes the theory,” is taken to “[contaminate] both”\(^{135}\). As critics of sexual markets contend: “Sentiment within the economic sphere generates favoritism and inefficiency, while rationality within the sentimental sphere destroys


\(^{135}\) ibid, 23.
solidarity”136. In exploring the anxiety these forms of “mixing” incite, Zelizer interrogates the mutually constituted nature of economic and intimate realms and makes a case for their compatibility.

Though her argument is taken as a radical departure from normative criticisms of sex work, Zelizer seems to share their concern about the integrity of intimacy and the threat of its contamination or “damaging”137. Her central aim is to overturn the notion that markets are “inherently incompatible with intimacy”138, a notion upheld in the “standard” presumption that “money corrupts” our interpersonal relations139. Indeed, the question for Zelizer is a rather empirical one – do markets allow for intimacy or not? Rather than challenge critics’ attachments to the chastity of our intersubjective relations, Zelizer aims to rescue intimacy from the snares of brute transaction by insisting on the “presence of differentiated social ties […] in payment systems”140. Zelizer furthers this redemptive ambition when she writes: “‘there is no reason to think that a prostitute’s acceptance of money for her services necessarily involves a baneful conversion of an intimate act into a commodity.’ […] Nor does prostitution,” she continues, “contaminate noncommercial sexual relations; different types of relationships can and have always coexisted”141. As this resolution goes to show, Zelizer’s rather equivocal claims about the harmony of public and private spheres work to appease critics’ anxieties about their antagonism. In fact, it may be her noncommittal equivocation of these realms that makes her argument so widely

136 ibid, 24.
137 ibid, 104.
138 ibid, 79.
139 ibid, 124.
140 ibid, 92.
141 ibid, 85.
palatable. In explaining away the oppositional or "hostile" nature of public and private realms, however, Zelizer may risk understating the threat of market incursion – whose penetration of the social world may antagonize the very ethic holding it in place.

Teela Sanders’s *Paying for Pleasure* further problematizes arguments against sexual commerce in troubling their assumptions about commercial sex as a necessarily exploitative praxis. The critics Sanders addresses maintain a “false dichotomy between commercial and non-commercial relations” in their failure to account for the intimate nature of sexual transactions. In invoking Anthony Giddens’s notion of *plastic sexuality* and Zelizer’s muddying of public and private domains, Sanders situates sex work within the broader “‘transformation of intimacy’” by capitalist markets, an analysis that foregrounds the neoliberal extension of the economic about the social. Like Zelizer, Sanders pushes back against second-wave radical feminist arguments that reduce the client-worker relation to mere transaction, whose logic figures the worker as a powerless and objectified victim. Instead, she calls attention to the forms of “bodily and emotional intimacy” that attend commercial sex, which she argues are made possible in “relationships with men who become ‘regular’ clients to the same sex workers,” a qualification that attests to her pointed investment in Category 3 relations over and above other dynamics. Indeed, Sanders goes so far as to argue that such relationships are “predicated on the same content of

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142 ibid, 124.
144 ibid, 88.
145 ibid, 88.
non-commercial relationships” – the only real difference being that they are
“mediated through a monetary transaction”\textsuperscript{146}. Given the inherent emotionality of these exchanges, Sanders suggests that the threat of mediation incurred by the wage is negligible, though it nonetheless poses a danger in need of mitigating.

What matters to Sanders is the “disclosing intimacy” of sexual relations, a form of mutuality that includes “‘close association, privileged knowledge, deep knowing and understanding and some form of love’”\textsuperscript{147}. Sanders redeems the value of sexual transaction in insisting on the fact of this intimacy and the “disclosure,” depth, and even “love” made possible in regular client-worker exchanges – a degree of connection foreclosed in single-stint transactions of “street hookers,” whose relations are inappreciably bare and impersonal\textsuperscript{148}.

Indeed, Sanders’s main contention with “hookers” seems to be that the surface-level nature of their exchanges objectifies and alienates the actors involved – a distance reckoned away in comparatively humane longer-term relations. She expands on this distinction when she writes:

If the sexual partner is an object then it is possible to avoid feelings or be concerned with any wider issues of emotions, exploitation or ethics. There are two accounts on which this simplification of what happens in the sex industry can be challenged. First, the argument of objectification ignores that there are emotional aspects of the client-sex worker relationship, and second, some men give a low priority to sex and a higher status to emotional connectivity, therefore resisting objectification\textsuperscript{149}.

\textsuperscript{146} ibid, 90.
\textsuperscript{147} ibid, 89.
\textsuperscript{148} ibid, 91.
\textsuperscript{149} ibid, 96.
In Sanders’s argument, sex work is defensible insofar as the partners involved are ethically considered and connected in an emotional bond. Critics of sex work seem to misunderstand the actually intimate nature of protracted relations and wrongfully associate them with the dangers of objectified exchange, a conflation Sanders is careful to correct. If only critics would attend to the emotional potential of higher-quality sexual transactions, they would recognize the prosocial value of the behavior it facilitates.

Like Wade intimates in his defense of mentorship, Sanders reassures critics that the intimate nature of sex work exchanges is potent enough to wholly obscure the underlying transaction. In longer-term relationships, clients’ perceptions of closeness can “neutralize” the moneyed component of the relationship, allowing them to “experience moments of suspended commercialism”\textsuperscript{150} and move beyond the brutish superficiality of transaction. Central to this suspension is the client’s perception of mutuality, whether “real or illusionary,” where the presumed reciprocity of exchange allows clients to “believe that sex workers are experiencing emotional and sensual closeness as well as sexual pleasure.” The experience of mutual care helps to give the client a sense of egalitarian and conventional romance, one that’s effectively as good as the “real” thing\textsuperscript{151}. As Sanders sees it, there are three main ways clients experience mutuality:

1. The ‘authentic’ delusion of mutuality. Acting (i.e. not pleasure) by the sex worker is necessary to provide the illusion of mutual pleasure yet is experienced by the client as genuine mutual

\textsuperscript{150} ibid, 94.
\textsuperscript{151} ibid, 98.
pleasure, holding their own sexual and intimate abilities in high esteem.
2. The ‘authentic-fake’ delusion of mutuality. The client understands that the sex worker is acting as part of the service (she is a sexual and emotional labourer) but he still experiences the interaction as mutual and authentic even though both parties are aware that it is fake.
3. The ‘genuine’ mutuality. ‘Real’ mutual pleasure is experienced by both parties either inside or outside the professional boundaries of commercial sex.

The experiences codified above illustrate that at stake in the worker’s performance of reciprocal pleasure (or care) is some form of genuineness – whose performance, if successful, works both to authenticate the service provided and to verify the client’s ability to perform sexually. Given the site’s insistence on mutual connection, it seems reasonable to assume that most clients on Seeking Arrangement believe they are paying for experiences within the third category, despite the likely predominance of the former two “delusions” in sugar arrangements. Yet although SA formally endorses the rather authentic intimacy in Sanders’s “genuine” mutuality, the role of money in its “mutually beneficial” arrangements seems to foreclose the sort of emotional and physical reciprocity she imagines.

Given its threat to “genuine” intimacy, the reigning performativity of workers’ pleasure confounds Sanders’s argument and destabilizes the notions of estimable reciprocity she lays claim to. In detailing the “authentic-fake” mutuality, her argument even potentiates a Brechtian imaging of performativity – “a performance that announces its own constructedness and thus disrupts the realist truth claims of

152 ibid, 99.
153 ibid, 100.
productive/representational hegemony”154 – though her eager return to the social value of sexual transaction foreshortens this sort of analysis. Despite her seeming acknowledgement of the performative – or in her words “delusional”155 – nature of mutuality, Sanders uncritically furthers it as a legitimizing feature of client-worker intimacies. Indeed, her subsequent invocation of Zelizer testifies to exactly this point: “‘intimate relationships do not necessarily have to be mutual’”156, Zelizer writes – a claim that works to explain-away the worker’s performance and restore the intimate potential of paid transaction.

While Sanders’s argument nominally holds out for “intimacy” in this way, albeit tenuously, her reinterpretation of its conditions demands closer attention. Indeed, her reference to Zelizer unwittingly makes room for a critical examination of the contingencies of exchange, in and beyond paid transaction. In protesting reciprocity as a necessary linchpin of intimate bonds, Zelizer destabilizes those ethics that relish in the dyad as a paradigmatic social form. For a moment, Sanders seems to come close to challenging coercive demands of the social—those which set the “real” intimacy apart from the “fake” and insist on the sort of participatory exposure requisite to violence. Yet although she may have opened up the possibility for an antisocial rendering, Sanders’ momentary disavowal of mutuality only worked to reinvigorate her argument for the “intimate” quality of paid transaction – an argument that aims to vindicate sexual markets by the very terms of the social ethic. Ultimately,

154 Miranda Joseph, Against the Romance of Community (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 65.
155 ibid, 99.
156 ibid, 102.
Sanders’s analysis is undercut by her moralization of the sexual market and insistence on the normative value of its exchanges.

In *Temporarily Yours*, Elizabeth Bernstein moves beyond Sanders’s and Zelizer’s moralism and focuses instead on the boundedness of sex in capitalist markets, an analysis that imports the particular affective landscape of contemporary capitalist exchange and the subjective and social meanings it potentiates for “market-mediated sex”\(^\text{157}\). While Bernstein seems to share Sanders’s investment in the intimate nature of sex work – claiming that the interdependent nature of sex and economy allows for “ever more profound and more intimate forms of erotic connection”\(^\text{158}\) – she acknowledges the limitations of intimacy in the market, whose exchanges allow for what she calls “bounded authenticity”\(^\text{159}\). She writes:

I seek to complicate the view that the commodification of sexuality is transparently equitable with diminished intimacy and erotic experience. Such an argument does not do justice to the ways in which the spheres of public and private, intimacy and commerce, have interpenetrated one another and thereby been mutually transformed, making the postindustrial consumer marketplace one potential arena for securing authentic, yet bounded, forms of interpersonal connection\(^\text{160}\).

Bernstein attributes the newly intimate potential of market exchange to the “postindustrial economic transformations” of capitalism, whose privatization of the sexual market has come to require rather emotional or “authentic” forms of erotic


\(^{158}\) ibid, 69.

\(^{159}\) ibid, 103.

\(^{160}\) ibid, 21.
connection\textsuperscript{161}. It seems the interpenetration of “intimacy and commerce” has given way to a new sort of “interpersonal connection,” albeit one that’s bracketed by the fact of transaction. “In postindustrial sexual commerce,” she writes, emotional authenticity has been coopted by the market and “incorporated explicitly into the economic contract”\textsuperscript{162}. Heartless and impersonal prostitution, Bernstein reassures critics, is a thing of the past – though the intimacy now available to us is marketized and “bounded” by the terms of its exchange.

Bernstein further destabilizes the public/private binarism in her attention to the transformation of subjective desire in postindustrial capitalism. Given the seepage of market logic into private life, Bernstein argues, it seems we’ve come to prefer the “neatly bounded commodity” over the “messy diffuseness of nonmarket exchange”\textsuperscript{163}, a preference that reaches into even the most treasured realms of the social world. As the market gets further embroiled in social actors – as it reroutes the very nature of our desire – it seems we become better suited for the intimacies it offers us. With the growing expansion of the market, Bernstein intimates, it seems the public/private realms so forcibly set apart in sex work criticism are not only reconcilable but “symbiotic”\textsuperscript{164}, an argument that seems to radicalize Zelizer’s and Sanders’s claims in altogether decentering questions of authenticity. The market may not preserve the “messy diffuseness” of real-world relationships, Bernstein intimates, but it gives us something that we prefer anyway.

\textsuperscript{161} ibid, 69. 
\textsuperscript{162} ibid, 105. 
\textsuperscript{163} ibid, 139. 
\textsuperscript{164} ibid, 141 (emphasis added).
Indeed, Bernstein seems rather unaffected by the impersonality of marketized sex. She plainly acknowledges the market’s facilitation of transactionality when she writes: “The act of sexual purchase […] serves as a temporary salve to clients’ contradictory desires for both transience and stability, for fungible intimacy as well as durable connection”\textsuperscript{165}. Here Bernstein addresses clients’ desires for superficial (“fungible”) contact in a claim that seems neither redemptive nor anxious. In detailing the coextension of durability and “transience” in the market, Bernstein seems uninterested in making a vindicative argument about intimate nature of its exchanges. Indeed, she openly acknowledges their “contradiction” – and the latent antagonism between impersonality and social mores – without trying to reconcile it, as Sanders did in her insistence on the superordination of authentic mutuality. What’s more, Bernstein highlights the precarity of intimate experiences in the market, which she claims depend on the terms of exchange being “temporarily subordinated” to an “authentic interpersonal connection”\textsuperscript{166}. Though intimacy is facilitated in the market, its connections are bracketed by rather impersonal contracting, the terms of which can only be suspended temporarily.

While Bernstein appears to have transcended the moral panic about sex work and impersonality, her progressive posturing masks a different kind of anxiety – one informed by traditional Marxist determinations of late stage capitalism and concerns about its expansion\textsuperscript{167}. At the close of her argument, Bernstein admits her concern

\textsuperscript{165} ibid, 134.
\textsuperscript{166} Bernstein, \textit{Temporarily Yours}, 103.
\textsuperscript{167} ibid, 118.
about the “new sets of social dangers”\textsuperscript{168} that sexual markets pose to the women who partake in them. Even in the “the white, middle-class, upper tiers of the sex industry,” she argues, women’s “incentives for engaging in sex work remain intricately tied to unequal relations of class and gender”\textsuperscript{169} – whose systemic exploitation of women demands “a sober analysis of the global inequalities (of sex, of class, of race, and of nation) that drive [them] into sexual labor”\textsuperscript{170}. Here Bernstein not only resuscitates moral concern over sexual labor practices – a concern displaced unsurprisingly onto the “global” woman – but imagines this exploitation as a fact of economic circumstance. “Feminists and other social commentators who are concerned about the existence and augmentation of contemporary sex markets,” Bernstein cautions, “would be wise to identify the fight against corporate globalization (in both its transnational and local guises) as pivotal to their interests”\textsuperscript{171}. As this injunction makes clear, the ultimate issue for Bernstein is “corporate globalization” – a claim that finally reveals something of her political stake in sexual commerce. “Feminists” and “social commentators” are too caught up in the trivialities of sex work discourse, Bernstein argues – in their concerns about authenticity, mutuality, and depth – to recognize the \textit{real} fight: the fight against global capitalism. While her argument may seem exciting for its avoidance of vindicalionalist rhetoric like Zelizer’s and Sanders’s, Bernstein suggests that such scholars have merely \textit{misplaced} their anxiety; the real culprit, she professes, is capitalism.

\textsuperscript{168} ibid, 188.
\textsuperscript{169} ibid, 181.
\textsuperscript{170} ibid, 185.
\textsuperscript{171} ibid, 185-186.
MONEY

“There are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions.” – MARY DOUGLAS, FOREWORD TO MARCEL MAUSS’S THE GIFT.

“The nature of money resembles the nature of prostitution. The indifference with which it lends itself to any use, the infidelity with which it leaves everyone, its lack of ties to anyone, its complete objectification that excludes any attachment and makes it suitable as a pure means—all this suggests a portentous analogy between it and prostitution.” – GEORG SIMMEL, “PROSTITUTION,” ON INDIVIDUALITY AND SOCIAL FORMS.

“The path of subjectivity lies within the capital relation, it does not try to imagine alternatives.” – ANTONIO NEGRI, MARX BEYOND MARX.

While Zelizer, Bernstein, and Sanders try to defend sexual markets, their arguments are undercut by appraisals of normative intimacy and concerns about capitalist expansion. Their analyses raise the question: Might there be another way to entertain the value of the sexual markets, if not by a metric of intimacy or care? In revisiting Bersani’s contentions with knowing impulses, Greg Goldberg elaborates a compelling argument for the political value of market relations – one that may offer something valuable to existing feminist scholarship about sexual commerce.

In his analysis of the gay hookup app Grindr, Greg Goldberg takes a closer look at the nature of critics’ aversions to objectification. Grindr’s critics abhor the market-like impersonality of the app, whose users they fear see “each other as objects to be consumed and disposed of at whim”¹. Users on Grindr are flattened a mere image and presented to the viewer in rows, like goods in a market, an experience that seems

¹ Goldberg, “Meet Markets,” 1.
only marginally different from online shopping. As with Seeking Arrangement, one can even filter profiles with customized preferences, a feature that testifies to the brute commodification of users and superficiality of their engagements. Though there is no explicit exchange of money, Grindr’s market-like exchanges pose a bifurcated threat to the social; like Seeking Arrangement, Grindr raises anxieties about the virtual and the commercial, threatening both “a mediation gap (insofar as contact between users is indirect) and a market gap (insofar as users ‘shop for’ rather than commune with other users)”\(^{173}\). In fact, the nature of these threats seems rather indistinguishable, given their challenge to the social project and the intersubjectivity it requires. In both cases, Goldberg illustrates, the fear is that we maintain loose and superficial associations with others at the “peril” of real relationships\(^{174}\). Ultimately, the reigning threat of an app like Grindr or SA, Goldberg argues, is the disposability and meaninglessness of the relations they facilitate, whose marketized nature endangers the bedrock of the social world.

Goldberg sees the market as an irrefutable danger to the social world – one that Zelizer, Bernstein, and Sanders misunderstand in their arguments for its intimate potential. Indeed, the antisocial threats of impersonality seem culminate in market logic, as Goldberg demonstrates in his attention to objectification. He writes:

> The problem with objectifying one’s partners here is not simply that in so doing we ‘reduce’ them to their physical attributes, their object properties. Rather, the problem is that objectification entails taking an instrumental approach to others – that is, using them, or seeing them only in terms of what they have to offer us, without concern for their

\(^{173}\) ibid, 2.

\(^{174}\) ibid, 12.
desires or pleasures. To be clear, the problem with instrumentalization is not precisely consent, though many have argued that seeing others as objects makes it easier to disregard their consent or lack thereof. Neither is the problem precisely that instrumentalized others are disposable, to be discarded at whim. Rather, the problem seems to be a broader violation of the social imperative that we consider and cater to others’ desires, which is also to presume that we might know them, and that we compromise or forfeit our own desires when there is a conflict. The problem, in other words, is that we approach others as if in a market, where self-interest or self-indulgence motivates relations, rather than a community or collective motivated by altruism.\footnote{ibid, 7 (emphasis added).}

Goldberg nuances critics’ contentsions with objectified relations in attending more closely to the particularities of impersonality’s threat to the social. In excavating their attachments, Goldberg shows how critics’ compulsions toward depth and knowing work in service of a collective ethic – one codified the values of knowing, mutual consideration, and “compromise,” that found the intersubjective, as Bersani details. The ultimate provocation of mediated contact, Goldberg claims, is its threat to the “altruism” that compels social bonds. In impersonalizing the social dyad, Grindr contorts the prosocial ethic inhered in loving – instead encouraging users to relate as mere market actors, whose “self-interest” and “disregard” of others radically disavow the social project. Indeed, it’s the antisocial nature of market exchange that Zelizer, Bernstein, and Sanders try to circumvent; in avidly defending the market, however, they seem to pass over the most politically exciting thing about it, which Goldberg brings to light in his defense of object relations.

In fact, it’s everything critics hate about apps that Goldberg finds redeeming: their objectification of users, their transactionality, their devastation of social values.
Rather than refute critics of Grindr—whose arguments about the social dangers of mediation he finds incontrovertible—Goldberg challenges the value judgments that underpin their claims. In employing Bersanian logic, Goldberg advances an argument for the “political desirability of objectification,” as seen from the “position of the objectified”\(^\text{176}\). What makes impersonality politically interesting, he argues, is its subversion of the imperial, colonialist projects predicative of the social world.

Holding the Other at a distance in objectified contact – allowing them to remain “illegible,” in Jack Halberstam’s words\(^\text{177}\) – “usefully preserves a gap between oneself and one’s potential partners”\(^\text{178}\). Indeed, it’s in “refusing to produce knowledge about others,” Goldberg argues, “that we might remain open to them”\(^\text{179}\) – where impersonality successfully disarms the ego’s drive “to master the outside world” by preserving the “unknown” in its opacity\(^\text{180}\).

Goldberg’s invocation of psychoanalytic logic credits the nonviolent potential of impersonal contact; in market-like relations, users can remain “indifferent” to each other’s “desires and pleasures”\(^\text{181}\), relieved of the penetrative demands of social bonds\(^\text{182}\). In Goldberg’s Bersanian paradigm, relationality is a matter of “positioning rather than intimacy”\(^\text{183}\). Having “willed [their] own lessness” in disarming the ego’s imperialism, users in this relational landscape can “live less invasively in the

\(\text{ibid, 2.} \)
\(\text{ibid, 2.} \)
\(\text{ibid, 13.} \)
\(\text{ibid, 9.} \)
\(\text{Goldberg, “Meet Markets,” 2.} \)
\(\text{ibid, 12.} \)
\(\text{Bersani, Homos, 124.} \)
world”\textsuperscript{184}. Indeed, far from “imposing a limitation on sexual relations,” as critics contend, the market may be the very means through which intersubjective violence is “successfully thwarted”\textsuperscript{185}.

What’s more, Goldberg’s framework helpfully circumvents anxieties about essence; in his model for impersonality, there need not be a self to expose or know at all. Indeed, doing away with the self seems to necessitate the very relation Goldberg describes. Insofar as the self is the precondition of the social world, as Foucault and Massumi explicate, its liquidation makes the whole intersubjective project impossible – leaving no other choice but an impersonal mode of relationality. Not only do the market relations offer relief from the imperial insistence of the ego – they altogether resolve the essentialism that compels its violence.

While Seeking Arrangement has often been vilified as a “a hub for fetishists,”\textsuperscript{186} Goldberg’s argument suggests that it may be precisely the fetishization of a sugar baby in SA’s market – her objectification as student, mentee, nubile – that protects her from the violence of intersubjective knowing. Despite having been the target of feminist criticism for so long, objectification may have the potential to radicalize women’s resistance of paternalistic and managerial relations. The fetishism inhered in Marxist analyses of commodity exchange attests to the nonviolence of objectified relations and their potential for a feminist politic. Marx characterizes commodity

\textsuperscript{184} Bersani, “Sociability and Cruising,” 22.
\textsuperscript{185} Goldberg, “Meet Markets,” 13.
fetishism as the process by which capital “obliterates and obscures” the labor invested in its production. As a seemingly isolable entity, dislocated from its means of production, the fetishized commodity embodies the “mystification of capital in its most extreme form.” Though typically we think of the consumer as the one protected in fetishism – safeguarded from the exploitative conditions that brought his object of pleasure into being – it seems here that the obscurity of the fetishized object works to mitigate the violence of its consumption. “Fetishes,” as Donald Morton describes it, effectively “guard against the encroachment of knowledge” – a fact that excites the political value of marketized contact.

The “inestimable value of sex,” as Bersani describes it, may very well be in its “anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, and antiloving” properties – in its semblance to the bare and self-interested market transaction. In other words, what’s politically interesting about sugaring is not its transmogrification of intimacy in market terms – as sex work scholars like Sanders suggest – but its devastation of intimacy altogether. In giving preference to SA relations based on mentorship and longevity, critics and legislators seem to overlook the real danger of the platform; indeed, it’s the relationships that seem the least threatening – those that most closely resemble loving coupledom – that in fact threaten the most violence. In their abdication of the social, “No-Strings-Attached” relations on SA offer reprieve from the violence and paternalism of intersubjective relations. Simply put, it’s all the things critics hate about the market that make it a valuable template for relationality.

187 Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1972), 482.
188 ibid, 494.
In *The Sexual Contract*, Carol Pateman imagines the self is a property available for contracting. In revisiting Locke’s contract theory, Pateman argues for an expanded formulation of capital, one that legitimizes private-sphere arenas occluded by civil politics – among them the relational, the domestic, and the feminine. Pateman takes the notion of capital beyond the realm of material goods and services in making a case for the “very special” property individuals “own in their persons”\(^{191}\), which Locke sees as manifest in their “capacities and attributes”\(^{192}\). Here Pateman brings the self into propertied terms, whose bounds it seems we negotiate in exchange with others. Indeed, this brokering of the self seems to be at the heart of our social relations. We could even, Pateman suggests, imagine all forms of relationality in terms of the negotiation and leveraging of selves in exchange—an analysis that radically reimagines the intersubjective as nothing more than “an endless series of discrete contracts” negotiated by budgeting actors\(^{193}\). Pateman’s framework thereby impersonalizes the social bonds we hold so dear and makes us out as mere contractors in exchange.

For Pateman, it’s not the *fact* of the contract that threatens freedom, but rather its occlusion or coercion by an ethic of love. Like other second wave Marxist feminists, Pateman takes marriage on as her main object of criticism, whose violence she locates in the paternalistic ethos that compels it. In quoting Gerda Lerner, Pateman writes, “The basis of Paternalism is an unwritten contract for exchange: economic support and protection given by the male for subordination in all matters, sexual service, and


\(^{192}\) ibid, 13.

\(^{193}\) ibid, 15.
unpaid domestic service given by the female"—a relation she describes succinctly as an “exchange of obedience for protection”. The issue with the marital exchange for Pateman is not the contract but all that is “unwritten” in it—the unstated subordination of the wife in labors of love, sex, bed-making—whose occlusion makes marriage into a sort of commissioned servitude, one dangerously obscured by an ethos of love. Indeed, it’s the antagonism and coercion of the marital union that make into what Claude Levi-Strauss describes as the “archetype of exchange”. In the logic of contract theory, every relationship seems to depend on reconciling the antagonism between its members, a project made difficult by the coercive and “unwritten” elements of exchange.

Pateman helpfully calls attention to how social hierarchies prefigure patterned forms of coercion in contracting—which seem to bear disproportionately on those with less leverage in exchange, whether along axes of gender, race, class. Yet it’s this close interchange with the social landscape that also potentiates the political value of contracting: “No limits,” she argues, “can be placed on contract,” whose negotiations prefigure liberating and repressive relations alike. Upon closer consideration, the freedom of contracting seems to be in arresting the antagonism between the self and its arbiter, whose hostility we mitigate through the terms of our exchange. Indeed, Pateman sees this peacemaking as the “central aim of contract theory” and that which potentiates its political merit. It’s in disarming the hostility of the self/Other

194 ibid, 31.
195 ibid, 58.
196 ibid, 59.
197 ibid, 15.
198 ibid, 62.
relation through contracting – through the rendering-explicit and then leveling of terms—that individuals can best position themselves toward freedom. The explicit contracting of sugar arrangements, Pateman suggests, might be more politically exciting than we realize.

In their manifesto “Counter-Planning from the Kitchen,” Marxists feminists Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici take Pateman’s logic further in bringing money into the contract; to really level the terms, they argue, we have to compensate those systemically disserved in exchange. As front-runners of the 1970s Wages For Housework movement, Cox and Federici pioneered arguments for waging reproductive labor, an effort that strategically employed a contractual framework. Like Pateman, Cox and Federici problematize capital’s strategic exclusion of feminized, private-sphere labor, an arena they argue has “always-already been economic” 199.

Federici images the labor of intimate exchange in her essay “Why Sexuality is Work,” an argument that calls attention to how intimacy’s demands variegate along social axes. According to Federici, even beloved and unpaid sex is “spent in calculations” on the part of the woman in a heterosexual relation: “We sigh, sob, gasp, pant, jump up and down in bed, but in the meantime our mind keeps calculating ‘how much’—how much of ourselves can we give before we lose or undersell

ourselves, how much will we get in return?”\(^{200}\) In a heterosexual dyad, intimacy is disproportionately laborious for women, Federici argues, whose participation is confined to a set of caring expenditures. Though the fact of this exchange seems to get buried in love, women are “never allowed to forget” the unsung labors it requires, Federici claims, and can “never transcend the value-relation in our love relation with a man”\(^{201}\). Here Federici calls attention to the critical interplay between social hierarchies and intimacy, where the onus of relational labor weighs more heavily on socially othered actors – and renders them more vulnerable to the violence of psychic incursion, as hooks argues. To disregard the labor and calculation that undergirds intimacy, Federici suggests, is to neglect this landscape and its codification of normative power relations. Indeed, her recommendation for the wage may be all the more exciting for its potential to account for the socially differentiated violence of intersubjective relations that hooks describes. The least you could do, Federici argues, is pay to play.

The real issue for Cox and Federici is the obsfuscation of labor by an ethic of love – an argument that seems to recapitulate Pateman’s and Goldberg’s contentions with the coercive demands of the social project. In an approximate antisocial rendering, Cox and Federici illustrate how seemingly unquestionable claims to love functionally coerce its violence. “To the extent that it is wageless,” they write, love has only ever


\(^{201}\) ibid, 26.
concealed “our enslavement to the home”\textsuperscript{202}; in fact, nothing has ever “been so powerful in institutionalizing our work, the family and our dependence on men,” Cox and Federici argue, than the idea that “‘love’ always paid for this work”\textsuperscript{203}. To insist on the immeasurability of love, whose intimacy is seen as unfit for the market’s austerity, is to take for granted the equity presumed of its exchanges. Like Goldberg, Cox and Federici see market relations as the way to overcome the violence of intersubjective bonds. If our social bonds require “calculating,” as Federici insists that they do, then the only equitable approach to their negotiation is through the fungibility of money. It’s the boundedness of moneyed relations on SA that tempers the open-ended sacrifice, labor, and accountability exacted from women in romantic love. Waging intimate labor, Federici argues, exposes patterned forms of exploitation in exchange and brings us closer to their transgression. Indeed, the wage is more than just money—it’s the force that delineates “work and non-work, production and parasitism, potential power and absolute powerlessness”\textsuperscript{204}, and therefore has to the potential to revolutionize the political significance of a given exchange. In a Marxist feminist logic, the bounded SA relation is exciting in that it brings the terms of labor into explicit negotiation and grants the baby leverage in the brokering; a wife’s work may never be done, but a sugar baby’s work most definitely is.

The ultimate provocation of arguments like Cox’s and Federici’s seems to be their stipulation that love just isn’t enough. In bringing intimacy into market logic, contract

\textsuperscript{203} ibid, 12.
\textsuperscript{204} Federici, “Why Sexuality is Work,” 2.
relations collapse the separate-sphere distinction so direly clung to in arguments against sexual commerce, instead stripping dyadic romance down to a mere transaction – one whose ambition, as Goldberg describes it, is “instrumental” rather than loving. The real danger of arguments like Federici’s and Pateman’s seems to be their divestment from mutuality, whose beneficence is presumed to found our social world—a move made all the more dangerous for its disavowal of ontologically feminine virtues (care, empathy, selflessness). Like Goldberg, they suggest that the route to freedom may have nothing to do with love.

Yet in calling attention the inextricability of exchange and social hierarchy, Marxist feminists like Federici expose Goldberg’s failure to account for the variegated power relations that undergird exchange—a distinction Georg Simmel helps to flesh out in *The Philosophy of Money*. Simmel seems to share Goldberg’s investments in the political potential of object relations: our ambition “to build a world that may be acquired without conflict and mutual repression, to possess values whose acquisition and enjoyment by one person does not exclude that of another,” he writes, is only achievable “in the world of objectivity” – whose exchanges demand we restrain the “direct subjective [desires]” that beget social violence. Indeed, it seems Goldberg’s framework succeeds not only in espousing the value of objectivity but in crediting the relational nature of freedom. “Freedom in a social sense, like lack of freedom,” Simmel writes, “is a relationship between human beings,” one that relishes in the “interchangeability of persons” as Goldberg suggests in his defense of the market’s

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205 Simmel, The Philosophy of Money, 291.
206 ibid, 301.
abundance. Rather than a wholesale rejection of relationality, a “mere absence of relationships,” Goldberg helpfully envisions freedom as “a very specific relation to others.” What’s more, Simmel suggests, Goldberg is right to trust in the liberating potential of exchange. In a similar turn against prosociality, Simmel celebrates exchange for its ability to assuage the “purely impulsive egotism or altruism” abound in the intersubjective, instead granting individuals the “justice” of leveled “advantage.”

What Goldberg fails to consider, however, as the Marxist feminist arguments intimate, are certain preconditions of freedom in exchange. Like Federici, Simmel sees intersubjective bonds as relations of indebtedness and calculation, where freedom lies in mitigating the exploitative terms of exchange. His argument begins from the assumption that “what we regard as freedom is often in fact only a change of obligations” in a given social relation, a progression he charts through alternations of “bondage and release.” According to Simmel, there are a few ways to be beholden in a social bond; if freedom is a question of degree, as he intimates, what matters is the leverage we’re allowed within each exchange. Simmel characterizes obligation in terms of the arbiter’s entitlement, which he claims can extend to any one of the following: 1) to the “person under obligation himself,” as exemplified in relations of enslavement; 2) to the product of the subject’s labor; or 3) to the product itself, “regardless of whether the person under obligation acquired [it] through his own

\[\text{\textsuperscript{207} ibid, 299.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{208} ibid, 292.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{209} ibid, 283.}\]
labour or not”\textsuperscript{210}. These classifications account for what Simmel calls the “degrees of freedom” afforded a subject in a given relation\textsuperscript{211}.

While the first degree is by far the worst – demanding an open obligation of “labour time and energy” from the subject – the second requires a “specific amount of labour”\textsuperscript{212} and is therefore a definite “development towards freedom”\textsuperscript{213}. In the second degree, the subject “only produces what is sufficient” for the terms of his contract with the recipient\textsuperscript{214}; here the product of his labor is the currency of the exchange, a formation Simmel calls “payment in kind”\textsuperscript{215}. Yet the demand for a labored product in second-degree relations nonetheless places constrain on “the human subject” and his energies\textsuperscript{216}, thereby restricting the bounds of his freedom. What’s more, “exchange in kind seldom gives both parties the desired object to an equal extent,” Simmel argues, and therefore disproportionately exploits one party in the transaction\textsuperscript{217} – a claim that echoes Federici’s denunciation of mutuality in sex and marriage. Indeed, the marital union seems to perfectly exemplify the second-degree relation Simmel describes: While a wife may not be enslaved to her husband, she still has to make him dinner and get him off.

It’s the labored obligations of the wife that Marxist feminists aim to negotiate in arguments for the wage — a defense that calls forth the moneyed terms of third-

\textsuperscript{210} ibid, 284.
\textsuperscript{211} ibid, 284.
\textsuperscript{212} ibid, 284.
\textsuperscript{213} ibid, 285.
\textsuperscript{214} ibid, 285.
\textsuperscript{215} ibid, 286.
\textsuperscript{216} ibid, 285.
\textsuperscript{217} ibid, 292.
degree relations, whose exchanges Simmel describes as the “magna charta of personal freedom”\textsuperscript{218}. Rather than laboring over “in kind” services, subjects in third-level bonds can fulfill their obligation with a money payment, which helpfully “excludes” them from the product exchanged\textsuperscript{219}. As he notes, the very dissolution of feudalist power depended on peasants’ “transformation into sums of money” and unshackling from the terms of their subjection\textsuperscript{220}. In Simmel’s logic, money is unmatched in its service to freedom, granting subjects exceptional relief from their arbiter’s demands: “Only money—because it is nothing but the representation of the value of other objects, and because there is almost no limit to its divisibility and accretion—provides the technical possibility for the exact equivalence of exchange values,” Simmel argues\textsuperscript{221}. The “unlimited convertibility” of the money payment potentiates an unprecedented degree of mutual satisfaction and equity in exchange, ensuring an “exact equivalence” between the “service and its return”\textsuperscript{222}. It’s the special fungibility of money, over and above other objects of exchange, that allows for the “interchangeability” of the subject, rendering their person more or less tangential to the transaction. Indeed, “the specificity and individuality” of subjects becomes “irrelevant,” if not “worthless” in a money economy\textsuperscript{223} – whose waging frees them from the demands of relational “dependence”\textsuperscript{224} and the violence it begets.

\textsuperscript{218} ibid, 286
\textsuperscript{219} ibid, 285.
\textsuperscript{220} ibid, 287.
\textsuperscript{221} ibid, 292.
\textsuperscript{222} ibid, 292.
\textsuperscript{223} ibid, 301-302.
\textsuperscript{224} ibid, 299.
Given Simmel’s arguments, it seems Goldberg is right to think that “a stricter evolution of concepts of objectivity and of individual freedom go hand in hand”\textsuperscript{225}, though he falls short in neglecting the import of the money payment itself. Upon closer consideration, his recommendation for impersonality seems to most closely resemble a second-degree relation. In espousing the equitable potential of objectified contact, Goldberg presupposes a non-hierarchical relation between the actors involved and takes for granted the equivalence of their benefits in exchange. In so far as in-kind relations like Goldberg’s operate by a barter logic, they seem to place too much trust in the efficacy of mutual trade – a shortcoming revealed in his attachment to the joint pleasure of the object mode. As Federici and Simmel make clear, his model fails to account for members’ variegated social positions and for the uneven returns they’re granted in an unwaged exchange. The issue, by both Federici’s and Simmel’s logics, seems to be Goldberg’s literal and figurative likening of actors in objectified contact; indeed, relations on Grindr lend themselves more readily to sameness (literally to a “homo” relation) than do those on a platform like SA, notwithstanding members’ differentiated social positions and privileges. In his orientation toward presumably equalized homo relations, Goldberg fails to tailor his model to the social polarities and patterns of indebtedness that undergird exchange – the terms of which only seem to be regulable in waging.

What’s more, Goldberg’s argument for the pleasurable nonviolence of market relations assumes that it is in the \textit{moment of exchange} that participants are gratified. In light of Simmel’s analysis, it seems Goldberg misses out on one of the most

\textsuperscript{225} ibid, 303.
exciting things about commercial exchange – namely, the fungibility of the value it transacts. In a moneyed relation, an individual’s gratification doesn’t have to happen in the moment of the transaction; it doesn’t have to have anything to do with the transaction, even, thanks to money’s exceptional versatility. In going to the market as a site of mutual pleasure, Goldberg seems to misrecognize the “magna carta” of its relations: that in radically disaggregating subjects and the good they transact, moneyed relations altogether disaggregate satisfaction from exchange. Money does away with the boundedness of mutuality in granting paid constituents unlimited alternatives for satisfaction.

Given Simmel’s codifications of freedom in exchange, it seems the Moral Penal Code wholly misconstrues the dangers of relationality. Indeed, the long-term, deep, mutual Category Three relation sanctioned in the MPC seems to epitomize the first-degree exchange Simmel so reviles, whose terms most closely resemble those of enslavement. On the contrary, Simmel suggests, it’s the decidedly illicit relation – the impersonal, short-term Category One transaction – that brings constituents closest to freedom. Indeed, Simmel’s utter inversion of the MPC taxonomy deranges the moral ethic surrounding it: The real site of violence, antisocial and Simmelian arguments portend, is the depth and mutuality of loving relations – an accusation that implicates the most precious bonds of the social world. It’s the uninterrogated, objectified sugar baby who ultimately has it best in dyadic relationality – who maximizes the leverage possible in exchange and most successfully evades the violence of social bonds. It seems that before we adjudicate preference to love – and totalize the sanctity of its relations – we might want to consider the psychic repercussions of intersubjectivity
and the value of its alternatives.
MIT-grad Brandon Wade never had much luck with women. He openly claims to have been, in his words, a “lonely geek,” and admits to not having had his first kiss until the age of 21. When he founded Seeking Arrangement in 2006, he did so with the intention of giving guys like him a “fighting chance.” “I wanted to create a site where I could meet beautiful, open-minded women,” Wade explains in an interview...

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228 ibid.
with *GQ*, “simple as that”

And while it may have taken three marriages and an accumulated net worth of $35 million to get there, it seems Wade was finally able to find what he was looking for: Tanya, a Ukrainian fashion student 20 years his junior. Below is an image of the married couple, published in *Vice* in 2014.

![Brandon Wade and Tanya, 2014.](image-url)

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As the “Seeking Arrangement” imprint stipulates, relationships like Tanya and Brandon’s seem to be the paragon of sugar dating, and serve to inspire hope in users about the love that may await them on the platform. As their matrimony suggests, Seeking Arrangement can help you find that lifetime of love you’ve always wanted: a mentor relation so good it never ends. Given Wade’s insistence on the longevity and depth of sugar bonds, marriage seems to be a natural consummation of the sort of relation he espouses. While his idealization of the marital union may seem inevitable, however, it’s not without some irony; of all of the redemptive discourse surrounding SA, it’s the founder who emerges as the most conservative vindicationalist of the platform. Indeed, the platform’s glamorization of Wade’s marriage – imaged above as the triumph of the sugar partnership – may be its most pronounced effort to pander to critics and their social investments.

As Simmel’s analysis illustrates, however, the long-term, deep, paternalistic relation that Wade promotes is likely more of a danger to the baby’s freedom than nearly any of the other bonds facilitated on the platform – not to mention the one most disposed to psychic violence, as antisocial theorists like Bersani make clear. Wade’s image of the ideal SA partnership, in other words, could not be farther from the kind that excites the political value of the platform. What’s more, the marital relation he promotes raises a formidable concern about the sugar contract: once she’s a wife, we’re made to wonder, does she still get paid? In the fantasy Wade conjures, it’s the unspoken dissolution of moneyed exchange that truly vindicates the sugar relation: If really find the right baby, Wade intimates, you may not have to pay at all.
In attempting to redeem the social value of sugar exchanges, Wade repudiates the very impersonality that makes them interesting. While he may have missed the mark in his exaltation of normative dyadic intimacy, however, he does seem to get something right: “Seeking Arrangement is modern feminism,” Wade proclaims in a phone interview with *Vanity Fair*. Though for none of the reasons he imagines, Wade is fully on target with this claim. At their best – at their most succinct, superficial, and objectifying – sugaring relations may be unmatched in their excitement to a feminist politic.

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