**Seduction: Men, Masculinity and Mediated Intimacy.**

Rachel O’Neill. Seduction: Men, Masculinity and Mediated Intimacy. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2018. 230 pages. ISBN-13:978-1-5095-2156-2 (paperback).

**Reviewed by:** Craig Owen, *Anglia Ruskin University, UK*.

My interest in reviewing O’Neill’s book came from previously reading Strauss’s (2005) *The Game*, the bestselling book about the seduction community. For those unacquainted with the ‘seduction community’, O’Neill describes it as a hybrid form of community-industry where ‘pick up artists’ (renowned for their sexual prowess) teach paying male customers a variety of skills and tactics to attract women. *The Game* charts the adventures of a U.S. journalist who, by engaging in the seduction community, turned himself from ‘zero to hero’ in his ability to pick up women. Whereas *The Game* conveyed fanciful and sexualised escapism, O’Neill’s monograph seeks to understand why men engage in the seduction community and to explore the cultural conditions in which it can thrive. Her research is based upon a year-long ethnography of the London seduction community, in which she attended a wide range of seduction training events, observed and interviewed male students and male and female teachers, and conducted a media analysis of accompanying materials. O’Neill paints quite a chilling picture in showing how forms of sense making associated with neoliberalism, postfeminism and evolutionary psychology impact the intimate lives of the men involved in seduction training. In Chapter 1, she demonstrates how the seduction community constructs an image of contemporary social relationships as intensely competitive, through the promotion of the neoliberal ideas of individualism, entrepreneurship and the accumulation of wealth. She highlights how, in this neoliberal context, men are cast as competitors, and are called on to bear full responsibility for the success or failure of their intimate lives. O’Neill shows how, consistent with the wider pre-occupation with work within UK culture, the intimate lives and sexual relations of students of seduction become a site of labour, requiring intense and sustained work on the self through engaging with profit-oriented training materials and coaching courses.

Taking a lead role in directing the students’ sexual makeovers are the teachers of seduction - the ‘pick up artists’. In Chapter 2, O’Neill documents how the teachers establish positions of authority through demonstrating their heterosexual competency to other men, either in practice or through relaying hidden, in-field videos of themselves successfully picking up women. Teachers then disseminate their system of expertise for the management of sexual conduct, guiding heterosexual men in the cultivation of a wide range of skills and techniques. These range from buying appropriate clothes that function as markers of status, wealth and power, to overcoming the nemesis of many a male student - ‘approach anxiety’.

In Chapter 3, O’Neill discusses a particularly notable system of seduction - the ‘Daygame Blueprint’ - that offers a standardised, sequential, phase driven approach, involving a set formula of carefully coordinated strategies that direct men to tactically manage intimacy and offer calculated displays of emotion at pre-defined moments, with the ultimate goal of getting a woman into bed. O’Neill explains how these tactical strategies for picking up women are justified on the basis of evolutionary psychology and socio-biology informed views of gender relations which naturalise, fix and amplify sexual differences between men and women and position the male sex drive discourse centre stage. This discourse positions men as at the mercy of their biological drives, where it is pointless for them to deny their unquenchable desire for and active pursuit of (hetero) sex. In Chapter 4, O’Neill, deploying numerous quotes from male students, shows how these conventional gender discourses become deeply embodied in men’s feelings and beliefs, and provide them with a source of reassurance, where they are encouraged to cling to a traditional, but very limited, masculine role. For example, one man stated, “the desire for sex and short term pleasure is billions of years old. That incessant desire for beauty and beautiful women and sex – that’s part of us, you know” (p.124).

For me, the saddest finding from O’Neill’s study is the way in which the seduction community promotes a transactional approach to sex. Here, O’Neill documents how sex is viewed as a form of consumption, with men located in the role of sexual consumers, and women controlling access to this prized resource. In order to gain access to this resource, men are encouraged to view women as problems or obstacles that need be overcome through tactical manipulation. By adopting this rationalised approach to sex, where getting sex is more important than being respectful, men are encouraged to disregard women’s experiences and perspectives, and prioritise their own self-interest. This leads to what I consider to be the scariest finding from the study, namely, that many of the pick-up strategies promoted in the seduction community establish extremely murky conditions for consensual sex. O’Neill most aptly demonstrates this through her critical analysis of ‘Last Minute Resistance’, an established set of premediated manoeuvres that help men have sex with women who do not give verbal consent. O’Neill explains how Last Minute Resistance strategically harnesses feminist critiques of cultural discourses that constrain women’s sexual expression. That is, it works from the assumption that women are unable to act on their sexual desires due to social pressure and secretly wish to be sexually overpowered by men. And so, when women say ‘no’, they really want to say ‘yes’. This gives men a licence to disregard women’s physical resistance and verbal objections to sex in the belief that they are fulfilling women’s hidden desires. As O’Neill rightly notes, this opens up a whole host of concerns in regards to mutual consent, sexual coercion, unwanted sex, and even the promotion of rape.

From the preceding account of the findings O’Neill sets out in her book, it would be easy to assume that the men involved in the seduction community were aberrant individuals. But O’Neill takes an alternative path to such assumption. Instead, she convincingly presents these men as ‘ordinary guys’, men who experience real emotional vulnerabilities and ambivalences in their intimate lives, and who turn to the seduction community’s reassuringly traditional gender values and promises of sexual success as a viable solution. Insightfully, O’Neill argues that the actions and emotions of these men are connected to wider postfeminist discourses and socio-cultural shifts in gender relations between men and women. So concerning features of the seduction community, such as the pervasive valuing of women solely in terms of their physical appearance, can be viewed as an extension of existing social norms and media produced standards of female beauty. In turn, whilst seduction training is marketed as a solution to men’s intimate woes, O’Neill shows how men’s participation often exacerbates their existing concerns and vulnerabilities, for example, viewing sexual encounters (or lack thereof) as a measure of men’s self-worth; and introduces new problems, with men’s repeated act of seducing women often becoming disassociated from an emotional or physical desire for intimacy or sex. As one man noted: “It’s almost seen as like a sport: you improve your game. There’s no – what’s the end of that? So it sets up something which is deemed to fail in many ways” (p.31).

On a number of occasions, whilst reading the text, I wanted to know more about how O’Neill negotiated the practical challenges of positioning herself in the field. Yet in order to prioritise the research findings and offer a feminist critique of the seduction community, O’Neill makes an explicit tactical decision to leave an extended discussion of the methodology until the end – the postscript. Here, O’Neill reflects on her reluctance to ‘come out’ in the field as a feminist and the requirement to absorb multiple instances of sexism in order not to jeopardise her research relationships. Appropriately, she plays devil’s advocate and questions the ethics of this approach, noting its potential to reinforce the image of feminists as scheming and duplicitous. But she ultimately argues this approach is justifiable if we consider that a fundamental goal of building research relationships is to produce research material. In turn, O’Neill likens the strategic rapport of research relationships to the tactical manoeuvres employed by seducers seeking sex. On the one hand, I find this argument ironic as both sets of relationships are manipulative. Yet the goals of each radically differ, with researchers seeking productive knowledge and seducers seeking personal gain and self-interest.

Written in an accessible style and focusing on an intriguing topic, this book will have obvious appeal to a wide audience. Despite this, due to the academic style of writing, the primary audience will more likely be academic, including postgraduate and experienced qualitative researchers in the fields of gender and masculinity studies. Moreover, in the field of masculinity studies, a field dominated by hegemonic masculinity, hybridized masculinity, performativity, Foucauldian, and inclusive masculinity theories, O’Neill’s text can be lauded for clearly demonstrating the value of using neoliberalism and postfeminism as theoretical lens through which to make sense of contemporary masculinities and gender relations.

Strauss, N. (2005). *The game: Penetrating the secret society of pickup artists*. New York: HarperCollins.