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Chapter Author(s): Suzanne van Geuns

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## Attraction to the Sequence

*The Algorithmic Approach to Success in Online Seduction Advice*

SUZANNE VAN GEUNS

“What we strive to do on this board,” writes a user on the SoSuave: Don Juan Discussion forum, “is to create a ‘program’ . . . which will yield the absolute highest success rate.”<sup>1</sup> The success he and his fellow users imagine is sexual in nature. SoSuave is a seduction forum, an online space dedicated to advice for men who want to persuade women to sleep with them. Seduction forums appeared at the intersection of two convictions that were growing increasingly pervasive in the early 2000s: that the internet could be a launching pad for strivers aiming for success and that success requires the inculcation or execution of “programs.” When it comes to women, “the base of the program, the basic algorithm,” this user explains, “remains the same.” A man who seeks to be suave needs only one algorithm. Men possessed of this algorithm should expect to only ever have to “change a couple things to keep it running smoothly” in different social situations. “For instance,” the user clarifies, “you know to increase cockiness when the hotness of the woman increases.” Men should “simply take the input they give you”—that is, take in a particular woman’s responses—“and slightly modify.” There is a striking gendered unevenness in how such computational references are employed in seduction advice. In their recommendations to each other, users imagine women so fixed that they only ever differ from each other in ways already contained in a basic program, and men who can propel themselves toward success thanks to the flexibility this program makes possible. In seduction advice, the logic of the computer legitimates an ethic of transformation and curtails changeability at the same time.

Seduction forums present a vantage point from which to see the frictions that emerge when men dedicate themselves equally to secular science and neoliberal promises. Scholars in gender studies have mostly analyzed seduction advice as an outgrowth of a neoliberal culture in which success belongs to those who invest in themselves and thus manage to win out over less worthy others.<sup>2</sup> Sexual success, in this analysis, is no different from other forms of neoliberal success, in that it comes into being through hard work and (financial) sacrifice. On seduction forums, sexual gratification accrues to the upwardly mobile; men who have managed to make themselves suave by honing their skills and purchasing seduction advice from experts. The instructions in question rely on forms of biologized essentialism rooted in secular science, most notably in evolutionary psychology. Talk of natural selection allows seduction forum users to “naturalize” patriarchal ideas about the differences between men and women, presenting them as an indisputable scientific fact. They are, in this sense, employing evolutionary psychology exactly as feminist scholars have long warned it can be: as a means for legitimating contemporary gendered inequality by presenting differences between men and women as “unchanging” and stable.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of secularism have theorized stable sexual differences as religious residues and as guarantors of secular stability; the cultural maintenance of this certainty—that there is something fixed about sex—is integral to modern secular orders.<sup>4</sup> The case study of early 2000s seduction advice reveals the intersection between a neoliberal culture that considers sex a terrain where mobility and improvement are possible and a secular scientific order that stabilizes itself by presenting sex as “natural” and, in that sense, constant.

This chapter takes up seduction algorithms as one way to resolve the tension between dueling secular commitments to fixity and flexibility. This tension becomes particularly pressing in matters of sexual difference. I begin by situating seduction advice on the early 2000s internet, which was then becoming a place oriented toward real-world success. This short history of online seduction advice reveals a split between “canned” and more “organic” or unrehearsed approaches to seduction, but I focus on the underlying consensus that sex and dating are informed by natural selection. The embrace of this evolutionary narrative in the intimate sphere gives rise to an awkward inconsistency. Through the prism of secular science, natural selection guarantees that men and women’s bodies reflect their adaptation for different purposes, in order to stabilize the embodied and social differences between them. Through the prism of neoliberalism, however, natural selection guarantees men that they will be competing with one another for sex, a presentation in which the

differences between men are always unstable. But why should one form of difference be stable and the other not? I outline how the algorithm comes up as a formal structure capable of making the inconsistency at the heart of this question irrelevant. Seduction algorithms reveal a register of personal transformation that is neoliberal and secular, but different from the “makeover” format Kathryn Lofton has identified.<sup>5</sup> The makeover relies on a spiritualized register of self-apprehension that locates growth and success in the knowledge and nourishment of the self within. The man whose algorithm makes him suave, by contrast, is not concerned with knowledge or even nature—he is only concerned with the basic structures and slight modifications that will yield the right output. Focused on early 2000s seduction advice, I present algorithms as infrastructures for success in a computational age.

#### FROM THE INTERNET TO MAINSTREAM INDUSTRY

What are seduction forums? Seduction was already a concern on the earliest computer networks, years before the personal computer would become ubiquitous. The interest in instructions that would help men kindle attraction—or just assent—in women reflects a broader shift in sexual culture. The need for such advice is premised, after all, on the notion that heterosexual intercourse is freely available—that is, not exclusively the purview of married people—for men who know how to get women to say yes. The increased cultural emphasis, from the 1960s onward, on women’s freedom to choose their sexual partners proved to be a point of friction for desiring men. A perceived disconnect between women’s stated preference for gentle or “soft” feminist men and their choice to not sleep with them instigated laments that women do not know what they want. This complaint was commonplace in what Susan Faludi has called the “backlash” to the liberal feminist victories of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> *How to Get the Women You Desire into Bed* (1992), a seduction manual that was popular on 1990s computer networks, explicitly targets men whose accommodation of women’s preferences does not get them what they desire. Its subtitle calls out to “the man who’s fed up with being mr nice guy.”<sup>7</sup> For much of the 1980s and 1990s, users gathering on different precursors to the World Wide Web exchanged short manuals, pickup lines, and conversational techniques over phone lines, their modems buzzing beside them.<sup>8</sup> In the early 2000s, seduction advice reached new heights of popularity—a development that is inseparable from the rise of the internet.

Around the turn of the century, the internet was becoming real. When users shared and debated seduction methods in the 1980s and 1990s, it was impossible to tell if and how these online conversations bore an imprint on users’

offline social lives. The dot-com boom and the related growth of the World Wide Web's user base instigated a shift. On seduction forums, this shift can be seen in the rise of the "field report," which would become a constitutive genre for seduction forums.<sup>9</sup> Between 1994 and 1996, the term appeared only three times on alt.seduction.fast, then the largest seduction newsgroup. In 1997, that number increased by 173. "Field" gradually came to refer to any in-person social situation where users had put the forum's tips and tricks to the test. In the two years between 1998 and 2000, users posted about their experiences in the field over 1,250 times.<sup>10</sup> Field reports saw users sharing their offline implementation of online advice. In one of the first field reports he shared, a user who calls himself Mystery writes that "the voluptuous one wrote a poem on my back, and we were flirting pretty big."<sup>11</sup> "EVERYTHING," he continues with emphasis, "is WORKING. Its [sic] all confirmed." When I write that the internet was becoming real, then, I do not mean to agree that there is a more or less accurate correspondence between online reports and offline occurrences. Who can say whether there was a poem on his back? I am not interested in debunking field reports. Instead, I highlight the growing porosity between the internet and the field in the early 2000s, because this porosity undergirds the growth of what would become a seduction industry.

Field reports spurred the rise of the pickup artist. Mystery, the paradigmatic example, established himself as a renowned artist in picking up women by sharing spectacular field reports and advice on the newsgroup. Born as Erik Horvat-Marković, he eventually parlayed Mystery's online popularity into real-world celebrity.<sup>12</sup> The man responsible for publicizing Mystery beyond the web was journalist Neil Strauss. He penned *The Game* after his editor at Rolling Stone pointed him to a digital "How To Lay Girls" guide. Assembled by a man who went by Tony, this guide collected instructional highlights from different prolific users.<sup>13</sup> The guide moved Strauss, who would, under Mystery's tutelage, become a famous pickup artist in his own right, to rhapsodize about the possibilities of the internet. "I became addicted," he writes, "to the online locker rooms these pick-up artists had created."<sup>14</sup> Large sections of *The Game* consist of quoted sections from field reports that originally appeared on an MSN Messenger group entitled "Mystery's Lounge." Launched in 1999, MSN Messenger was Microsoft's instant chat service. It became a staple for internet users in the 2000s.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately for internet researchers, the program stored chat logs on users' personal computers. This means that they are largely unavailable to scholars today—there is no archive of Mystery's "lounge" that I can access, unless and until I meet a pickup aficionado who has not deleted his files and still owns an operable computer from, for example, 2001.

MSN was not the only—or even the most important—online locker room, however.<sup>16</sup> The early 2000s also saw the blossoming of another venue for online exchange: the forum.

What sort of locker room was the forum? An internet forum is an online gathering place where users write public messages to each other. Their design varies, but forums usually retain the threaded structure that also characterized older networks, as well as a reliance on pseudonyms and topical organization. Forums are Web 2.0 phenomena. The term *Web 2.0* originated as a post-dot-com-boom marketing term. It does not describe any technical characteristics of the maturing internet. Instead, it captures a changing sense of computational networking's social dimensions. Bearing in mind its limited explanatory force—internet sociality did not develop in clear sequential stages—I use the term here to denote the extent to which forums evoke and express what media scholar Henry Jenkins has called “participatory culture.”<sup>17</sup> On Web 2.0, users do not just consume content. Their participation—their posting—generates the content that makes the forum worth visiting for other users. While participatory culture is not unique to online communities, it did become newly salient in the years that the internet's user base grew most quickly. Media historian José van Dijck notes that the 2000–2005 period saw the zenith of “non-market peer production”—websites “thrived on the enthusiasm of users as they ran and operated their new virtual spaces.”<sup>18</sup> The growing crop of early 2000s seduction forums ran on intense and generous user participation.<sup>19</sup> These forums include SoSuave, Fast Seduction, which would later be renamed PUA Forum, and the Roosh V forums. These forums were the beginning of the highly successful commercialization—the turning into offline profit—of online seduction instruction.

The commercial logic that structured forums and the incipient seduction industry was that of the coach and celebrity. Peer production propelled some men, those whose advice seemed eminently useful or who always had exciting field reports to share with the forum, to fame. After Strauss's book about seduction became a bestseller, forum acclaim began to translate to older popular media. Strauss toured the publicity circuit. He talked about pickup artistry on daytime talk show *The View*.<sup>20</sup> A 2006 clip of him chatting with actress Jessica Alba, seated beside her on talk show host Jimmy Kimmel's couch, is still available on YouTube, where present-day commenters praise Strauss's skillfully inconspicuous deployment of seduction methods in a high-pressure setting.<sup>21</sup> In 2007, a year later, Mystery became the star of VH1 reality show *The Pickup Artist*, joining a stable of shows dedicated to competitions between ordinary people striving to be extraordinary.<sup>22</sup> In between different challenges

and tests, every episode featured clumsy and awkward contestants scribbling in notebooks while Mystery holds forth on why women never walk alone, how to ask for their number, when to go in for the kiss, and so on. In the first episode of the second and last season, the female voice-over breathlessly introduces the participating men as “loveable losers.”<sup>23</sup> The camera pans over to Mystery, decked out in gold and posing on a throne. His position as a television star underwrites, for “losers” and viewers alike, that pickup artists could stand out and excel far beyond the forum.

The final step in this process of mainstream legitimization occurs with the industrialization of coaching. On forums, where users shared advice and field reports with each other at no cost, profit had not been very visible as a motivating factor. Strauss reports that Mystery, indisputably the biggest star on and off seduction forums, only began to offer a \$500 “Basic Training” workshop after four years of offering advice for free on the Fast Seduction forum and over MSN.<sup>24</sup> He would not start his own company, which he named Venusian Arts, until 2007, when he reached mainstream fame.<sup>25</sup> Users who had glossed themselves as Tyler Durden and Papa, two of Mystery’s most avid students, would approach seduction instructions with significantly more business acumen. The company they established under their real names, Owen Cook and Nicholas Kho, industrialized seduction coaching. They called it Real Social Dynamics. The corporation cranked out advice at breakneck speed, a productivity facilitated through its continuous hiring of coaches. Within two years of its 2002 establishment, Real Social Dynamics was employing former students as coaches and encouraging fans and forum readers to work as “affiliates” who would earn a commission for every seminar ticket sold through their referral. This pyramid structure allowed the company to expand rapidly. Its most popular seduction coaches acquired celebrity status of their own. Reeling in thousands of dollars per customer, Real Social Dynamics coaches taught in-person bootcamps, workshops, and seminars all over the world. They were riding the crest of a wave of interest in seduction instruction as a path to real-world success. Seduction had become a for-profit, tangible industry, as potent on the forum as in the field.

#### NATURAL DIFFERENCE

The seduction industry, born of a rapidly commercializing internet, could increasingly be divided along ideological lines in the early 2000s. These fissures provide an important point of insight into the knots between sexual expectation, secular knowledge, and profit motives from which the industry had grown. My interest here is in the methodological shift between Mystery and Real Social

Dynamics, which increasingly occupied users on forums.<sup>26</sup> What kind of bootcamps are worth the money? When it comes to sexual success, what is amenable to instruction? Mystery's advice heavily relied on the provision of opening lines and jokes that he knew—after extensive testing in the field—would work well. The Fast Seduction forum, for example, lists scripts such as Mystery's "Pez opener," which involves offering women sweets and then joking about not taking candy from strangers.<sup>27</sup> After attending an in-person class with Mystery, one user writes a glowing review: the "right ROUTINES," "now flowing and fully internalized," miraculously helped him move from an initial meeting to sex in a mere four hours.<sup>28</sup> He notes that he now always takes his Pez dispenser with him to the club. Such success would be threatened, one can surmise, if women knew that the candy dispenser was strategic and the joke rehearsed. Real Social Dynamics latched on to this fragility of the canned scripts sold by pickup artists like Mystery. The company claimed that its advice would instead allow men to foster in themselves a *natural* desirability. Instead of rehearsed lines, Real Social Dynamics presented "natural game" instructions.

While this divide—mystery versus the real, canned versus the natural—was much debated on seduction forums, it remained superficial. The two strands firmly agreed that sex is, among other things, a matter of natural selection. In his popular handbook, Mystery explains that women are "genetic judges" of men's "survival and replication value."<sup>29</sup> When men experience difficulty dating, Mystery argues, this can be traced back to their lack of awareness about the extent to which women's "basic instincts" are just as geared toward the survival of the fittest as those of their forebears.<sup>30</sup> In his reasoning, the body lags culture: women who date are always actually deciding whether or not to mate, and men seeking to have better dates should begin with this fact. Seduction forum users uniformly recognize that some men are "naturals," men who do not need seduction advice to foment attraction. They already know what to do. Women's desire for such men is, as one forum user puts it, "built into [them] by evolution."<sup>31</sup> The gap between the natural and his friends, who report on forums that they have "seen him get laid many times," burdens them.<sup>32</sup> Real Social Dynamics promises to close this gap with such products as the Flawless Natural course, which has one effortlessly attractive man "lay his entire toolbox bare."<sup>33</sup> Once men learn natural game, which always anticipates women's genetic judgment, they can expect to join the ranks of the naturals, the course claimed. Naturals may already be clued into women's basic instincts as they have naturally evolved, but both the Mystery Method and natural game instructions promise other men that they, too, can inhabit natural selection in a manner that is sexually fulfilling for them.

This consensus about the determining force exerted by evolution takes shape against the background of an enormous interest in evolutionary explanations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Sociologist Martha McCaughey describes the development of a “caveman mystique” arising when men use ideas about the continuities between “cavemen” and themselves to make sense of—and inculcate—aggressive, nonmonogamous, and heteronormative sexual desires and behaviors.<sup>34</sup> Scientific stories about nature legitimize what is already present, McCaughey shows, but they also nestle themselves in bodies, giving rise to intuitions, *making* present what they describe. This self-affirming effect worries feminist biologists and social scientists, who have long questioned arguments in evolutionary psychology that trace contemporary behaviors back to “hardwired” natural differences between men and women.<sup>35</sup> To see sexual difference as stable is to project present-day essentialism into the distant past, these scholars argue. Such feminist caution about the slippage between “evolutionary psychology as a field of academic enquiry [and] a conduit for popular assumptions about sex and gender” rarely made it to the mainstream.<sup>36</sup> Educational materials and forum posts abound with confident assertions that the appetite for seduction advice—the *need* for it—is driven by (cave)men’s prehistorically overpowering sexual drive.<sup>37</sup> Drawing on her interviews with men enrolled in seduction bootcamps, feminist ethnographer Rachel O’Neill underlines that her interlocutors draw on this “evolutionary repertoire” to abdicate responsibility for what they do in pursuit of sex.<sup>38</sup> They imagine themselves to be acting on urges and instincts they cannot control. Men seeking to inhabit evolution better seek to claim for themselves the patriarchal power attributed to, and rendered “natural” by, the figure of the caveman.

What I want to dwell on here, however, is not so much the misogynist thrust of evolution talk in seduction advice as its illumination of an awkward tension in contemporary secular gender politics. Whether in favor of canned or more spontaneous approaches, users understand attraction to be a bodily response over which women have no control. “Woman psychology,” explains one user, “can be generalized” to such a degree that some seduction techniques will work “with every single woman in this world.”<sup>39</sup> “All women the world over love confidence,” another user adds; it is their nature.<sup>40</sup> This puts attraction firmly in the domain of the sciences. In his theorization of disciplinary divides in the secular sciences, Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm distinguishes between the “mind-dependent” and “mind-independent” realms. Humanist scholarship focuses on phenomena whose characteristics are indelibly shaped by human choice and consideration, while the natural sciences dedicate themselves to those phenomena that seem unaffected by our

thoughts about them.<sup>41</sup> When seduction forum users speak of women's feelings of attraction as a biologized effect men can cause, they locate attraction in the mind-independent realm; a designation that allows them to sidestep what women themselves say or think about its origins. Attraction is a fixed, natural phenomenon. At the same time, the seduction industry promises men that they can increase their attractiveness, that they can work at eliciting greater attraction in the women they desire. If attraction is *too* fixed, after all, the array of bootcamps, seminars, and instructions manuals available in the early 2000s cannot sell. Men need to be able to *become* attractive.

This assessment of attraction produces a persistent inconsistency, a contradiction that illuminates the intersection between neoliberalism and secular science. Women's experience of attraction is natural, and this means no mind-dependent effort on their part can change it, while men's natural attractiveness can be acquired precisely through diligent mind-dependent effort. I read secularism as a discursive sorting mechanism that relegates parts of human life to the domains proper to them in modern liberal democracies. In Talal Asad's genealogy, the secular emerges through a host of bifurcating procedures that separate the muchness of life into opposed categories: knowledge and belief, the natural and the supernatural, religion and superstition, and so on.<sup>42</sup> This sorting is always unfinished, undermined by "spectral entities" that cannot fully become legible through the liberal rationalities a secular order anticipates.<sup>43</sup> Secularism, in this reading, arrived promising forms of fixity and delivering hauntings. Gender difference is integral to these promises and deliverances. In her scholarship on sex and secularism, Joan Wallach Scott locates an indeterminacy in modern democratic orders that could only be settled by pinning down the indeterminacy of sexed bodies.<sup>44</sup> The certainty that men and women can be sorted from one another grounds the other forms of sorting pursued under the rubric of the secular. Taking up this argument, Peter Coviello interprets "science and natural reason" as tasked with the stabilization, the making *maximally natural*, of sexual difference. He speaks of the sciences as "secularism's foot soldiers," the means by which its sortings can take hold.<sup>45</sup> Of course, science and secularism both also open up room for deviance and defiance. Still, the scientific claim to natural sexual difference allows secular sorting to appear fixed and certain.

Forum users know, however, that attractiveness—no matter how natural or scientifically measurable a quality it is—is not unchangingly apportioned to some and not others. Secular modernity today bears the imprint of neoliberalism. The forms of discourse that have emerged in what Lofton calls secularism's "unfocused sectarian landscape"—a landscape that can appear only once

religion is separated out from its entanglements with other forms of life—are those of celebrity, consumption, and market, each “without bounds, without permanent structure, and without imprinted creed.”<sup>46</sup> Far more diffuse than the delimited spaces reserved for what gets called religious in secular orders, these forms of discourse reflect an “ontological investment in markets and commerce as the basis of all social action.”<sup>47</sup> In this secular regime, the subject is not just rights-bearing and rational but also, in Wendy Brown’s memorable phrasing, “construed on the model of the contemporary firm” and “expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value.”<sup>48</sup> Neoliberalism, in short, necessitates forms of difference among people that can be traced back to their efforts—some are better maximizers than others. Scientific narratives of “survival of the fittest” are often mobilized to “naturalize” the inequalities integral to neoliberalism, rendering difference as the result of inevitable competition rather than human choice. When applied to gender, however, the flexibility a neoliberal ethos encourages and assumes chafes against secular fixities. If evolution has made men and women different in enduring ways, as secular science has long promised it has, why should the difference between them be stable while the differences between “naturals” and their less desirable counterparts can be closed through effort and instruction?

Evolution talk in seduction advice reveals an awkward incompatibility between the neoliberal need to see possibilities for moving upwards and the secular need to see science clothe difference with certainty. Seduction instructions navigate this intersection as a matter of technology. Mystery exhorts men to remember that women’s internal “circuitry is calibrated less to a man’s physical characteristics than to his social . . . value.”<sup>49</sup> Women respond, Mystery explains, to popularity. Users frequently discuss how they work to demonstrate high social value to women. One user, for example, describes how he introduces his friends to women with high praise and visible confidence, because the skilled “introducer absorbs all his friend’s good points for himself, and then gets the women all for himself.”<sup>50</sup> While social “points” are amenable to mind-dependent effort, women’s machinery and its calibration is beyond its scope. Tyler Durden’s *Blueprint Decoded* and coach Julien Blanc’s *Pimp*, two of Real Social Dynamics’s most popular courses, both begin with mechanical metaphors for attraction.<sup>51</sup> “Men→Visual cues = light switch,” notetakers summarize, while “women→behavioral cues = volume knob.”<sup>52</sup> While men can desire a woman after one glance, such that building attraction is like flipping a light switch, women’s arousal can only be built up slowly, because it depends on the gradual emergence of behavioral cues that indicate a man’s

position in a social group. “The reason things are this way,” Julien Blanc proclaims, men light switches and women volume knobs, “is because of our evolution.”<sup>53</sup> Evolution, translated to technology rather than nature, can produce both women who are fixed and predictable in their responses and men who are flexible enough to play the machine differently.

#### TOWARD THE ALGORITHM

Attending to technological language in seduction instructions reveals what transformation has become in the neoliberal secular today. In *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* (2020), queer theorist Jane Ward situates pickup artist seminars in what she calls the “heterosexual repair industry”: the commercial domain that sells men and women solutions for the fact that heterosexual desire ties them together in relationships that, under patriarchy, cannot truly serve their well-being.<sup>54</sup> As an example of the tragic dimensions of heteropatriarchy, she points to the feelings of “sexual loss” straight men experience when the expectations they are socialized into—that they will have satisfying sex with women they find attractive—are not borne out in the real world.<sup>55</sup> “I would tell girls that I was falling for them,” confesses one user on the Fast Seduction forum, “only to have them get creeped out.” “It baffled me,” he writes, “I really had no idea what I was doing wrong.”<sup>56</sup> The inevitable dissonance between the patriarchal assumption that women will be interested and the actual experience of women’s rejection burdens men. It becomes a personal fault of which women’s mere existence reminds them. “Every time I walked down the street,” Strauss writes, “I saw my own failure staring me back in the face with red lipstick and black mascara.”<sup>57</sup> The seduction bootcamp, seminar, or e-book meets such “heteromasculine shame” with “a neoliberal intervention”—that is, “a multilevel industry offering an array of packaged services.”<sup>58</sup> Eager to resolve feelings of failure, men who pay for seduction instruction are paying for tangible change: shame into power, sexual loss into unlimited access. The main vehicle for such transformation, I will show, is the algorithm.

The seduction industry meets the hunger for transformation with the neoliberal imperative to not only put in effort but also put up cash. In a format familiar to scholars of marketing and of religion, seduction coaches appear as examples of their products’ efficacy. Buy, they say, and become like me. In this transformational logic, aspiration takes the shape of emulation, the practice of observing a successful person and translating their skill into a method you can adopt yourself. This emphasis on success through likeness is so pervasive in seduction that almost all scholarship on seduction advice approaches the genre through its neoliberalization of sex. The seduction industry certainly

assembles a community of strivers.<sup>59</sup> O'Neill, whose ethnographic scholarship focuses almost exclusively on offline seduction instruction, theorizes men's efforts to emulate coaches through the cultivation of what she calls a "sexual work ethic." Seduction instruction, she writes, "channels the meritocratic feeling of neoliberal culture at large by facilitating an ethos of competitive individualism within the domain of intimate relationships."<sup>60</sup> The coach has more sex than his clients because he has duly worked to transform himself, as evidenced by his assiduous self-instruction. So-called in-field videos, which depict a seduction celebrity *working* the field, routinely include failures as well as successes, as if to emphasize that the effort never ends. The fact that all coaches, including Mystery, once started out as "average frustrated chumps" (AFCs) undergirds the conclusion that the only thing between a desiring man and his sexual fulfillment is his dedication to developing himself. Making emulation possible, the countless instructional materials sold through the seduction industry start men on the *work* of transformation.

The tie between purchase and positive change that sustains the seduction industry resembles and connects to ventures of self-transformation analyzed by other scholars of religion. Every pickup artist emphasizes how shy, off-putting, and wretched they were prior to instructing themselves into competency. They dwell on their clumsiness. Strauss quotes a poem, entitled "sexual frustration," that he wrote in junior high.<sup>61</sup> They call themselves unattractive. Tyler Durden notes he could not "get a shred of attention from a girl if [his] life depended on it." His receding hairline always seemed to repel the "good looking girls" he desired.<sup>62</sup> Such self-debasement allows seduction coaches to offer themselves up as examples, testifying to the efficacy of the practices they sell and facilitating emotional connections between themselves as celebrities and their students as unsprouted stars. One way to read the seduction industry, then, is as a miniature outgrowth of what Lofton has called the secular rite of the "makeover." Focused on Oprah Winfrey, she describes the sublimated Protestant practices of confession and degradation that often precede mediated transformations.<sup>63</sup> She argues that Oprah facilitates these testimonial processes for others by confessing prodigiously herself.<sup>64</sup> Through her own example, Oprah discusses the practices that transformed her and points her viewers to products they can purchase to help ease themselves into these same practices. The seduction coach, celebrity on a much smaller scale, also uses testimonial practices to direct men's desire for transformation into neoliberal solutions: purchasing products, working harder, "investing" in the self. In the seduction industry, however, the familiar interplay between testimony and emulation takes on distinctly computational contours.

The investment in the seductive self appears as the purchase—and subsequent inculcation—of an algorithm. “In relationships,” posits Mystery in a book published at the height of his mainstream popularity, “if someone doesn’t have success and wants to get it, he or she will need to adopt the algorithm for success.”<sup>65</sup> The book appeared with the reputable St. Martin’s Press—it even became one of Oprah’s recommended books, for women curious about “the tactics members of the opposite sex can use to hoodwink you.”<sup>66</sup> The algorithm for transformation, or successful hoodwinking, is “a step-by-step game plan that structures ‘courtship’—[which is] the sequence of events that results in guys getting laid—for success.”<sup>67</sup> Mystery’s description accords with Ed Finn’s genealogy of the algorithm. In mathematics, the term describes “a recipe, an instruction set, a sequence of tasks” that “reliably delivers an expected result.”<sup>68</sup> “Repeatable” and “practical,” algorithms “illuminat[e] pathways between problems and solutions.”<sup>69</sup> Algorithms present a processual structure that is agnostic, for lack of a better word, about content, but still charts a procedural path from desire to its fulfillment. The algorithm can contain all sorts of beliefs and actions; it only organizes these sequentially. This lack of content allows algorithms to become relevant and useful everywhere, whether in mathematics, computer science, or dating. The only feature the algorithm retains in all appearances, Finn argues, is that “it just works.”<sup>70</sup> Wherever algorithms appear, they call forth iterative and dynamic sequences that project a path toward discrete outcomes. This ability to contain various forms of human effort and organize them toward result makes algorithms integral to the transformative possibilities sold in the seduction industry.

Algorithms ensure that the relationship between input and output is one that “just works”—a promise that draws a range of seduction coaches to their formal structuration. “It takes time and dedication,” writes one user in a post on the SoSuave forum, “to absorb the principles, memorize routines, understand the algorithm and hit the field to practice. Most guys are not willing to put forth the effort. BUT IT WORKS. . . . It’s what guys who are naturally good with women do—they tease and flirt and banter, show value, get her attracted, comfortable, and seduce. The genius of Mystery is he codified and algorithmized it.”<sup>71</sup> Algorithms, in this reading, are the instructions available to those for whom unrehearsed sociality does not yield the desired results. The lopsided distribution of “natural” skill in seduction underpins the shame that fuels the desire to transform and improve. After all, this inequality among men—the fact that some can flirt and others fail—perforates the heteropatriarchal expectation that men are uniformly “deserving” of sexual access. The seduction algorithm offers a particular solution. It promises that men can

overcome their seemingly natural limitations, provided they pour enough effort into the codified form of the algorithm. “Now remember,” writes Tyler Durden in a 2007 blog post about “building your pick-up algorithm,” “you’ve got various moves for every situation and you just go in there like a computer and UNLEASH THE ALGORITHM WITHIN.”<sup>72</sup> To work toward sexual success is to go in like a computer; memorizing, practicing, absorbing, until the algorithm is so thoroughly inculcated that it organizes all “moves” a man might hold inside. Read through the prism of the algorithm, the difference between Mystery and Real Social Dynamics is merely one of executing versus unleashing, keeping the infrastructure for success that is the algorithm as an external reference point versus letting it coil up within. Crucially, both approaches present algorithms as forms of structuration that can and should take precedence over the noncomputerized loveable loser and frustrated chump that is the self.

#### THE ALGORITHMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

What kind of infrastructure, then, is the algorithm? When forum users discuss algorithms, I do not take them to speak in metaphors. I conceive of the algorithms invented by pickup artists as actually similar to, rather than merely evocative of, for example, “linearization algorithms” in the Lisp programming language.<sup>73</sup> That is, I do not begin with the gap between computer and world that has historically occupied scholarship. In sociology, anthropology, and law, scholars problematize assumed gaps between social and computational realms, drawing out how engineering subcultures inflect the algorithms programmers produce, for example, or how such programmed algorithms in turn affect cultural dynamics.<sup>74</sup> Scholars of race and technology have been especially instrumental in pushing for holistic accounts of the complex cultural contexts that algorithms come from and intervene in.<sup>75</sup> Across these literatures, however, algorithms remain tied to devices. Born in code, housed in programs, they span social life but take effect somewhere in the gap between computers and reality. As a scholar of religion, I take a different vantage point. Catherine L. Albanese, in her work on the metaphysical tradition in American religious life, writes of “a work of the practical imagination” in which awareness of the correspondence between the present world and another “made of the same material” fuels progress and healing.<sup>76</sup> While algorithms bracket metaphysics in favor of efficacy, this analytical attention to *formal* correspondences inspires my own. The usefulness that clings to seduction algorithms, in my view, stems from their resemblance to device-bound algorithms. That is, they seem to be at their most efficacious when they appear as replicas of the computational logics at work in the devices that are increasingly ordering the social world.

Algorithms are formal arrangements first and foremost. While there are as many algorithms as there are problems to solve, seduction algorithms bear a strong formal resemblance to those employed in symbolic artificial intelligence research. The history of artificial intelligence and computing began with cybernetics, a field that relied on the “system” as its object and the analog computer as the preferred device for studying it. Analog computers materially represent problems. Fiddling with the relationship between a problem’s parts reveals the solution by revealing how the system that produced the problem works. A spring-operated scale, for example, uses the physical pull on the spring to measure an object’s gravitational pull. Before 1998, the dominant paradigm in seduction advice bore the imprint of cybernetics; the seductive man tinkered with the woman he seduced just as the cybernetician tinkered with his analog device. After 1998, however, seduction takes after another approach to artificial intelligence. The interdisciplinary 1956 Dartmouth conference instigated a shift from a “connectionist” cybernetic paradigm to a symbolic framework, and from analog to digital.<sup>77</sup> No longer physical, digital computers solve problems by processing binary code. This means that they can solve *any* problem, provided it is first expressed symbolically as a series of ones and zeroes, and they have enough memory to store and process inputs. Symbolic artificial intelligence research posited that the language of binary logic could reveal the fundamental likeness between computers and human minds, enabling the former to “think” like the latter.<sup>78</sup> Algorithms then appear as procedures that lay out the planned-out sequences—if A, then B—and order the operations—first X, then Y, unless Z—that comprise such thought.

In seduction, the algorithmic form—as planned-out sequence, as binary order—appears both in the Mystery Method and in natural game advice. The Mystery Method posits that there is an underlying structure that remains the same in every interaction that ends in a man having sex with a woman. This emphasis on a universal sequence was a departure from earlier seduction methods, which offered men routines (speech patterns, hand movements) but recommended that they adapt these to the specific “systems” of the women they were aiming to seduce.<sup>79</sup> In a move that resembles the exchange of analog specificity for digital universality, this tailoring disappears in the Mystery Method. All seductions, according to Mystery, comprise three distinct states—attraction, comfort, and the actual seduction or “close”—through which men are to progress. Each stage requires different actions and procedures. Unsuccessful seductions, in Mystery’s view, can usually be attributed to “improper sequencing”—that is, commencing procedures too early or too late.<sup>80</sup> Initiating foreplay—a closing stage procedure—without having built comfort, for

example, is a sequencing error. “My job as a guy,” writes a SoSuave user who sums up Mystery’s approach, “is to flip her attraction switches so I can get the girl I want.”<sup>81</sup> The Mystery Method offers “canned” scripts and actions for each switch that needs to be flipped; “last minute resistance” on the part of the woman being seduced, for example, requires distinct phrases and motions.<sup>82</sup> The algorithmic form, which gathers and organizes these scripted materials, furnishes men with the foundational assumption that seduction is a sequence or decision tree, a binary series of yes/no moments that men skillfully progress through on their way to success.

Natural game advice underlines that effective algorithms do not just organize sequentially; they also constrict. The natural knows intuitively, without active thinking, what the right course of action is. His intelligence is his instinct. In his 1961 book on symbolic logic and intelligent machines, computer scientist Edmund Berkeley, expressing excitement about digital computers’ capacity for storage, explicitly defines intelligence as the ability to “learn from experience.”<sup>83</sup> Soon, symbolic artificial intelligence researchers found themselves grappling with the limitations of that storage. There is an “explosive computational burden” involved in asking computers to store every possible sequence.<sup>84</sup> Algorithms, as instructions for progressing along one correct path toward a solution, work properly when they do not also present sequences that go nowhere. Seduction algorithms are likewise at their most efficacious when they present men with only one option rather than many possible responses to a given input. The more they curtail, the better algorithms work. Users articulate this clearly: “Over the years, pickup becomes more of a second nature . . . mistakes slowly are erased, and the proper action, the proper thing to say, they are written in its place. we forge almost a routine, an algorithm, a flow chart, of if this, then that. we can navigate our own labyrinth with ease after time.”<sup>85</sup> This user has so thoroughly inculcated the requisite algorithms that they “just work” when he unleashes them—exactly as instinct does. Now that the algorithm has ensured that mistaken paths no longer appear as options, this user no longer has to exert himself by holding entire labyrinths in his mind. The *right* sequence comes to him with ease, just as it does for naturals.

The different algorithms that circulate in early 2000s seduction advice present an opportunity to consider self-transformation in a different register. In Lofton’s writing, self-transformation hinges on ritualized introspection—by means of marketed products. Oprah, she writes, recommends keeping six different journals; diary writing appears as a “local catechism” in the pursuit of an improved, empowered self.<sup>86</sup> Self-transformation here appears as part of a *spiritual* register first and foremost. In his intellectual history of American

spirituality, Leigh Eric Schmidt emphasizes that this register, which he notes is “nothing if not personal” and often characterized by “introspective brooding,” has roots in the development of religious liberalism in the nineteenth century.<sup>87</sup> The journal, as Oprah recognizes and Lofton theorizes, makes it possible to know the self. John Modern’s genealogy of spirituality puts this mode of self-apprehension at the heart of the spiritual register that has grown so expansively in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He describes “a penchant to examine one’s mood or sensibility as it fluctuates in relation to an outside” in antebellum America and attributes this separation between inside and outside and the desire to draw a line between the two to an emergent secular order.<sup>88</sup> What to make, then, of a penchant not for filling journals but for posting field reports detailing what worked and what did not? The transformative power vested in algorithms draws less on self-knowledge or self-apprehension than on the promise of efficacy—the search for the algorithmic arrangement capable of connecting wish to fulfillment. The pursuit of change via the algorithm, in this sense, offers a glimpse of how people imagine their flourishing in a computational age.

Important for the study of religion here is how the sequential structure of algorithms—whether as containers for “canned” routines, as in the Mystery Method, or, in natural game advice, as procedures of constriction—dethrones knowledge as the path toward personal success. Writing about religion and medicine in two very different texts, Kelly Bezio traces what she calls a “pragmatic secularism,” beholden to “nothing more than someone’s work proving effective.”<sup>89</sup> Pragmatic secularism allows characters in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) to reduce the competition between “fringe” (i.e., Indigenous) and “mainstream” (i.e., scientific) knowledge systems to “which can claim the most efficacy.”<sup>90</sup> Bezio recognizes this same pragmatic secularism in a contemporary surgeon’s “checklist”—a device that reduces the need for fuller knowledge of the body to the skill needed to move through steps and if/then decisions.<sup>91</sup> Secularism becomes pragmatic, she argues, in settings where knowing needs to be turned into doing. This is a work of reduction. In the contemporary moment, where neoliberal emphases on continual improvement ensure that people need to be doing all the time, the most effective register of reduction is computation. To speak of attraction and desire in terms of circuitry, switches, and knobs is to pour evolutionary narratives into local and tangible machinery that men can make work for them. The algorithm is the ideal vehicle for this reductive work: empty of substance, it can house all manner of ideas without becoming attached to any in particular. The algorithmic form creates order but does not anchor that order in anything thicker or more expansive than

efficaciousness. Seemingly limitless in their usefulness, their ability to “just work” suspends contradiction without becoming open-ended in the possibilities they produce. Algorithms never forfeit their directedness toward success; this is the original reduction that makes them so capacious.

## CONCLUSION

The year 2014 was somewhat pivotal in online seduction. Where pickup artists had been associated with amusement—reality shows, talk show appearances—before, they were now coming into view as harbingers of sexual assault. “The alpha caveman builds attraction,” notes a Real Social Dynamics student, “based on his behavior”—that is, “fearless, assertive, free, loud, dominant.”<sup>92</sup> Alpha-beta terminology, taken from the study of animal behavior, pervades natural game advice.<sup>93</sup> In an e-book that begins with “have you ever watched [silver-back gorillas on] The Discovery Channel,” one pickup artist distinguishes the alpha from the beta male, who “worries about other people’s needs.”<sup>94</sup> Natural game requires men to “AMOG” (alpha male of the group) other men—that is, overtake them in the social hierarchy by caring less and being louder.<sup>95</sup> Disregard for others becomes the principal path to success, a methodological development that culminated in Real Social Dynamics coach Julien Blanc being denied a visa for Australia and the United Kingdom after sharing instructional videos of himself committing sexual assault.<sup>96</sup> (Being an alpha, in his teaching, required forcefully pushing women’s heads toward his crotch.) The backlash he faced was part of a wave of renewed public interest in feminism that would culminate in the #MeToo movement four years later.<sup>97</sup> Seduction advice disappeared from the mainstream. It is tempting to read the misogyny that was then coming under scrutiny through the lens of its biologically essentialist rhetoric, as if Blanc’s violence is indeed the violence of the caveman. But the source of disregard, the root of the violence, is not the belief that women love dominance so much as it is the pursuit of success by means of algorithms.

The misogynist harm recommended in, or sanctioned by, seduction advice is fundamentally algorithmic. Natural game is not inherently more aggressive than Mystery’s corny opening lines; both approaches envision men who skillfully play on the biological machinery that determines women’s feelings of attraction.<sup>98</sup> These tactics are violent toward women insofar as they present structures in which encounters can only end in the “success” of male satisfaction. On seduction forums, men explain to one another how computationally structured advice serves their interests. “I use a very specific, tested algorithm,” announces a pickup artist wanting to sell his lesson program, “so I can

sleep with her that night.”<sup>99</sup> “If your skillset is developed,” explains Tyler Durden, such that the algorithm has become intuition, “success will happen on autopilot.”<sup>100</sup> The autopilot is only possible because the seduction algorithm renders women’s arousal as building along a predetermined sequence. While each encounter is different, the algorithm offers a vantage point from which women’s feelings can only ever be a linear progression from no to yes. “I thought going caveman,” writes a natural game adherent, “would get her to relent a second time.”<sup>101</sup> Her fixed nature informs his flexible strategy. A user more invested in scripted approaches describes his success in similar terms. An uninterested woman succumbed to her “natural instinct” to “sacrifice” herself to him sexually after he skillfully went about “upping the ‘getting to know you’ conversation while decreasing the ‘building status and attraction’ conversation.”<sup>102</sup> The algorithmic sequences in both types of seduction advice fixate women in a position from which they can only yield, while presenting all hesitance as a snag that targeted technical intervention can straighten out.

I end on the violence endemic to this directedness because seduction is not the only domain where an algorithm seems to be the answer. Increasingly, it seems that there is no place where they do not apply. Seduction forum users were early but not alone in their embrace of computational logics in a decidedly noncomputational domain. Advertised as a “fascinating exploration” of how “the simple, precise algorithms used by computers can also untangle very human questions,” *Algorithms to Live By*, for example, is a book-length effort to harness algorithms for success more broadly.<sup>103</sup> Seduction instructions, which are nothing if not specific about what constitutes success, offer a clear view of what it might mean to “untangle” questions rather than know how to answer them. It is hardly surprising that untangling is promising; algorithms lend direction to hope. It is this organizational quality, the ability to pour desire into neatly segmented sequences and if/then junctures, that allows algorithms to appear universally useful. The computational secularism revealed in this hunger for universal usefulness is a secularism that approaches knowledge pragmatically; knowing matters insofar as it makes doing—or getting things done—possible. It retains the archetypically secular promise that the world can be sorted, fixed in its right place, without anchoring this promise in natural facts. This has consequences, the seduction example illuminates, for the sorts of transformations people envision. Unlike more inwardly focused, spiritualized approaches to improvement, algorithms seem to simply marshal whatever leads to success. Seduction algorithms should remind scholars of sex, neoliberalism, and the secular to steer their own “autopilot” away from content or substance to inquire into direction and

organization instead. Where are algorithms pointing us, we might ask, and how are our possibilities contained?

## NOTES

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6. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006).

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12. Since my argument focuses on forum posts and online publications shared under pickup artists' nom de plume, focused more on cultural production than on biography, I cite their writing with the username or author name as it appeared in the source.

13. Neil Strauss, *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 9; Tony, "Tony's Lay Guide," Maniac High's Pick Up Girls Guide and Seduction Website!, June 3, 2000, <http://web.archive.org/web/20010302151255/http://www.pickupguide.com/layguide/index.html>. Tony's guide gathers advice from different sources: the newsgroup, but also self-published materials. Because it started out as a private archive, composed of posts copied into a Word document, the assembler rarely credits users for particular advice. To address this issue, the 2000 version includes a page thanking some prominent newsgroup personalities, including Ross Jeffries, who authored *How to Get the Women You Desire*, and—most of all—Mystery.

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15. Tom Warren, "MSN Messenger Is Shutting Down After 15 Years of Memories," *Verge*, August 29, 2014; Marc Weber, "Browsers and Browser Wars," in *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*, ed. Niels Brügger and Ian Milligan (London: SAGE, 2019), 270–96.
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47. Donald Boyer, *The Life Informatic: Newsmaking in the Digital Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 134.

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51. Real Social Dynamics disbanded completely in 2018, removing the website—including its forum—and all instructional materials. My analysis of Real Social Dynamics content rests on the PDF documents that users have uploaded to dedicated PDF websites, such as Scribd and PDFCoffee.

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56. ajhorst, "My Transformation- AFC to PUA," *Fast Seduction*, December 12, 2004, [http://www.fastseduction.com/files/phrases/players\\_guide/players\\_guide\\_015.html](http://www.fastseduction.com/files/phrases/players_guide/players_guide_015.html).
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58. Ward, *Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, III.
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60. O'Neill, *Seduction*, 26.
61. Strauss, *Game*, 30.
62. Tyler Durden, *Tyler Durden's Classic Post Collection*, PDF presented by Real Social Dynamics, 14, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, accessed May 2, 2022, <http://web.archive.org/web/20160221230258/http://hotseatathome.com/members/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TylerDurdens-Classic-Posts-Collection.pdf>.
63. Lofton makes this argument in part by pointing to the resonances between Oprah's coach and Protestant revivalist Charles Finney's "anxious bench," on which sinners sat and mournfully awaited their public conversion. The structural similarities with a conference room full of "losers" eager to become pickup artists stand out. Real Social Dynamics offers an especially literal example; their popular "Hot Seat" seminar is designed to "shock you out of your slumber and enlighten you to what's possible." See Tyler Durden, "Real Social Dynamics Presents: Hot Seat," Real Social Dynamics, February 7, 2010, <http://web.archive.org/web/20110207130831/http://rsdhotseat.com/>.
64. Lofton, *Oprah*, 95.
65. Von Markovik and Odom, *Mystery Method*, 22. The "she" in this quote is a rhetorical flourish to express the generality of the connection between algorithms and success; this line appears below a subtitle that reads "the algorithm for getting women."
66. Liesl Schillinger, "5 Self-Help Books to Read Now," *Oprah*, November 7, 2010.
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68. Ed Finn, *What Algorithms Want: Imagination in the Age of Computing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), *What Algorithms Want*, 18.
69. Finn, *What Algorithms Want*, 19.
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