

# Non-Sexual Spooning and Inanimate Affections: Diversifying Intimate Knowledge

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## Abstract

This article considers forms of non-normative intimate connection, which have been widely covered by the popular press: stranger intimacies at *The Snuggery*, a NY business where clients purchase non-sexual cuddling time, as well as objectum-sexuals who are attracted to and/or form intimate relationships with objects. Each case study illuminates the potential in diversifying intimate knowledge, offering pathways to examine socio-cultural constructions of intimacy and drawing on the regulation of affect to challenge dominant modes of relation.  
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## Résumé

Cet article considère les formes de relations intimes non normatives, qui ont fait l'objet d'une grande couverture par la presse populaire, c'est-à-dire l'intimité avec des étrangers à *The Snuggery*, une entreprise basée à New York où les clients peuvent faire l'achat de câlins à caractère non sexuel, ainsi que les objectophiles, qui sont attirés par des objets ou qui forment des relations intimes avec des objets. Chaque cas illustre le potentiel de la diversification des connaissances intimes, en offrant des façons d'examiner les constructions socioculturelles de l'intimité et en misant sur la réglementation pour mettre au défi les modes de relation dominants.  
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In July 2009, Lisa Duggan and José Muñoz published a friendly back-and-forth exchange to the *Bully Bloggers* blog, entitled "Freedom to Marry Our Pets or What's Wrong with the Gays Today?" In a cheeky critique of ongoing rights-based campaigns for same-sex marriage in the U.S., Duggan and Muñoz (2009) lamented the loss of a radical queer politic, which, rather than seeking state approval, actively resists state involvement in sex and private life. Despite their shared dissent, Muñoz suggested to Duggan, "Let's roll with the pro-marriage gays for a minute," before continuing, "If marriage is the way you can be sure that our bonds count in the world [sic] then I might as well be married to my princess of a bulldog Dulce." Duggan concurred, writing, "if we want the state to legitimate our deepest love and intimate relationships, I'm with you on Freedom to Marry Our Pets! Love Makes a Family, José!" (n.p.).

Hitting on major 'cultural flashpoints', such as the 'slippery-slope' rhetoric invoked by the conservative Right, *Bully Bloggers* then launched the *Freedom to Marry Our Pets Society Page* (Bully Bloggers 2009), which invites people to announce their wedding engagements to beloved animal companions. Ranging from long-term courtships to whirlwind love affairs, critical theorists on this webpage have come on board to fly in the face of so-called 'proper' (read: human-human, state- and socially-sanctioned) intimacies. *Freedom to Marry Our Pets* is comprised of same-sex, polyamorous, incestuous, cross-species, intergenerational, and multi-household relationships. It humorously interrupts the legal and social marginalization of non-normative intimacies, while putting them in conversation with broader concerns of social justice and critical queer activism.

Illuminating links between the sexual and legal regulation of formalized versus non-formalized relationships and the limits of so-called 'free' expressions of intimacy and desire, the exchanges on the *Freedom to Marry Our Pets* webpage challenges the widespread neoliberal structurings of romantic and sexual life. As

dominant relationship models continue to re-assert idealized notions of natural monogamy, insular couplehood, and domestic bliss, it would seem that the requirements for ‘appropriately-livable’ sexual lives have less to do with sex itself and more to do with maintaining proper expressions—or, at least, appearances—of intimacy. This article examines the constructions of intimacy at stake in normative media discourses and considers the ways that affect is harnessed, mobilized, and/or limited in the popular news reporting on *The Snuggery* and on objectum-sexuals. In so doing, I seek to shift the conversation from its current focus on legal rights-based discourses and notions of ‘acceptance’ to consideration of broader de-centralized, de-individualized, and multiplicitous intimate connections that can and do span a range of relational interactions.

While *Freedom to Marry Our Pets* stands as a strategy to invoke and provoke—political conversation, these pronouncements of interspecies affection hardly reflect intent for follow-through in legal or ceremonial realms. In this sense, the web-based project may stand as a poignant challenge to normative, and specifically homonormative, modes of relation. But ultimately, the project does little to model what it means to live actively and consistently outside of current socio-legal constructions of intimacy and desire. The question arises: what about those who occupy space outside of these dominant structures in a more sustained way, and those who challenge normative models through their lived experiences of intimate relations? What about those who fail to live out proper intimacies, whether by choice or by circumstance? And what might be productively learned from inhabiting, or even from thinking seriously about, these kinds of intimate alternatives?

It is my contention that fostering discursive and material space for non-dominant intimacies allows for models of possibility to emerge—possibility for living life differently, for being with each other differently, and for finding, creating, and/or maintaining intimate bonds that interrupt the existing stronghold of normative affects. With this in mind, I take up two distinct but equally-revealing examples of so-called ‘improper intimacies’ that have found their way into popular news media in recent years. First, I contemplate the deeply ambivalent news coverage of *The Snuggery*, a female-run business where clients purchase non-sexual cuddling time. I then examine public discourses around

objectum-sexuals; people who are attracted to, and/or form intimate relationships with, objects. The public discourses surrounding objectum-sexuality raises the question of whether human-inanimate object relations are legible, only to dismiss them as nothing more than comical fodder. The media narratives in each of these cases simultaneously afford potential for a diversity of intimate structures and reveal the ways in which fields of intimate possibility are continually locked down and managed in dominant realms. Popular media coverage of *The Snuggery* and of objectum-sexuality (OS) raises critical aspects of the normalization of intimacy. In constructing distinct narratives that illuminate the differing economic, social, and political stakes of each case, related media coverage points to discernable boundaries that reduce intimate relations to private familial kinships or romantic bonds between two human actors. The anxious media backlash against professional cuddling and objectum-sexuality, however, also reveals spaces of potential rupture within current hierarchies of intimacy.

Even though these two cases diverge in many respects, I suggest that reading them alongside each other for the ways in which each has been framed in popular news might draw out complex narrative links between intimacy, sexuality, and socio-cultural affective regulation. In order to frame the larger discussion in this article, I open with an examination of the current socio-political regulations of intimacy and discuss how contemporary queer cultural theorists have engaged with these regulations in recent years.

### **On the Regulation of Normative Intimacies**

This article is strongly informed by queer affect and cultural studies frameworks. I draw on these in my discussion of intimate possibilities in order to shift theoretical attention to the circulation of affect. With this conceptual move, I am not conflating affect with intimacy; rather, I intend to read the two alongside and through one another in order to draw out some of their productive overlaps and resonances. Opening with a rehearsal of some key writings on the regulation of intimacy contextualizes my analysis of professional cuddling and objectum-sexuality in the remainder of this article.

In her introduction to the edited collection *Intimacy*, Lauren Berlant (2000) offers a critical meditation on the role of intimacy in structuring everyday life. She

writes that, “usually, this story is set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love” (1). For Berlant, “institutions of intimacy” and “zones of intimacy” play a large role in affective possibilities (or the lack thereof). While these sites do not control affective bonds in a simplistic uni-directional or linear way, they significantly impact the types of intimate connections that are understood to be valid, valuable, and possible. Socio-legal and policy-based analyses offer important insights into the regulation of intimacy, but they account for only part of the equation; the affective work of regulation must also be considered. Berlant offers a compelling reminder that intimacy can be found in specific sites of encounter, but it can also “be portable, unattached to a concrete space: a drive that creates spaces around it through practices” (4). She wonders about the potentials of considering the unboundedness of intimacy, moving beyond the realms of institutional and physical connections and asking what might be made possible with an attentive mind to “more mobile spaces of attachment” (4).

In Berlant’s (2000) framing, normative ideologies of intimacy occur “when certain ‘expressive’ relations are promoted across public and private domains—love, community, patriotism—while other relations, motivated, say, by the ‘appetites,’ are discredited or simply neglected” (5). This hierarchy speaks to one aspect of what Nathan Rambukkana (2010) has named “intimate privilege,” and what others have discussed under the rubric of the biopolitics of normative intimacy. Notably, Jasbir K. Puar (2007) has linked the privatized organization of intimacy to biopolitical and necropolitical practices, while David Eng (2010) draws out the racialization of intimacy through marked and unmarked structures of kinship.

In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar (2007) takes aim at the growing political conflation between private and public spheres and lays out how normative models of domesticity are bound up in the “private liberty of intimacy” (126). This, in turn, often appeals to the type of public (state) legitimation of private life challenged by Duggan and Muñoz (2009) with their *Freedom to Marry Our Pets* web project invoked earlier. In discussing *Lawrence-Garner v. Texas*—which decriminalized sodomy in the U.S., while simultaneously relegating queer sex to private realms—Puar (2007) challenges the very

basis of the ruling, asking who has access to the kinds of private spaces that are delineated as being ‘acceptable’ in the first place (124). She positions these kinds of unmarked consequences of the ruling as biopolitical technologies of control—ones that are heavily raced, classed, and gendered—and states that, “the private is a racialized and nationalized construct insofar as it is granted not only to heterosexuals but to certain citizens and withheld from many others and from noncitizens” (124-125). She continues: “the private is, therefore, offered as a gift of recognition to those invested in certain normative renditions of domesticity” (124).

David Eng (2010), too, articulates the configuration of privacy and kinship structures as deeply racialized. Attending to the narratives of ‘choice’ in *The Feeling of Kinship*, he argues that “the neoliberal language of choice now helps to reconfigure not just the domestic but indeed the global marketplace as an expanded public field in which private interests and prejudices are free to circulate with little governmental regulation or restriction” (9). In this sense, normative domesticity—or domestynormativity, as Puar (2007) would call it—extends from individuals and couples through transnational networks and back again. Eng urges a critical understanding of how neoliberal notions of choice work together with unmarked racialized constructions of domesticity in order to produce the racialization of intimacy.

These types of biopolitical formations inform and run throughout Mel Chen’s (2012) recent work, which includes extensive considerations of ‘animacy’ as an analytic category. Chen takes up “animacy hierarchies”—complex systems of meaning where matter is deemed to be somewhere on a scale ranging from ‘animate’ to ‘inanimate’ and where subsequent value is then attached to that matter. Where something falls on the animacy hierarchy informs how much agency, activity, and choice is attributed to it. Central to Chen’s discussion is a critical challenge to normative Western framings of ‘animate’ and ‘inanimate’ objects, so as to expose how these linguistic categories are racialized, sexualized, gendered, ability-based, and species-oriented. These deep-seated, hierarchically organized ideas about animacy are confronted when non-normative forms of intimate connection, such as objectum-sexuality, appear. As I argue, the aggressive de-valuing and trivialization of disobedient structures of intimacy, as in the case of objectum-sex-

uality, points to the affective boundary work that is animated when animacy is recognized in matter that is usually understood to be ‘inanimate.’

Berlant (2000) suggests that “desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and cultivate them” (5). This literal and figurative lack of space works to regulate and control the types of intimacies that are allowed to develop, flourish, and evolve within dominant spheres. It is not that these marginalized intimacies cease to exist without majoritarian validation or that the goal should necessarily be inclusion into the dominant ethos, but rather that, through current normative framings, the productive potentialities of non-dominant intimacies are cut short and made to be impossible. In order to recuperate some of the possibilities offered by alternate forms of intimacy, marginalized forms of affective connection must be re-valued and taken seriously, in theory and alongside praxis.

An analytic prioritization of affect and animacy is one way to practice this re-valuing, since, as Chen (2012) asserts, animacy has the ability to “rewrite conditions of intimacy” by allowing for a de-vesting in neoliberal individualisms and an opening of space for different forms of communal connections (3). Berlant (2000) suggests that, intimacy “poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective” (3). In revisiting biopolitical formulations and/or the ways in which they are theorized, normative intimacy can be, and is, interrupted and refigured to allow for a variety of affective connections across a range of ‘non-normative’ spaces.

The claim that normative intimacy can be interrupted and refigured takes us to the crux of this article, which considers the questions of how *intimacy* might offer a way to think about possibilities for disrupting individualized domestic/normative models of existence, and further, how ‘improper’ affective connections might productively interrupt these kinds of normative domestic models by offering expanded possibilities for intimate relating. In the following sections, I more thoroughly engage with these questions through specific examples, starting with the stranger intimacies produced through professional cuddling services at *The Snuggery* in upstate New York.

## ‘Profiting off Intimacy,’ ‘Monetizing Love,’ and Other Sensible Affronts

Jackie Samuel, founder of *The Snuggery* in Penfield, NY, has withstood public outrage and hostile accusations directed at her because she exchanges non-sexual touch for pay. Providing direct access to “the therapeutic power of touch” (Agomuoh 2012), *The Snuggery* offers hourly services with individual cuddlers for roughly a dollar a minute. The interactions offered through *The Snuggery* draw on ideas similar to those of other small-scale social actions (e.g., Cuddle Parties, people who offer Free Hugs to passersby who find themselves wanting), which all assert the human need for intimate, non-sexual physical contact. Samuel and *The Snuggery* have very clear and precise ways of framing their work. The website explains that, although non-sexual touch in North America is often discouraged, “the research is clear: humans need touch to thrive” (TheSnuggery.org). According to Samuel, scientific study supports the health benefits of affectionate touch, which include lowering blood pressure, reducing stress, and curbing anxiety. *The Snuggery*, by its very framing, makes connections between physical encounters, health, and bodily processes, and affective and emotional responses. Though *The Snuggery* is set up as a domestic space, in a private dwelling complete with couches, beds, and other ‘home-y’ aesthetics, it disrupts normative interactions that typically unfold within the realm of private spheres by charging money for an act usually deemed to be ‘naturally occurring’—i.e., affectionate touch.

While the explicitly therapeutic and healing rhetoric upon which Samuel founded her business has lent credibility to her work in the eyes of some, the ‘professional cuddler’ also has faced significant antagonistic, reactionary responses from neighbours and strangers alike. This backlash raises a series of questions: what happens when a price tag is put onto emotion work, which is expected to be free of charge and is presumed to be offered out of love, duty, and/or affection? What happens when relational economies are challenged through capitalizing on the gendered division of labour? And what happens when emotional encounters are offered, for pay, to a multitude of people, rather than to just a few intimates, and to people who are often strangers?

When looking to popular news coverage of Samuel’s work, the answers look bleak. Since *The Daily Mail* first interviewed Samuel in 2012 and drew attention to

her seemingly 'unusual' business, a series of online articles have cropped up with their own views on Samuel's venture. Though often accompanied by pejorative descriptors like "weird," "odd," and "bizarre," the published pieces tend to approach *The Snuggery* largely as a legitimate and respectable business, at least at a surface level. The fact that these intimate interactions belong to a specifically capitalist endeavour works, in this case, to legitimize the claim to the 'professionalism' of Samuel's cuddling. The *International Business Times*, for instance, opened its November 2012 story with the caption, "A Rochester woman has turned intimacy into a commodity by starting her own professional cuddling business" (Agomuoh 2012, n.p.). Presented as a matter of fact operation, professionalizing cuddling *makes sense* within contemporary forms of capitalism.

These stories also, however, tend to attribute Samuel with a relatively benign—sometimes verging on dismissively 'silly'—approach (see, for example, Grossman 2012; Stampler 2012; Villalva 2012). This downplaying and dismissiveness is accompanied by boundary-protecting invocations of 'pure' and 'natural' intimacy formations. Those who voice their disapproval of Samuel's work most frequently accuse her of 'selling intimacy' or of being an 'intimacy profiteer'. These reactions make clear that intimacy is somehow assumed to be 'sacred', (supposedly) 'untouchable', and, most of all, free of charge. This is especially true in relation to a woman circulating intimacy within privileged forms of social capital. Samuel has been quoted as saying, "Some have said I am worse than a prostitute because they think snuggling is more intimate than sex. I've been told I'm monetizing love" (Samuel quoted in Boyle 2012, n.p.). Such statements speak to how *intimacy* and *love* have been equated and naturalized, while denying the complex interactions between intimacy and sex or between sex and love. Even if the whorephobia in this reaction, "worse than a prostitute," can be temporarily bracketed off, the implicit hierarchy of relations it sets up cannot. According to dominant scripts, buying and/or selling sex can *occasionally* be 'justified' (e.g., out of desperation or as a matter of purely physical release). Indeed, the coverage of Samuel and *The Snuggery* implies quiet acceptance that sex is commodified, while, by contrast, intimacy is not (yet). Physical contact without sex is seen to be necessarily and inherently more intimate, which coincidentally makes it more threatening to the

dominant/normative order of things. Cuddling for pay is, therefore, coded as being "worse" on the social morality scale, thereby opening cuddling for pay to more vehement opposition.

This reading is both supported and contradicted by Samuel's personal position: having entered the business as a graduate student, Samuel reads as a white female. She is a mother of a young child and makes claims to having a 'natural proficiency' for snuggling. *The Daily Mail* cites Samuel as saying that, though she *hopes* it comes naturally to everybody, she feels that she was "born knowing how to snuggle" (Boyle 2012, n.p.). The racialized and intellectual privilege Samuel occupies inspires complex boundary work that reinforces the limits of intimate space. The vast majority of the articles published at the time of writing this article have been sure to distance Samuel's *non-sexual* economic exchanges from pretty much any and all forms of sex work, by continually foregrounding that, "Sexual activity—or any touching that is sexual in nature—is against the rules" (Grossman 2012, n.p.). These framings simultaneously invoke traditionalist, Victorian, and colonial notions of women's work as existing necessarily and exclusively within the domestic sphere and implicitly places Samuel's work firmly within the realm of emotional labour, while focusing on the gendered aspects of intimacy and care.

To clarify, my claim here is *not* that snuggling is an act necessarily void of intimacy. Samuel herself acknowledges a level of intimacy, or at least affection, in interpersonal touch. These types of intimacies created through the work-based connections of professional cuddling—often between strangers and rarely in sustained or ongoing relationships—push back against dominant scripts that prioritize sustained and ongoing monogamous connections. The prescriptive qualities of the attachments and assumptions repeatedly invoked in coverage of *The Snuggery* are crucial to this writing. Several misguided claims populate media narratives, such as the suggestion that sex is never intimate when paid for and that non-sexual acts of touch are always already intimate experiences. Potential intimacies forged at *The Snuggery* are not less impactful simply because they are part of an economic exchange nor are they inherently less affectively charged for those who may experience them. That said, intimate connections are also not a necessary or predictable part of the cuddling

interaction. Lines of thought that imply otherwise not only pre-empt and prescribe limited affective or emotive experiences of touch, but also reinstate strict regulations and narrow possibilities around the relationship between sex, sexuality, and intimacy—and, again, not incidentally, around interactions with racialization, gender, class markers, and other forms of social capital.

In order to destabilize these supposedly self-evident and coherent narratives, intimacy must be brought to the surface and rethought in attempts to resist normalizing imperatives. Being attentive to alternate sites and circulations of intimacy works to expand the horizons of intimate investments. As Berlant (2000) offers, “rethinking intimacy calls out not only for redescription but for transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects.” Intimacy, she explains, typically comes with obligations to “remain unproblematic” and, when it fails to fulfill this fantastic relation, it evokes more hostile attempts at regulation and control (6-7). Such hostility organizes the logics of reporting on *The Snuggery*, wherein attempts to delegitimize or minimize the potential impact of these affective encounters remain journalistically paramount.

### **The Woman Who Married the Eiffel Tower, Redux**

If Jackie Samuel’s professional relationships problematize the so-called “good life” of intimacy in one way, Erika Eiffel’s personal relationships present a challenge in another, as hers abrade the accepted limits of dominant and ‘appropriate’ models of intimate relations. Eiffel identifies as “objectum-sexual”—someone who forms significant attachments to, and has intimate relationships with, non-human, non-animal objects. The details of these relationships vary depending on the object and the person connecting with it. Object relations are sometimes experienced as sexual, sometimes as non-sexual but still romantic, and are almost always characterized as profoundly intimate. Objectum-sexuals, like a variety of other desiring subjects, may be either monogamous or non-monogamous and may structure their relationships in a myriad of different ways. Importantly, those who publicly identify with objectum-sexuality—sometimes taking on an identity of *objectophile*—frame their desires as expressions of their sexuality or sexual ‘orientation’, but are clear in distinguishing these desires from object-based fetishes or kinks.<sup>1</sup>

According to personal accounts published through online sources like the Objectum-Sexuality (OS) Internationale website (objectum-sexuality.org), objectum-sexuals are trying to make sense of and live out their sexual and intimate lives within the same dominant human-human focused relationship models as everyone else. Though a liberal claim to normalcy is invoked in these narrations and though OS is not characterized by an explicit attempt to be subversive, the hostile and reactionary response to objectophilia and those who identify with objectum-sexuality clearly demarcate OS as another decidedly ‘improper’ intimacy, one most often rejected as invalid and upheld as categorically impossible. Similar to public reaction faced by Samuel, these frenzied reactions illuminate telling boundary work around the ‘proper’ role of intimacy in domestically normative, mononormative, human- and hetero-focused worlds. With Eiffel and other OS relationships, however, the challenges to normative understandings of intimacy go one step further: whereas Samuel’s professional cuddling services draw heavily on the language of *human* need and *human* nature, OS relationships tend to sidestep these framings altogether. I wonder what sense can be made of this discrepancy, especially given my task of reading both cases in the context of diversifying possibilities around intimate knowledge. Instead of centering an innate drive for interpersonal touch, OS relationships move away from human-focused claims and call for rethinking the very terms of so-called ‘healthy’ relations. The affective and emotional connections of human-object relationships call into question some of the most foundational assumptions of intimate normalcy, including that intimacy is formed between humans, or between humans and domesticated animals. Such questioning parallels other public narratives of objectum-sexuality, which focus on access to and inclusion in dominant spheres.

It would appear that the spokespeople for the recognition of OS have made some headway in terms of public visibility and their stories are slowly becoming more nuanced in the media. After appearing in a somewhat sensationalist UK ‘news-doc’ piece called *Strange Love: Married to the Eiffel Tower* (Piotrowska 2008), Erika Eiffel started a press tour to speak further about objectum-sexuality and the misconceptions and misinformation propagated by the film. She gave several interviews, appeared on prime time TV and in popular news

sources, and spoke publicly about her own experiences of intimacy in past and current relationships with an archery bow (with whom Eiffel collaborated for archery competitions), the Berlin Wall, and the Eiffel Tower (whom she married in an extra-legal commitment ceremony in 2007). Through these interviews, it becomes clear that Eiffel not only identifies as objectum-sexual, but also as an 'animist'—one who has “always felt everything around [her] possesses a sentience, possesses a soul or energy, a flow, a force” (Eiffel quoted in Spahic and Pick 2013, n.p.). This explicit invocation of animacy offers an invitation to think about objectum-sexuality further through Chen's (2012) work and encourages an examination of affective animacy through the in/animate affections present in OS relationships.

An 'animist' worldview, per Eiffel's description, clearly challenges dominant hierarchies of animacy that firmly demarcate bounds between human, non-human animal, and non-animal matter. This understanding of animism runs throughout Eiffel's romantic and sexual desires and calls for a re-description and re-visioning of intimate possibilities. The intimacies lived out by Eiffel and other objectum-sexuals model non-normative forms of affective connection, and they frequently invoke panicked affective responses from those encountering this type of unfamiliar, or 'strange', non-normativity. Both the modeling of possibility and the invocation of panic are equally, though differently, telling. Since, as Chen (2012) instructs, animacy hierarchies “conceptually arrange human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority” (13), they are central to world orderings. Where such hierarchies are re-organized in ways that destabilize the totalizing dominance of patriarchal hegemonic structures, a profound threat is registered. In response, almost without fail, the boundaries of hierarchical categories are again re-enforced. Being in love with the Eiffel Tower remains pathologized as emotionally limited and strange. In similar fashion, paying for cuddling services is re-scripted as indicative of a personal, intimate, and affective lack.

Non-dominant intimacies that act as models of possibility are consistently devalued, trivialized, or made to be impossible by publics at large. The idea of finding intimacy with inanimate objects is certainly no exception to this. Through online news stories and video interviews featuring Eiffel, it becomes clear that ob-

jectophilia is seen to be so impossible that it is (practically) unimaginable outside of the realm of joke or parody. Article after article posted to online news sources ridicule those who claim to have found love or significant relationship intimacy with objects. From stories titled “Woman With Objects Fetish Marries Eiffel Tower” (Simpson 2008) and “The Ride of Her Life: A Woman Marries a Roller Coaster” (Newsome n.d.), it is clear that objectum-sexuality has been almost gleefully misrecognized and misrepresented in the media and in general publics more broadly. Presenting OS through mockery attempts to reassert the dominant ordering of animacy—and the majoritarian understandings of where a human might find intimacy—confirming Chen's (2012) claim that, “the inanimate and animate are both subject to the biopolitical hand” (193). As part of this hierarchical boundary work, Eiffel has faced violent linguistic assaults for her outspokenness and media visibility. Still, she has continued to be a spokesperson and advocate for objectum-sexuals. In fact, *The Globe and Mail* published another story in August 2012, which features new interviews with Eiffel (Boesveld 2012), and she is a central figure in the 2013 documentary, *Animism: People Who Love Objects* (directed by Bill Spahic).

It seems that, slowly, the representation of objectum-sexuality may be diversifying. More recent publications and stories take a notably different tone from those published a few years ago. They are more accepting of objectum-sexuality as a legitimate orientation from the get-go and rely on objectum-sexuals themselves to provide the majority of the narrative about their sexual and intimate relations. What might this potential shift in discourse indicate? What, if anything, is it that is changing through more diverse representations and what purpose does the incorporation into dominant spheres serve? Perhaps expanding discussions of gay marriage and other non-heteronormative sexualities have led the way to a discursive legitimation of other marginalized relations and intimate structures of attachment—as long as they are marriage-like. If so, perhaps the 'slippery slope' scare-tactic rhetoric is not so foundationless after all, as leftist naysayers have claimed. Still, the reactions to accounts of OS continue to be dominated by scoffing, de-valuing, and denying the legitimacy of object-human relationships. Accordingly, any seeming shifts towards greater acceptance should be approached with justifiable caution.

I wonder how further analysis that is attentive to animacy hierarchies might consider OS as an anti-normative, non-dominant challenge to structures of intimacy, even as existing narratives of OS invoke, and sometimes appeal to, liberalist acceptance into the realm of normalcy. When considering that the open and visible parts of OS communities are still quite small in numbers, the 'who' of who is speaking matters. Who is granted authority to speak about objectum-sexuality and who is not? Certainly, there is an element of personal and political risk involved in 'going public' as an OS. This begs the important question of who can risk being visible as part of the OS community in the first place? Who is recognized as being an authority on the subject of their own experience and who is recognized as a speaking subject at all? These are some of the questions that run throughout the work of Berlant (2000), Eng (2010), Puar (2007), as well as others. The complex intertwining of racialization, biopolitics, and affective attachments relegates certain bodies to limited speaking roles, which, in turn, undoubtedly impacts who is able and willing to speak publicly about their private attachments.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to highlight similarities between the seemingly very different cases of Jackie Samuel and Erika Eiffel. I focused on the ways in which the anxieties and hostilities raised by such 'strange' or 'improper' intimacies illuminate various facets of normalization and their role in the regulation of affect. Though both women evoke similar responses from dominant publics, primarily trivialization, ridicule, and dismissal, there are specificities to each case that point to distinct elements of intimate regulation: who and what are acceptable objects of emotional and affective attention and how that attention can be appropriately articulated. These cases expose the ways that imagining diverse forms of intimacy is being limited, while also offering alternate possibilities for being and relating in the world. Not only are material conditions of intimacy regulated through discursive framings, legal rulings, and social mores, but the expressions of affective connection are also privileged and/or disavowed in line with dominant understandings. As I have drawn out, which affective connections are privileged and which are disavowed is informed by hierarchies of animacy, agency, freedom, and choice.

The narratives that can be articulated around affective bonds and intimate attachments are limited by the systemic devaluation of those whose bodies, whose work, whose desires, and whose intimacies somehow get it 'wrong'. Connections that are deemed to be 'improper' are pre-empted by and debased through a wide range of socio-cultural constructions of intimacy, affect, and desire. While the production of affect cannot be simply controlled, as Sara Ahmed (2004) reminds us, it can be, and is consistently, harnessed, mobilized, and/or invoked in ways that are informed by racialized hierarchies of animacy and agency, only to be further reinforced through structures of intimate privilege. Yet still, getting it 'wrong' may open up crucial and productive paths. In analyzing various sites of intimacy, my main interest lies in exploring what might be gained from taking seriously 'non-normative' intimate attachments (i.e., those formed outside of heterosexual, white, middle-class, couple-focused, reproductive, and human-human imperatives). I want to consider further how we might imagine these changes specifically outside of dominant institutions or socio-legal structures. Or, at least, how we might productively fail to live up to the imperatives they embody. After all, as J. Jack Halberstam (2011) asserts, failing to live up to oppressive and restrictive imperatives can be an important practice of resistance and a powerful statement of dissent. Perhaps the intimate knowledges that are forged within the moments of encounter in professional cuddling and within objectum-sexual relationships can be instructive for imagining ways for how we can all fail harder, fail better, and fail with more affective spark.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The sources consulted for this article are restricted to narrative accounts of objectum-sexuality that circulate in public domains. These include the OS Internationale website, a variety of online articles and interviews, and the documentary films referenced. Thus, the views presented in this article may or may not be representative of larger communities of OS people. They do, however, reflect what has appeared in public venues to date at the time of this writing.

60-an-hour-you-can-snuggle-with-a-professional-cuddler/.

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