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Impersonal Intimacy: A Situational Approach

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ABSTRACT

How come that in semi-anonymous contexts characterized by flux and exchangeability, people experience affection, closeness and some sense of trust? The answer, proposed in this article, is that intimacy is not necessarily bound up with personal relationships but with social situations. A situational approach, grounded in classic sociological thinking and queer theory, allows us to challenge the close association of intimacy with personal relationships, without celebrating subversive closeness. In doing so, we turn to empirical studies of impersonal intimacy and address the ways in which rituals and rhythm produce intimacy through orienting perception and bodies. Drawing on examples from empirical and theoretical studies of tango dancing, horse riding and self-help groups we explore intimacy apparatuses that connect people while also keeping them apart. Underscoring the situational elements, our approach points to the limits of thinking intimacy as belonging to the individual and situates the study of intimacy at the heart of a critical social science.

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I fall in love every day. Not with people, but with situations.

Amy Winehouse

Introduction

How to make sense of intimacy in modern society? This question takes us to the core of classical sociological discussions on solidarity, individualization and rationalization (Forstie, 2017; Illouz, 2007; Santore, 2008) as well as to more recent debates on sexuality, internet sociality and loneliness (Hobbs et al., 2017; Policarpo, 2016; Robards & Lincoln, 2016). How do modern life shape relations, what binds social contexts and practices, and what is the role of power and normativity in the production of closeness and community? While last decades' scholarly discussions on intimacy have challenged heteronormativity (Roseneil et al., 2013; Weeks et al., 2001), and norms around reproduction and the couple (Sheff, 2014; Wilkinson, 2020), these approaches tend to reinforce a somewhat troublesome linking of intimacy with personal relations, love and family life. Thus, intimacy

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often becomes a stake in highly normative debates, and several important sociological works have placed intimacy strictly within the sphere of personal relationships. Anthony Giddens, for instance, in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Giddens, 1992), uses intimacy interchangeably with sexuality, and when he occasionally questions this reduction of intimacy to sex, it is in order to confirm the personal basis of intimacy. Likewise, Niklas Luhmann's *Love as Passion* (Luhmann, 1998), Lynn Jamison's *Intimacy* (Jamiesson, 1998), and Eva Illouz' *Cold Intimacies* (Illouz, 2007) all tend towards an understanding of intimacy as originally belonging to the personal realm. This understanding underlies sociological analyses of modern intimacy as a product of capitalism and rational labour (Illouz, 2007), and it shows in studies of how intimacy is established in the service sector (Hochschild, 1983), as well as in research on prostitution (Bernstein, 2007). Modern intimacy has often been situated in a societal context of affective coldness and is frequently associated with an instrumental and rationalized life world marked by a tragic decline of authenticity, and an essentially sterile and individualized society (Bauman, 2003; Forstie, 2017, p. 3).

It is queer studies that have most systematically problematized the normative tendencies in these works, highlighting the need to uncouple intimacy from institutions such as the family, and, not least, heterosexuality (see for instance Berlant, 2000; Bersani & Phillips, 2010; Dean, 2009; Muñoz, 2009; Roseneil, 2010; Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2016). Insofar as queer formulations of intimacy often target normative assumptions that structure standard sociological approaches, they are generally more appreciative of the modern elements of intimate relations and typically celebrate (queer) sexuality situated in urban (Bech, 1997), public (Bersani, 2009; Dean, 2009), and virtual contexts (Hakim, 2019). In this sense, queer studies point in the direction of a framework that imagines anonymous and fluid contributions to the production of intimacy as equally important as those situated within conventional institutions like the family.

The following article argues that a situational approach, bridging classic sociological thinking and queer theory, allows us to challenge the close association of intimacy with personal relationships further. Redirecting focus from “men [sic] and their moments” to “moments and their men [sic]” (Goffman, 1967, pp. 2, 3), we use the situation to detach intimacy from the personal relationship paradigm, instead tying it to the impersonal character of ongoing social processes. More specifically, we turn our attention to three social contexts where impersonality, as well as formality, hierarchy and ritual practice, play important roles: tango dancing, the riding school and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) self-help groups. We have explored these three social contexts separately in the past and will, in this article, draw on insights from the studies to develop a situational approach to what we call impersonal intimacy—intimate situations where people experience affection, closeness and trust, but lack the interpersonal stability and continuity of personal relationships. Theorizing impersonal dimensions of intimacy, we link the production of intimacy to formal framing and organization, materiality and processes of power. In line with the introductory quote by singer Amy Winehouse, the cases discussed in this article are examples of people “falling in love” with, and through, situations.

We begin this article with a brief theoretical introduction, accounting for our situational approach. We then go on to provide an overview of the methodology of our three cases. In the succeeding sections, we draw on our situational approach to outline, *first*, the ritualistic and rhythmic aspects of impersonal intimacy. The situational approach is

here conceptualized in terms of orientation and shared attention, bringing forth the impact of symbolic-material elements. This section involves a discussion of the other as characterized by exchangeability and flux. *Second*, we move towards a discussion of anonymity as a viable aspect of impersonal intimacy. In this section, we argue that the impersonal elements, exposed by the situational approach, display both an intensified focus and a decentring of the self. *Third*, we focus on asymmetries and explore how power structures both enable and block intimacy. We end with a concluding discussion in which we connect these three aspects of impersonal intimacy to argue that critical social science is in need of a conceptualization of intimacy beyond the individual and the personal.

A Situational Approach

The challenge when theorizing intimacy beyond the individual and the personal is to find a way of addressing structure and continuity without reference to personal bonds that are characteristic of the kind of relations that we usually think of as intimate—rooted in friendship, sexuality, or romantic attachment. To respond to this challenge, we suggest a situational approach informed by sociological work on rituals (Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1956; Summers-Effler, 2006). We combine ritual theory with Foucault's (1980) notion of the apparatus and work in new materialism and affect studies that blur the boundary between body, materiality and discourse (Ahmed, 2006; Barad, 2007), in order to explain how social structure and embodied interactions are linked in rituals.

Already in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/1995), Émile Durkheim introduced the idea of a ritualistic underpinning of joint emotions or what he calls *collective effervescence*. For Durkheim, the ongoing circulation of shared symbols offered by rituals was not only important in the sense that they directed participants' attention towards specific objects, institutions and social orders. It was also essential for establishing close social relations and solidarity, a collective sense of shared focus and common emotional arousal in larger groupings (Summers-Effler, 2006, p. 135). In the sociological tradition of ritual theory, Collins (2001, 2004) picked up on these ideas. Addressing rituals in a wide sense, Collins argues that rituals, and what he labels *interaction ritual chains*, comprise a bodily co-presence, a shared focus of attention, shared emotional tonality and engagement in joint rhythmic patterns—including everything “from the pace of turn-taking to the micro-rhythms of vocal soundwaves” (2020: 479)—which generate emotional energy that fuels the repetition of the ritual. These rituals do not only consist of extraordinary events, like communal celebrations, carnivalesque festivities and religious ceremonies, but also include what Goffman (1956, 1967) termed *interaction rituals*—the informal every day ceremonies creating a sense of belonging.

The strength of Collins' ritualistic approach—its capacity to identify patterns of joint action and shared emotions in disparate social processes—is also its weakness, as it risks reducing all social rituals to one and the same fundamental social-emotional dynamic (see e.g. Malešević, 2019). For example, Collins (2001, p. 41) suggests that “[t]he gay rights movement and its public campaigns [,] are part of the same generation of movements as the new Christian right” and therefore share certain ritual traits—a perspective that risks downplaying the two movements' particularities. Emphasizing the situatedness and impersonal dimensions of

intimate relations, we wish to accentuate the way intimacy as energy emerges through rituals. But to better bring out the nuances of intimate sociality and separate it from other kinds of rituals, we conceive of these situated intimate relations as more or less formalized *apparatuses*. This is not to be confused with Collins (2004, p. 50) apparatus, which in his work denotes the structure of a formalized, ceremonial ritual. In contrast, we rely on Foucault's (1980, p. 194) notion of the apparatus as a system of practices, discourses, philosophical ideas, architectural forms and formal and informal regulations that produce a certain social reality that shape certain kinds of subjects. An apparatus is thus the link that enables Foucault's (178: 139) "bipolar technology" of a structural, biopolitical organization of life, and a physical disciplinary power, "bearing on material elements" (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). Formal aspects of a ritual may be part of an apparatus as Collins suggests, but they thus also include linguistic, practical, institutional and physical aspects from which subjects and social relations emerge.

Barad's (2007) new materialist work brings the integration of symbolic, material and embodied reality further. She regards apparatuses as material-discursive practices, as "specific material reconfigurings of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 142) that detach agency from materiality, and causal forces from passive matter. This detachment allows for objects to emerge as autonomously existing entities. Apparatuses have a structuring force, but they only exist in actual, embodied and repeated interactions—normative regulations, bodies and social relations are produced in tandem. By connecting ritualist theory and the concept of apparatus we thus underline that intimacy needs to be approached as situationally conditioned. This is also why we find Ahmed's (2006) social geography useful—which we will discuss further on—in which she shows how subjects become intelligible when they are positioned both socially and physically along "shared normative lines" (Ahmed, 2006).

Rhythm and repetition are particularly powerful tools for exploring intimacy beyond the personal: when stable personal bonds are absent, it is embodied, ritual repetition that provides continuity to impersonal intimacy. As Lefebvre (2004) demonstrated in his rhythmanalysis, social life itself can be understood in terms of intersecting and conflicting rhythms—*arrhythmia* and *eurythmia* (see also Tavory, 2018, p. 123). Intimacy apparatuses are rhythmic as well. Aligned micro-rhythms coordinate attention and focus, while also producing the broader normative space within which intimate relating unfolds. Consider Foucault's (1977, p. 135f) seminal analysis of the military drill, through which the soldier-subject is produced in tandem with the physical exercise that constitutes it. Or Garfinkel's (2002, p. 150ff) much-cited metronome experiment, in which a clapping audience simultaneously creates and follows the rhythm—the ritual draws the individual body into its order through the embodied dissemination of temporal spacing.

As we will show in our discussion, ritual, rhythm and embodiment are central to understanding intimate situations beyond the personal. But before outlining these aspects, we will briefly present the cases upon which we base our argument, and some of the methodological considerations.

Case Methodology

The situational approach to intimacy developed in this article builds upon the results of a four-year-long research project that explores intimacy through a set of relations that fall outside the categories of romantic relationships, family, or friendship. More precisely, we develop our theoretical understanding by drawing on our earlier empirical and theoretical studies of tango dancing, the riding school and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) self-help groups (see e.g. Palm, 2021; Redmalm, 2019; Törnqvist, 2018). While different in character, these cases illuminate important aspects of the overarching theme that this article explores. The current article contains references and examples from the three individual cases, primarily but not exclusively related to the Nordic context, with the overall ambition to address more general dimensions of intimacies beyond the familiar.

As cases of intimacy, characterized by some degree of anonymity and exchangeability, the empirical studies offer prisms for theorizing intimacy beyond dyadic and long-term relations defined by the private realm. More precisely, they allow us to theorize the premises for an intimacy established in semi-public spaces characterized by loose membership in which individuals are connected and kept apart at the same time. The tango dance embrace, for instance, is orchestrated to *not* lead to (sexual) intimacies outside the club, just as the sharing of deeply personal details in the self-help group does *not* necessarily mark a first step in a friendship relation, and the melting together of rider and horse does *not* solidify into a trusting bond across species boundaries. The tango venues are characterized by formalized procedures guiding the dancers to how a dance invitation should be performed, when to switch partners and what body parts to touch and not, thereby securing both a sensual dance experience and integrity and distance. Riding school practices also follow established protocols—informal normative frameworks as well as formal lesson schedules and routines for the horses, ensuring that no horse is overburdened. Pupils are typically expected to groom the horses before and after the hour-long lessons, meaning that interactions—both between pupils and between pupils and horses—extend beyond the lessons themselves. This makes the broader social environment of the riding school a potential sphere of intimacy. In AA-meetings strict procedural rules allow participants to speak without being interrupted or questioned, and thus contribute to an intimate sharing of deeply personal information. These case qualities allow us to reflect on the situational in terms of a joint intimate attention shaped by institutionally embedded rules and scripts for action and will be further analysed in the following sections.

The cases are selected, not only because they are underexplored intimate situations, but because they, as methodological cues, shift our understanding of intimacy. While the cases, at first glance, seem to be examples of weak attachments, they also encompass existential experiences “on which people depend for living” (Berlant, 2000, p. 4) and are thus not insignificant or odd versions of intimacy that complement conventional figurations. As dancers testify, the intimacy they experience bound to tango *as a situation* is more stable and long-lasting than the friendship-based or romantic relationships that dancing may generate. Thereby, the article contributes to previous theorizations of intimacy by challenging the notion of intimacy as belonging primarily to an enclosed private or personal domain. Theorizing intimacy this way thus aligns with attempts within the study of intimacies to push intimacy beyond the personal relationship

paradigm, beyond (heteronormative) kinship, and beyond the familiar, hence allowing us “to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living” (Berlant, 2000, p. 6; cp. Ahmed, 2006: 103; Törnqvist, 2019; see also Butler, 2000, p. 23; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004, Roseneil, 2007; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Weeks, 2007). Following the argument that “no relationship is ever only intimate, and no intimate situation is by itself a relationship” (Henriksson, 2014, p. 100), we address intimacy, not as a set of pre-defined relations, but as a sense of attachment and closeness, lived in shifting ways.

The cases were studied separately using different methodological strategies, but all were guided by a phenomenological focus on lived experience, explored through ethnographic observations and interviews. The study on *couple dancing* is based on a chest-to-chest ethnography containing participant observations at tango clubs and dance schools in Stockholm (six months), San Francisco (four months) and Buenos Aires (two months), and semi-structured interviews with twenty-nine tango dancers (see Törnqvist, 2012, 2013, 2018). The study of *equestrians and horses* is based on twenty-five semi-structured interviews and ethnographic visits to three riding schools in Sweden over the course of six months (Redmalm, 2019; Schuurman et al., 2024). Three riding groups were followed more closely with observations before, during and after weekly classes. Finally, the study on *self-help recovery from alcoholism and addiction*—although related to ethnographic observations in twelve step groups—primarily offers a theoretical analysis of issues of meaning making, interaction and organization in Alcoholic Anonymous in general (Palm, 2021). For more detailed information about the three case studies, see the referred articles and monographs.

Ritualized Intimacy

Rituals and rhythms orchestrate intimacy in multiple ways. The self-help group, the tango club, and the riding school illustrate how rituals align diverse rhythms and synchronize bodies and actions. In other words, there is a schematic guidance, embedded in the situation, that triggers feelings of closeness and belonging. In relation to the twelve-step self-help meetings, intimacy relies heavily on both established discourses, administrative measures, and scripted meeting procedures, as well as the rhythm of sharing in the actual embodied reality of the meetings, where members engage in joint readings of twelve-step texts, state the rules that apply throughout the meeting, welcome newcomers, and celebrate sobriety of members of the group (O’Halloran, 2008; Palm, 2021). At the tango club, too, ritualized schemes of action instil steps and movements in a way that ideally synchronizes the dancers’ bodily rhythms—such as heartbeat and energy—into a shared flow (Törnqvist, 2018; Henriques, 2010). Likewise, rhythm is central to the riding school apparatus, both the synchronized movements of horse and rider, and the interplay between horse-rider couples in the riding range. Being “one with the horse” is typically described as an ephemeral and euphoric state that occurs as a consequence of the horse responding to the movements of the equestrian and the equestrian knowing beforehand each move of the horse. Rather than emerging in an organic fashion, as a sudden expression of chemistry, however, the tuning of bodies responding to each other presuppose the apparatus through which the rider makes use of ritualistic schemes

implied by the riding lesson, and various bodily and mental techniques for communication (Brandt, 2006; Holmberg, 2019; Redmalm, 2019).

The joint intimate emotionality produced in these contexts—such as dance euphoria or trust during a sharing session—are not necessarily tied to an attentive focus on the other. On the contrary, it involves the other through a joint attention towards the ritualized practices. As Julian Hanich puts it, in his work on collective spectatorship (watching movies together): “Joint attention refers to the fact that you, I and others present have a common understanding of ‘what we are doing’ and that we are not focusing on the same thing by accident” (Hanich, 2014, p. 346). Intimacy engages the other, while attention may lay elsewhere. In our research, this shows in the way personal relationships are downplayed in statements of what makes for an enjoyable dance, a successful riding lesson or a fruitful self-help group meeting. The way a dance evening is set up makes dancers focus on tango *through* individual partners, that is, through the script of dance steps and the lead-and-follow dynamic in the connection. In this sense, dancing is not necessarily about focusing on the other, in a strictly intersubjective way, but rather involves a focus on the shared ritual and rhythm. Dance partners are desired and attended to, not despite the ritualized order of dancing, but *through* the ritual and the way it orients attention, at times away from partners. While being a chest-to-chest based interaction, feelings of intimacy are therefore often projected away from individual dancers and oriented towards tango as a situation, involving all dancers on the floor, as well as bystanders (see Törnqvist and Holmberg, 2021), along with the dim-lit club atmosphere as such, with its spread of sweat and perfume. This also explains why tango dancers sometimes tell that the emotional entanglement with individual dancers “hinder the tango experience”. Dancers also contend that they enjoy the anonymous encounter in which dance partners remain strangers, implying that even basic information, such as surname, age, hometown or profession remain unknown. The tango apparatus thus interpellates dancers in a way that fosters closeness while, at times, disrupting the couple as a social unit. A similar dynamic can be observed in riding schools, where riders are discouraged from favouring specific horses, as the goal is the lesson—to learn how to ride in general, rather than to ride a specific horse. Likewise, self-help meetings are also dependent on a joint attention directed beyond the intimacy between individual participants, towards the therapeutic process itself.

All three cases comprise moments of passage between instances of informal interaction and the formal ritual, thereby demarcating the apparatus in time and space. As members of the self-help group go from the informal chatting in the lobby to the meeting proper, pupils groom the horses in the stable while catching up with the other equestrians before entering lessons, and tango dancers move from the informal areas of the dance clubs to the dance floor, the cases all illustrate how the onset of the formal ritual closely corresponds to an increased and densified intimacy. It is, for instance, in the highly formalized procedure of self-help meetings, rather than in the more relaxed interaction before and after meetings, which the most intimate moments of Alcoholics Anonymous occur. With the support of the formal structure of the twelve-step program, the participants dare to open up about their alcoholism, sharing their life-stories, shame and resentment. In other words, formalization enables a transgression of borders. Likewise, it is the ritualized order that makes it safe—both physically and emotionally—for dancers in large anonymous tango venues to fall into the arms of a stranger. While this is, for

many, the most intimate moment of a dance evening, it is often more impersonal than chatting with friends in the bar framing the dance floor. Similarly, as one equestrian at the riding school pointed out, the passage works as a way of pausing a life typically lived “inside the head”, forcing her to put thoughts on work or family away as they would otherwise inhibit the riding. The formalized structure of the riding lesson thereby provides a framework for intimate experiences to unfold, as it enables riders to enter a state where they “stop thinking” and, ideally, become one with the horse through the ritual flow of synchronized rhythm and bodily movement. In these instances, it is clear that intimacy is not produced despite the impersonal, semi-anonymous and exchangeable set-up, but rather is an aspect of it.

This shift, from informal socialization to the ritualized acting inside the apparatus, addresses a shift in the construction of the other. The tango, the AA scene and the riding school depend on ritualized scripts that invite participants to semi-anonymous encounters with a stream of dance partners, fellow alcoholics or horses. Ideally, in tango, the ritual is directing the emotional dance energy not to be bound up with one partner, but shared among several. This is secured, partly, by a ritualized shift of partners every third song. It is also common practice in riding schools to allow pupils to ride the same horse for only a few lessons in a row, the main argument being that, to become a good rider, one needs to learn to manage different horses with varying experience and temperament. One additional effect of this rotation is that riders, just like dancers and participants in self-help groups, do not become intimately attached to a specific horse. Our cases thus illustrate contexts in which intimacy hinge on a relation to an *exchangeable* other.

Typically, not only dancers but also equestrians and participants in self-help groups emphasize the situational dimension. For instance, horseback riders often speak in general terms about their “love for horses.” This can be contrasted with how people refer to romantic partners—not as a “crush on heterosexual couple-hood” or a love for a certain gender, but as individualized feelings for a unique person. In this way, the situational apparatus not only promotes intimacy through actions and emotions orchestrated by ritualized scripts and rhythm, but the apparatus itself also becomes an object for intimate projection. Thereby, the ritualized shift of horses or dance partners, or the sharing among fellow alcoholics, appears to direct focus on the ongoing activity as such, thereby establishing an arena for a highly exchangeable or “liquid” intimacy (Bauman, 2003). Because intimacy in these settings relies on standardized scripts of action, it is consequently resilient to the flux of participants. Newcomers join and old members leave, while the same procedures are repeated time and time again. In fact, the constant flux of dancers, equestrians, and AA members coming and going is a vital part of the apparatus, contributing to its stabilization rather than challenging it. The flux itself urges for structure and predictability. The fact that these contexts are constructed not to depend on individuals or individual relations makes them potential states of “exchange(st) ability” (see Törnqvist, 2021, 2023).

Impersonal Intimacy and the Self

The intimacy established in our cases is difficult to describe as belonging to some subject or self. In fact, our informants partly search the situational in order to let go also of the self. This is how ideal moments of dancing, riding or sharing are sometimes described.

Along the lines of Jessica Mjöberg's suggestion that intimacy moves "the borders of . . . selves . . . to the borders of the joint unit" (Mjöberg, 2009, p. 16; 2011), intimacy interrupts individual borders and identity, transforming them into broader units. It is in queer studies that the consequences of such transformation of boundaries have been most radically debated. Tim Dean, for instance, in his study of practices and communities of barebacking, *Unlimited Intimacy*, discusses the way in which anonymous unprotected sex with strangers establishes a situation where intimacy hinges on the giving up of personal limits to the other. Indeed, the defining trait of intimacy for Dean becomes the opening towards the other as implied in the act of allowing oneself to be intimately exposed to and vulnerable before another being (Dean, 2009). Somewhat similarly, participants in the self-help group are bound to undergo a radical exposure, knowing that they may not leave the meeting as the same persons who entered. In a similar vein, equestrians attempt to "think like a horse" while simultaneously surrendering some of their control to a creature much bigger and stronger than themselves.

The intimacy produced in our cases could thus be addressed as a force that disrupts individuality and identity. In AA practice, personal boundaries to some extent have to be broken down in order for a realization of group sharing to take place. To insist on privacy and personal boundaries inhibits the practice of sharing. In line with Mjöberg, this is not a relationality that opposes the subject to the world, but one which makes the subject "correspond with itself outside of itself" (Bersani, 2009, p. 656). More often in our case studies, however, intimacy operates in more conservative ways and in support of social order, which is why participants typically react negatively to breaches against the impersonal intimate situation. When social dancers make invitations outside the established script of the dance, or when members of a self-help group share overly detailed, potentially triggering accounts—such as those of inebriation—the situation can be disrupted. Trespassing the ritual by bringing in the personal in a too intimate way disturbs the jointness and causes tension.

Impersonal intimacy rituals may seem to come with a promise of liberation: the subject transcends the normative boundaries that define it and reaches towards an existence beyond atomic individualism. However, our cases indicate that the central role of anonymity and exchangeability does not simply direct focus away from the individual. In fact, the contrary is often true as anonymity and exchangeability strengthen the focus on the self. As in Michal Pagis' study of silent interaction rituals in meditation retreats where "meditation participants need others in order to forget about others" (Pagis, 2015, p. 54), the alignment of action and orientation in dancing, riding or sharing paradoxically allows participants to escape interaction and refocus on the self. Rather than strengthening group identity at the expense of the self (or individual difference), the intimate dance embrace, the sharing in self-help groups, and the centaurian rider-horse fusion establish a self-centred emotional now-modus. Returning to Durkheim, we may then ask whether the rituals in our studies challenge or confirm individualist tendencies in society.

One answer is that the dancers, equestrians and self-help group members not necessarily build intimate relationships; rather, they are intimately engaging with a ritualized situation. This implies a rediscovering of self in different ways—of knowing the own body through dancing and riding and of coming to understand oneself as a fuller person with strengths and vulnerabilities in the self-help group.

This is not to argue that intimacy is solely an expression of a narcissistic society (see Lasch, 1979). Rather, these cases display the intimate characteristics of identity as such. The often asymmetric intimacy apparatuses allow us to leave behind, at least momentarily, a stable sense of self, to become partly desubjectified. Just as in what Mjöberg refers to as the oceanic quality of intimacy, our cases are organized around principles of exchangeability and flux that hold the promise of releasing the participants from themselves. Our cases are thus reminders of the fact that there is a “desubjectification in every subjectification” as Agamben suggests (Agamben, 1999, p. 123; see further; Mills, 2005, p. 203). This implies rediscovering that the self is bound up with other unknown or partly unknown selves, not in an oceanic state beyond the ego, as the infantile longing for the motherly symbiosis (as described by Sigmund Freud), but in terms of an in-between knowing and unknowing, and in movements between subjectification, desubjectification and resubjectification. Impersonal intimacy allows for a radical exposure of the self, a momentary moving of the boundaries of the self, while maintaining a relationship to itself through this transformation. In this way, the self is paradoxically preserved through energizing moments of egolessness.

Intimate Asymmetry

If intimacy knits individuals together through the ritual, it simultaneously also turns individuals away from each other. Intimacy flows along the lines of a social geography that carves out a space through boundary making that include/exclude, empower/disempower, refer/defer and energize/discharge (Ahmed, 2006). In such a social geography, behaviour and desire are either “on line” or “off line”. A body which appears “off line” is typically experienced as being out of joint with the apparatus, its specific rhythm or emotional tonality. Such a body repeatedly gets stuck, does not smoothly move along with others, and is also incapable of getting intimate with others within the given framework. The bored and mischievous horse, the misplaced foot on the dance floor, and cross-talk during sharing in self-help groups, are all examples of disruption, or even cancelling, of intimate energy and flow.

In this sense, the cases display intimacy organized around what Sarah Ahmed has termed “shared normative lines” (Ahmed, 2006). As Ahmed argues, such processes take place through the positioning of participants in relation to other actors and objects, and in space, more generally. Individuals are constantly positioned in the spatial contexts in which intimacy occurs. They enact the produced closeness from different points in space, and as such they gain access to objects and subjects involved in the situation in different ways, making some things reachable and other less so. In all our cases, subjects move through settings that align them with other bodies and objects; dance partners, gazes, voices, horses, meeting room chairs, tears, riding crops, music etc. In this sense, intimacy is realized through orientation and reach. Whether it is a hand reaching for another hand against the backdrop of a Serenity Prayer reciting in a twelve-step meeting, a hand reaching for a dance partner, or, yet again, a hand giving a horse an appreciative pat on the neck, intimacy hinges on a bodily orientation that may or may not be received, and that organizes intimacy through asymmetries. Such asymmetries are not simply obstacles to the realization of intimacy, but rather part of its production.

Intimacy apparatuses, tango dancing, horse riding and self-help groups are not free from processes of hierarchization and distribution of power. Our cases thereby entail elements that sit uneasy with normative notions of what intimacy is and should be. This can be illustrated by the riding school in which the human/animal binary circumscribes the human and equine participants and make interspecies constellations of intimacy both possible and impossible. Horses are central to the orientation process, producing intimacy, not just as tools, but as other beings with whom equestrians establish a sense of mutual understanding. However, the joint ritual performed at the riding school also teaches the equestrians how to master the animal. The interconnection that equestrians establish between their bodies and the body of the horse does not just happen, but depends on and is inseparable from the asymmetric connection they make with the horses they ride, through a guidance of domination practices and emotions. Interconnection is partly the result of a complex physical interplay mediated by “objects and technologies”—different kinds of equipments like saddles, bridles, spurs and crops (Game, 2001; Thompson, 2011, p. 236).

One particularly interesting tool in this regard is the crop. Several of the participants in the study expressed unease about hitting horses, something they felt forced the horse into something it did not want. However, the pupils in the riding schools were taught to whip the horse “when necessary”, according to the idea that it is crucial to show the horse who is in charge. In a way, the use of a crop here interrupts the notion of riding as an experience shared by rider and horse. By punishing unwanted behaviour in order to reach a joint flow, pupils orient themselves towards the horse as *something* that can be manipulated. This displays a fundamentally asymmetrical relation in which one part consumes the other’s labour. And yet, the aim of using the whip is to establish a joint intimate flow. In contrast, when a horse bites a rider, or throws them off during riding, it is not considered to be a correction on behalf of the horse aimed at changing the rider’s behaviour, but a disturbance in the interaction caused by the horse. That way, the case displays the double-edged work of asymmetries and disruption. While generating feelings of flow and closeness, the riding situation entails relations of domination that, in effect, work both as obstacles and facilitators for intimacy.

The asymmetry between the rider as master and the subordinated horse is structurally similar to the relation between old-timers and newcomers in the self-help group. Representing the institution of AA, the old-timer repeatedly wields a symbolic version of the crop against the newcomer in order to maintain the particular flow and rhythm of the meeting. This might be in the form of interrupting cross-talk and of keeping time during free sharing, or, through slogans intended to discipline newcomers in a humorous manner. For instance, the slogan “Take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth” functions as a way of silencing newcomers and urging them to listen to other members.

In tango, finally, asymmetry is mostly experienced in terms of rejection and abandonment. At stake is the embodied and emotional effects of a ritual that synchronizes bodies at the prize of simultaneously shaping an outside, thus excluding other bodies. What appears is, at many times, an intimacy apparatus that systematically relates dancers in ways that direct some bodies towards each other, while some move away from others; that situates some bodies centrally, while others are referred to the peripheries; and in which some are facing each other, while others

turn away; some feel relaxed, while others are in tension. While problematic, this framework of exclusion and scarce dance resources (particularly on the side of women/followers) also produces intimacy. Rejecting dance partners that are perceived as disturbing the ritual, thereby refining the dancing, is a way of augmenting the intimate energy.

These examples illustrate a conceptualization of intimacy not as opposed to power asymmetries, but rather as emerging through non-neutral and often exclusionary processes. This aligns with Judith Butler's (1999) critical remark regarding Foucault's rallying call in *The Will to Knowledge* (Foucault, 1978) for a revolutionized physical intimacy beyond reductionist categorizations of contemporary power/knowledge structures. According to Butler (1999, p. 18), this vision implies a kind of "exuberant utopianism" that overlooks how "heterosexual identifications are implicated as well in homosexual desire"—and vice versa. That is, ignoring that intimacies are never free from existing relations of power and regimes of knowledge prevents an analysis that takes into account how, for instance, norms of sexual difference—or species difference—are co-productive in situations of intimacy.

While appearing as uncorrupted in idealized images, intimacy apparatuses are far from innocent. The examples indicate that intimacy never occurs in pure symmetric or egalitarian order (although such goals may inform the apparatuses). Difference points us beyond idealizing accounts. Still, this is not to argue that power and exclusion are the ultimate truth of intimacy. Even if intimacy is never free from asymmetries and differences, we should, following Lévinas (2002), also acknowledge that something always escapes in our encounter with the other. Even when having the upper hand in a situation of intimacy there is an asymmetry of information that impedes us from fully knowing the other, thereby making it impossible for us to fully reduce the other to a mere extension of ourselves. In this perspective, although we use our categorizations and normative power/knowledge regimes, along Foucault (1977, 1978) insights, to approach and understand the other, there is something infinite and impossible that can never be fully grasped. That is in itself an intimate quality, a moment where the self is allowed to, again, with Bersani, "correspond with itself outside of itself" through the flux of impersonal intimacy.

Concluding Discussion

In this article, we challenge the close association of intimacy with personal relationships by discussing three cases of impersonal intimacy from a situational approach: tango dancing, AA meetings and riding schools. In the first analytical section, we showed how these contexts work as socially organized apparatuses that order and synchronize bodies in time and space, creating a ritualized intimacy through shared moments of closeness and belonging. Thus, formal organization, material conditions and bodily proximity precede, and are therefore a prerequisite for, experiences of emotionality between participants—the repetitive, ritualistic character of the situations makes it safe to come close, physically and emotionally. In this sense, the impersonal dimensions of intimacy are discussed as part of a more broadly reaching relationality addressed in queer approaches to intimacy. As Tim Dean argues in relation to intimacy in barebacking, we claim that these are social contexts whose solidarity and intimacy rely on impersonality rather than egocentric pleasure. Thus, the situational approach discussed in this

article echoes Bersani and Phillips's (2010) notion of desire as a potentiality of embodying something radically different from, and indifferent to, personal interest and particularity.

This takes us to the argument of our second analytical section, where we focused on how participants partly sought out these situations as a momentary escape from the self. Ideally, dancers are lost in the moment of dancing, equestrians stop thinking and become one with the horse, and even in the self-help group, members willingly give up personal boundaries to experience a group flow. While dance, riding and self-help undeniably offer opportunities to forge out different forms of personal identity and pleasure, they also confront the subject with situations that interrupt such identities and pleasures. What might have started with a hope of self-improvement or self-fulfilment, may potentially evoke encounters with something that denies the clearly demarked structure of the self. However, this striving away from the self rarely results in an antagonist relation between self and the other or between the self and the world. More often, we observed how the surrender of personal boundaries ultimately led to a return to the self, a rediscovery of the self now carrying traces of intimate interaction. As Bersani and Phillips (2010) argue in relation to queer relationality, the subject comes to correspond with itself outside of itself. Impersonal intimacy presents us both with an impulse to transcend the personal in order to become part of something outside itself and a possibility to interrupt the antagonistic relation between self and other and establish a more profound sense of at-homeness in the world. Ultimately, it thus challenges the very separation between, on the one hand, the individual and the private and personal domains, and, on the other hand, collective practice and social order. Instead, impersonal intimacy pushes the subject towards otherness, not as a source of alienation and threat, but as one of the alignment with the world.

Yet, this idea that impersonal intimacy indicates a more profound at-homeness in the world is somewhat idealizing. In line with this suspicion, the third and last analytical section of the article showed how the studied cases also indicate patterns of asymmetric structure in all three of them: equestrians controlling horses, old-timers correcting newcomers at AA meetings, and desirable dance partners preserving the tango apparatus by rejecting aspiring partners. In fact, asymmetry often gives thrust to impersonal intimacy rituals, creating at the same time productive frictions as well as relations of use and abuse, ordering bodies "on line" and "off line". As Forstie (2017) points out, studies of intimacy in modernity are usually situated in a societal context of affective coldness, where 'strong' intimacies are typically idealized and opposed to the instrumental and rationalized life world. As stated in the introduction, we share Forstie's concern about overly stressing contemporary society as inherently antagonistic to authentic forms of intimacy. What our cases seem to suggest, however, is that impersonal intimacies, just as personal intimacies, are difficult to disentangle from structures of power. Indeed, intimacy can be a crucial ingredient also of quite cold and violent social processes. This, we claim, points towards a quality of intimacy as a relationality neither good or bad, nor radical or conservative.

Our focus on rituals, the self and asymmetry offer a contrast to a widespread understanding of intimate personal relationships as founded in ideals of equality, mutuality and simultaneousness. Instead of confirming such a matrix, we wish to point towards tensions inherent in intimacy. While striving to get close to others, we are bound to

remain at a distance and to instal individuality in order for sociality and relationships to emerge. Also, with regard to time, intimacy defies a linear formula of mutuality. Sometimes we come to understand what we have experienced only afterwards, when the light is turned on in the dancehall, when unsaddling the horse, or during the moments after a self-help group meeting when the sharing of vulnerabilities is exchanged for small talk in the cloakroom on the way out. These ruptures characterize intimacy, not only in the empirical cases discussed in this article but, more broadly, in the paradoxical possibility of being a single individual separable from a collective, and at the same time being made up by that collective. The situational approach proposed in this article shows the fundamentally ambiguous character of intimate social relationships, beyond distinctions such as closeness and distance, weak and strong, warm and cold.

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