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Objects of Desire: Toward an Ethics of Sameness

[Amber Jamilla Musser \(bio\)](#)

Abstract

Through an examination of objectum sexuality, an orientation in which people sexually orient themselves toward objects, this essay reflects on what constitutes sexuality, the nature of intimacy, and the agency of objects. Using the discourse of similarity, I suggest that we read objectum sexuality as a mode of understanding subjectivity under neoliberalism. I also suggest, however, that we read it as a phenomena that could open into an alternate set of ethics. More specifically, I argue that objectum sexuality allows us to think critically about the displacement of the subject, the animacy of objects, and understandings of attachment.

At the beginning of her segment on *National Geographic's* "Forbidden Love," Erika introduces herself by saying, "I'm a person who's in love, very much in love. I just happen to be in love with an object."¹ The audience is prepared for her declaration, having already spent several minutes with Edward, a man who is in love with his car, Vanilla; but hearing her words juxtaposed against an image of her standing alone caressing the Berlin Wall still has an impact. These words alter our image of the Berlin Wall and open an array of possible ways to relate to it. What might have begun as a familiar exploration of its parameters gives way to a love story. And, despite Erika's proclamation, this is not an ordinary love story. However, the ways in which it is extraordinary require several layers of unpacking. First, we must confront the obvious—typical love stories involve human protagonists. Even if we are willing to accept the fact that this woman loves the Berlin Wall, questions about the agency of objects and, more fundamentally, the legibility of agency in general, remain. Here, I am more interested in taking this narrative at face value and asking why this story is framed around love. Erika's claim that the love that she shares with the Berlin Wall is not only the *same* as the love that could exist between two humans, but also reciprocal, queers our understandings of romantic love and relationality.

On the surface, these reimagined possibilities occur because Erika self-identifies as an objectum sexual, a newly emergent sexual orientation. Following the time honored tradition of sexological self-categorization, objectum sexuality emerged in 1979, but has only recently begun to gain traction as a new sexological category.² Eija-Ritta Berliner-Mauer, a Swedish woman married to the Berlin Wall, used the term as a way to explain her love for the Wall and described it as "an orientation to love objects."³ In 1996, Eija-Ritter began a multi-lingual website to chronicle her relationships with objects; a few years later she began an internet group for others to do the same.⁴ By 2008, Erika started *OS Internationale*, a website devoted to educating others about objectum sexuality. In addition to building a robust community, the website garnered much publicity for objectum sexuality and made objectum sexuals the object of much public scrutiny in newspaper articles, blog postings, and various documentaries. In public appearances and self-published manifestos, objectum sexuals argue that their love is the same as love between humans (though most objectum sexuals say that they have never been in love with another human). This push for the public recognition of objectum sexuality has been spearheaded by Erika and is largely mired in a discourse on rights and normalization. Objectum sexuals are embedding their desires within a narrative of sameness in order to claim the status of good citizens.

However, there is something more radical at stake in objectum sexuality. While recognizing objectum sexuality as a category of sexual orientation does provide us with the opportunity to think about intimacy as it has been refigured by neoliberalism, I argue that we view Erika's relationship to objects as a mode of desubjectification, more precisely, as a mode of becoming-object. This notion of becoming-object exploits the discourse of sameness, but inverts it. Instead of asking how are objects like subjects, the question becomes how are subjects like objects. This shift opens a window into what desubjectification can mean for questions of relationality and ethics in queer theory.

Object Relations

In order to explore the queer potential offered by objectum sexuals, I am going to examine the ways in which objectum sexuality is embedded within a discourse on love. Catering to this normative frame requires objectum sexuals to describe their manner of relating to objects as similar to conventional narratives in that the objects and relationships are seen as singular. In tandem with the scripting of objectum sexuals' desires as normal and natural, the specialness of the object—its animated and individual qualities—allows us to assimilate objectum sexuals into neoliberal citizenship.

The OS community's insistence on a discourse of sameness illuminates the difference between objectum sexuality and other modes of relating to objects. Their objects are not used as mediators or tools.⁵ We know this because the object's functionality is

not part of the objectum sexualis' matrix of desire. While Erika describes herself as being in love with the Berlin Wall, she is not enthralled with its ability to separate pieces of territory, nor does she imagine the Wall performing any sort of task for her. Likewise, though she relates to the Wall using various representational modes, Erika is not invested in using it to communicate with other humans in a new way.⁶

It is also important to recognize that the Wall does not necessarily represent anything other than what it is to Erika, thereby removing it from the realm of fetishism.⁷ Fetishism is difficult to apply to objectum sexuals for several reasons. First, it leaves us unable to account for the particularity of their object choices. Though Erika argues that she is drawn to walls as a category, she is not in love with all of them. Second, this specificity renders collection undesirable. Although many objectum sexuals are in relationships with several objects simultaneously, the logic of collection does not seem to apply. This is partially because of the particularity of each object and relationship and partially because these tend to be large objects, which would make collection practically difficult. Finally, Freud's insistence on embedding fetishism within a narrative of trauma is rejected by the objectum sexual community largely because of their reluctance to be classified as suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, which is one of the frequent diagnoses given to objectum sexuals.⁸

In seeking to keep the object of desire intact, objectum sexuals preserve the object's otherness and reinforce particular normative narratives about love. This juxtaposition offers a portrait of queer love that prizes both difference (in terms of object) and assimilation (in terms of aim). In their narrativizations of sexual preference, objectum sexuals do not see objects as substitutes for the unattainable (or the phallic). A. L., who is in love with a building, takes issue with Freudian interpretations of objectum sexuality, A. L. writes, "their inner Freudian makes the claim that I must love a building because it's a large phallus! What? This implies I cannot have physical gratification without the presence of a penis and therefore I cannot love without human company. Absurd! First, I am [an] objectum sexual and I have no physical attraction for the male, nor his bits. Second, my physical attraction for my lover is not defined by human sexuality and therefore I see zero relevance to an object appearing phallic. I love this building with all my heart foremost and there should be no need to justify our love in the confines of humans-sexuality [sic]."⁹ This formulation of objectum sexuality makes apparent the stakes of the label as a novel form of organizing one's relationships with others. For objectum sexuals, the object "and nothing else— is the desired sexual partner, and all sexual fantasies and emotions are focused on it."¹⁰ By seeking recognition for objectum sexuality as an orientation, A.L. is invested in challenging contemporary concepts of gender and sexuality by arguing for the validity of her sexual preference. This insistence on novelty is striking; if objectum sexuality is not a permutation of established forms of object relations, what exactly is it?

In our attempt to parse A.L.'s statement that her "physical attraction for [her] lover is not defined by human sexuality," we are led in some ways to the crux of the matter, namely the way in which objectum sexuals *do* interact with their objects.¹¹ How do they choose these objects and what do they do with them?

When Erika came into contact with the Eiffel Tower for the first time in January 2004, it was a cold, blustery day. She set eyes on the Tower and "a special feeling came over her; one she can only describe as intense love, a chemical attraction. That feeling of finding The One."¹² Her first love was a bridge near a childhood home and she says, "I can't deny that when I see a very attractive Wall, Bridge, or Fence that I don't get aroused...it's quite natural."¹³ Erika comes across her objects in several ways. Some, a few provincial bridges and fences, for example, she happens upon. Others, like the Eiffel Tower and Berlin Wall, she describes as being drawn to after seeing images of them via photographs, television, or film. Eija-Ritter draws on a similar narrative of mediated love and says that she fell in love with the Berlin Wall after first seeing it on television when she was seven.¹⁴ Eija-Ritter characterizes her attraction in terms of design elements: "I find long, slim things with horizontal lines very sexy... The Great Wall of China's attractive, but he's too thick—my husband is sexier."¹⁵ Sexologist Amy Marsh's research on objectum sexuals breaks down the objects into several different categories: transport (automobiles, trains, aircraft, etc.), large structures such as bridges, buildings, towers, etc., machines and other electronic devices, and a variety of small private objects.¹⁶ The range of objects and reasons for attraction are both large. Here is a sampling of answers from Marsh's survey:

"His looks and personality."

"I love how it looks like, how it smells and how it moves."

"first, METAL! Nothing else feels sooo good to the skin! Then, their shape, proportions."

"Structurally speaking, my objects are resilient and unmoving. They tend to infuse a particular linear and angular geometry amidst planed surfaces. My objects utilize the properties of physics for their existing purpose. However, this is simply a base attraction. I have a strong emotional attraction to my objects because of a spiritual kinship that must be present in order for the relationship to reach fruition."

"shape plus function."

"his face."

"function, appearance, personality."¹⁷

Though these objects differ in type and size, they are loved. There are, however, some striking commonalities among them which allow us to interrogate love's simultaneous queering and normalizing function among objectum sexuals.

In addition to the fact that all of the objects are man-made, one of the first things that we notice about objectum sexuals is that

they tend to ascribe names and genders to the objects.¹⁸ On the one hand, this correlates to an underlying belief in animism, but on the other, it speaks to the difficulty of describing sexuality without gender. Erika insists that the objects of her affection are always gendered. Though, "[she] can't lift up a leg and check...there is a general persona that I sense about my objects and they do have a distinct gender."¹⁹ Of the Eiffel Tower, "the grand madame of Paris," Erika says, "I didn't determine her gender, she did;" the Eiffel Tower is female, while Lance, her former lover, is male.²⁰ It is important for Erika to think of Lance as a male, not just because it completes a heterosexual narrative (Erika is, after all, married to the female Eiffel Tower), but because gender places Lance in the category of the subject.²¹ Erika argues that gender is important because "[she will not] use the word 'it' for an object I love as that denotes inanimate."²² The fact that animation implies gender speaks to the way in which gender has thoroughly infused our sense of subjectivity. While Susan Stryker and Judith Butler have discussed the necessity of intelligible gender for human survivability, its application to objects is not usually considered because we do not tend to see objects as alive.²³

In their quest for objectum sexuality to be recognized as a sexual orientation, objectum sexuals rely on a particular narrative of love and desire. Objects, they argue, are both like and unlike humans. They are like humans in that they possess genders, souls, and agency and unlike humans in that these things are not presented in a human body. Objectum sexuals seek to minimize this difference, which I argue is central to objectum sexuals' desire for the objects, in order to focus on the discourse of sameness. By arguing that their love is the same as the love that humans have for other humans, they force us to alter our view of objects in order to imagine how an object could be just like a human. While this discourse is productive in its own way, it is a narrative that is predicated on producing objectum sexuals as neoliberal citizens. This desire for citizenship hinges on a desire for recognition; objectum sexuals are making themselves visible as subjects with a particular sexual orientation because they want recognition as subjects who desire objects.

This drive for recognition through sexual orientation is one of the central tenets of neoliberal citizenship. Brenda Cossman argues that "the new modality of sexual citizenship is one that is privatized, domesticated, and self-disciplined."²⁴ In this vision of citizenship, one strives for inclusion because it signifies social acceptance though the terms of this are structured according to the logic of privatization and self-discipline that characterizes neoliberalism. While a previous generation of those deemed sexually deviant were content to gain recognition by asking psychologists to acknowledge their desires as pathological, objectum sexuals want recognition as normal members of society.²⁵ This means portraying their behavior as natural, controllable, and without societal cost.

Indeed, we see this neoliberal ethos at work in the way in which objectum sexuals are portrayed in *National Geographic's* documentary. "Forbidden love" is an episode in the *Taboo* series, which is dedicated to showcasing unconventional lifestyles. Alongside portraits of Erika and Edward, the episode features a married sex surrogate, and an intergenerational couple. This arrangement in and of itself normalizes objectum sexuality by presenting it as one of several unconventional sexual pairings. The episode further naturalizes objectum sexuality by asking Edward and Erika to narrate childhood attachments to objects and scripts this into a coming out arc by also asking them to discuss how and when they made their desires public to their friends and family. Alongside this, we also hear from a range of experts—a sexologist, a biological anthropologist, a bioethicist, and a psychoanalyst—who offer various hypotheses as to the emergence of objectum sexuality. It is variously described as a combination of chemistry and situation or a matter of neurological difference or the result of synesthesia. The explanations that are rooted in biology are accepted while the psychoanalyst's description of objectum sexuality as a response to trauma is regarded as suspect. This framing of objectum sexuality as a product of biological processes shifts the question of self-discipline away from object choice to manner of expression.²⁶ Here, Edward and Erika provide compelling cases for their devotion to their objects of choice by speaking of their love in rapturous terms. To this end, we see Edward caressing Vanilla and showering her hood with kisses while he says that Vanilla "fulfills him beyond physical gratification." Erika's narrative is framed as one of love that surpasses the challenges of having to love in public. We see Erika drift off to sleep cuddling a model of the Wall and then giddy with excitement that she has been given permission to spend her first night alone with the wall inside one of its towers. Physical connection is mostly absented and its portrayal in an earlier documentary, "Married to the Eiffel Tower" earned a strong condemnation by the group for being sensationalistic. These are narratives of love, but a very particular kind of domestic, private, and faithful love. In this way, their love is seen as harmless, natural, and normal.

Queering Love, Sex, and Capitalism

This discourse of normalization, however, produces myriad difficulties. First, there is the issue of how to discuss these narratives of love. In tandem with the belief in animism, these discussions on love acquire a spiritual element because they center on the soul. When Erika discusses her love of the Eiffel Tower, she says that she is attracted to her soul. This glimpse of the object's soul occurs in tandem with the baring of Erika's soul and is central to the narratives of love and specialness that lie at the heart of objectum sexuality. Erika believes that an object's soul reveals itself "when you are truly, truly interested in an object and you're willing to bare your soul, then you see theirs."²⁷ Other objectum sexuals echo Erika's insistence on a soul. Rudi writes, "The soul is always hard to see, even harder in an object ... that does not talk. We see and feel the soul in an object because when you love something with your soul, its soul makes connection to ours and so we feel it. Normals do not contact things that way—so they can't feel it. You will always receive what you give. The stronger you give, the more you receive."²⁸ According to objectum sexuals, this possession of a soul animates the objects and allows for intimate relationships with them.

Given the language of spirituality, we might turn toward a religious discourse to make sense of this love between humans and objects. Teresa de Ávila's discussions of ecstatic spiritual union with God are oddly resonant with the words of the objectum sexuals. Rudi's statements that some cannot feel the object's soul and Erika's insistence on the sensuous nature of her spiritual union evoke Ávila's understanding of the spiritual love that she encounters with God: "the Beloved clearly shows He dwells in the soul and calls by so unmistakable a sign and a summons so penetrating, that the spirit cannot choose but hear it."²⁹ Ávila describes love as a merger of souls rather than the product of an agency. Juxtaposing objectum sexuals with Ávila works both to underscore the disruption to the phallic order of things that objectum sexuality enacts and allows us to potentially consider objectum sexuality as either a modern mode of celibacy in which erotic life does not reduce to a corporeal interaction or an updated version of "pure love." "Pure love," as represented by Ávila, is described by Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips as nonsexual and all-consuming. Above all, "pure love" has several constant features: "a subject's passionate, fixed attention (an attention demanding or nondemanding, sexual or nonsexual) to an object (personal, collective, divine) distinct from himself" and "the idea of union with the loved object... two different beings may be thought of as merging in the happy fulfillment of personal love."³⁰ In Bersani and Phillips' interpretation, pure love involves union with the love object. Applying this logic to objectum sexuals, we can understand their love as a process of union where object and subject become one. In their discussion of objectum sexuality, Dominic Pettman and Justin Clemens focus on the transformational aspect that love provides to both objects and subjects.³¹

This union of subject and object also has a physical dimension. Given their chosen name, a lot of emphasis has been placed on the sexual dimensions of these relationships. Further, the difficulty of assimilating objectum sexuality into normative models of human sexuality has allowed scholars such as Jennifer Terry to theorize them as potential sites of resistance to sexual norms.³² Admittedly, as A.L. points out above, it is not easy to map objectum sexuality onto normative notions of human sexuality.

Yet, sex does occur. Erika describes the sexual encounters between herself and her various object lovers as the same as sex between humans because it includes, "orgasm, foreplay, afterplay, and all of that."³³ In the FAQ section of the objectum sexuality website, which provides an online resource for objectum sexuals and those interested in their community, Erika elaborates on her position,

Yes, of course, we enjoy physical relations with our partners. Easy? Not exactly, but the connection happens even if the pieces do not fit. We each have our own means of physical union ... or mental union ... it could be a simple caress to much more. Beauty is in the eye ... just as sexual pleasure is ... For me, I indeed feel a very spiritual connection with my lover when we make union with each other.³⁴

A.L. argues that we need to understand sex with objects in a non-genital way:

Well, it is not possible to have sex with a building, they demand. OK, that may be the case if you are going off the prolific definition between humans but why does sex have to be the defining factor whether love is right or wrong for an individual? There are people incapable of having sex or chose not to for a variety of reasons. Is this to say that they can never know love? And there are those like me with a different characterization of sex.³⁵

B.C., a sound engineer in love with several sound boards, echoes these statements and provides his own definition of sex:

... just because we state that we have 'sex' with an object does not mean that the way that we have sex is anything like the way that humans have sex. For instance, an OS woman does not necessarily have to be penetrated to be having sex; a lot of OS sex is based on emotional intimacy ... for me personally, it is a psychic connection, an energy transfer in addition to kissing, cuddling, and other such 'above the waist' displays of affection that defines what I mean when I say that my partners and I have sex.³⁶

Sex, then, takes a variety of forms, but it is most frequently described in spiritual and emotional terms.

In "Forbidden Love," Edward says, "When I hold her in my arms, I can feel an energy coming from her. Not a noise, but definitely an energy, a vibration that enters my body that I can call a form of communication, the energy feel."³⁷ "Married to the Eiffel Tower," the documentary that objectum sexuals malign, bears witness to these moments of connection. After consummating her marriage to the Eiffel Tower, Erika describes their interaction as an exchange of heat. She says, "the heat of my body is flowing into her cold steel and her cold steel is flowing into my body and we are reaching equilibrium." The interviewer asks if she is bothered by the cold and she replies, "it is quite pleasant that she's so cold because you can feel that exchange of energy and that's quite spiritual."³⁸

Amy, who is also featured in "Married to the Eiffel Tower," is in love with a carnival ride. She talks about her sexual encounters with 1001 Nacht as occupying a similar pattern of exchange and spirituality, "when I make love to him at home, when I start climaxing just as I'm going over the edge, I start telling him, I want your fluids, I want your fluids..."³⁹ Though Amy describes sex with 1001 Nacht in physical terms, it is important to note that this encounter takes place in her house. Since 1001 Nacht resides in an amusement park far enough away that she only visits him a few times a year, this means that the lovers are often not in physical proximity. Amy summons him technologically—she plays his theme music and watches a video of him on her computer. In this version of mediated sex, a virtual 1001 Nacht performs for Amy.

Though the film has been denounced by objectum sexuals because of its sensationalism, these portrayals of sexual intimacy still have a great deal to offer. Namely, I argue that they queer sexuality by appealing to a discourse of the senses. Rather than speak of genitals, Amy and Erica describe an exchange of vibrations and feeling. In some ways this discourse inverts the previous discussion of souls and personality; here, sex is reduced to its most basic activity of exchange and sensation. It is about bodies

and energy rather than personality and individuals. Though this emphasis on sensation does not adhere to neoliberal aspirations of privacy and individuality, it allows us to see ways in which physical intimacy can be described as a process of becoming in mechanical terms.

This discourse of exchange also makes clear the way in which objectum sexuality queers capitalism. As I noted above, all of the objects are man-made. In one vein, it is tempting to read objectum sexuality as the culmination of commodity fetishism. After all, what could be more emblematic of capitalism than this ecstatic desire for objects. While the objects are valued, their origin in the world of labor is erased. The obfuscation of the human element of these objects—their designers, manufacturers, etc. are conspicuously absented from these narratives of love—echoes Marx's notion of commodity fetishism just as the conspicuous "disappearance" of these objects' history further marks objectum sexuality as symptomatic of late Capitalism.⁴⁰ However, to do this would be to miss the objectum sexuals' insistence on the agency and particularity of their objects. In granting these objects agency, objectum sexuals do not aspire to consume or collect the objects, preferring instead to exist *with* them thereby eschewing a consumerist ethos in favor of one of non-possession. Further, their insistence on particularity runs counter to capitalism's dependence on exchange and exchange value.

Further, we can see the appeal of the actual object by looking at the relationships that objectum sexuals have with representations of the objects of their affection. Since there is often physical distance between the lovers, Erika does not live in Paris and Eija-Ritta does not live in Berlin, objectum sexuals are able to simulate encounters with their lovers through various technologies. Computers provide one possibility, but model building offers another. Eija-Ritta has gained acclaim for her models and has taught Erika how to create her own version of her lovers. In "Married to the Eiffel Tower," Erika explains this as a way of producing a more proximate version of her lovers, "I can't exactly go to sleep at night and curl up next to the Eiffel Tower or the Golden Gate Bridge or the Berlin Wall so I have to suffice with handcrafting models."⁴¹

Thinking with the models helps us to understand more about objectum sexuals and their objects. On the one hand, it would appear that the models offer objectum sexuals the means to truly possess the objects of their affection. However, this production of replicas, which can be possessed and caressed, emphasizes the struggles many of them face in their relationships with objects, namely lack of control and privacy. It is difficult to love a building and engage with it intimately. Loving a public structure means that their moments of connection are always monitored and subject to external rules. D. from Berlin writes, "My lover is huge and in a public place, so this is in the first line our problem. We can't go out, we can't be private."⁴² In "Married to the Eiffel Tower," we see evidence of this when Amy is escorted away from the Empire State building after attempting to caress it. These examples underscore the importance that has been placed on privacy in sexual encounters. It also illustrates one of the particular hazards of having a relationship with an object. One lacks the ability to fully control the object; D. elaborates on this lack of agency on her part, "I can't control anything, and me and my darling; we have so little to share. I have to accept people polluting and damaging him all the time and I cannot even defend him." If the real object cannot be controlled, the model offers a chance for things to be different.

On the other hand, the presence of the models also illustrates the specificity of the object. Though the models can provide comfort for objectum sexuals, they are not substitutes for the objects themselves. Erika might curl up with a model of the Berlin Wall and she may have a tattoo of the Eiffel Tower on her chest, but, as evidenced by her many visits to Paris, she is looking for connection with the actual object.

Despite the discourse of acceptability and citizenship, these spaces where the emphasis on the object's particularity threatens to undo the work of normalization by working against capitalism and traditional narratives of love allow us to glimpse the queer potential of objectum sexuality. Through a desire to normalize their practices and identities, discourses of love, sex, and capitalism are queered, not just for objectum sexuals, but for all.

Becoming-Object and Objectum Sexuality in Queer Theory

Thus far, I have argued that there is a tension between objectum sexuals' desire for assimilation into a normative structure and the ways in which this discourse of naturalness and love reveals the queer potential of objectum sexuality. But what does this queerness mean?

In many ways objectum sexuality provides us with a new way to examine debates in queer theory regarding the infamous anti-social turn. This shift toward anti-sociality emerged from the work of Leo Bersani, who explored gay male sexuality as a form of self-shattering, and Lee Edelman, who coined the term *sinthomosexual* to describe the relationship between the death drive and queerness.⁴³ This equation of non-futurity and self-annihilation with sexuality gave new ways to understand the ways in which queerness functions as a site of resistance to societal norms which are founded on a heteronormative, reproductive logic. Given this quick gloss, it is easy to see the ways in which objectum sexuality's turn away from humans can be read as anti-social. Indeed, this is the thread that lies beneath Bersani and Phillips' discussion of pure love.

Things shift, however, if we read this as a turn *toward* objects rather than a turn away from humans. What does it mean to embrace the otherness of an object? Specifically, what does it mean for humans to imagine themselves as objects? What mode of un-becoming a subject does objectum sexuality offer? Here, I suggest that we read objectum sexuality as a mode of becoming-object as a way to dislodge anti-relationality from negative affect. While productive arguments have been made regarding the

embrace of shame and pain within queer theory, objectum sexuality gives us a way to articulate this shift as an embrace of positive affect through an ethos of becoming and sameness.

Before we arrive at the point of becoming-object, we need to talk about the object's difference. While objectum sexuals remain committed to animism and the object's similarity to humans, their desire for this other is, in fact, predicated on difference. What is this difference between humans and objects, how is it described, and why is it so appealing? Given objectum sexuals' reluctance to figure their desire as different, they are reticent on the matter. While some will point to design elements or souls as central to an object's appeal, there is also the pull towards objectness that lies beneath the surface.

In describing her love for the Berlin Wall in "Married to the Eiffel Tower," Erika caresses the wall and says, "I wish I were an object just like you. I wish I were a part of you."⁴⁴ Her identification with the Wall does not end there; however, she describes the similarities between herself and the Wall in biographical terms. Erika says, "I feel like the Berlin Wall was built, made, and then rejected by people and I feel that way about my own life. I was born into the world and not loved."⁴⁵ In "Forbidden Love," Erika echoes these sentiments saying, "There's a resilience about the Wall that I'm very much drawn to. The fact that he's been to hell and back and survived is kind of a parallel to my own life in that I feel that I'm a survivor also."⁴⁶ Drawing on her personal history of abuse and neglect she says that she does not understand how people can bring something into the world and not love it. Ultimately, "this rugged old wall has taught me a few things... to stand up. Who cares what people think about you, stand up ... I am the Berlin Wall. Hate me, try to break me apart, try to take me down but I will still be here standing."⁴⁷ In a statement on the objectum sexuality website, Erika reiterates this identification: "I relate to the Berliner Mauer as a kindred spirit of abuse and survival thereof. In many ways ... I am the Berlin Wall."⁴⁸ Erika's strong identification with the Berlin Wall (and desire for union with it) needs to be taken seriously as an essential component of objectum sexuality. If we use Erika as an exemplary objectum sexual, and, indeed, she is the most visible face of the public campaign for rights, this identification with objects is an alliance with the inorganic. Erika is attracted to the Berlin Wall as a symbol of resistance because it endured; it was abandoned and still remains.⁴⁹ While the reasons for Erika's attraction to these qualities can be gleaned from the bits of biography that she provides, what is noteworthy about the object's appeal is its fixity, which Erika scripts as resistance and strength. This object remains rooted in place despite changing political tides and weather. What Erika reads as its strength is its relative permanence and stability.

We can say that Erika desires the Berlin Wall because she wishes to possess its characteristic stability, permanence, and strength, but what does it mean for Erika to want to be the Wall. Identification is complex. On the one hand, identification allows Erika to consolidate her own identity around that of the Wall. On the other hand, identification also works to annihilate Erika's subjectivity. In *Identification Papers*, Diana Fuss argues that identification is a process that "keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an *illusion* of identity as immediate, secure, and totalizable."⁵⁰ Though Erika's identification with the Berlin Wall allows her to stabilize her sense of subjectivity by setting her apart from the wall (the wall is strong and endures), the desire produced by this identification works to threaten the coherence of her subjectivity. While Fuss queries how identification can be thought without "annihilating the other as *other*," Erika's identification with this object, the Wall, illuminates the ways in which this identification leads to the annihilation of the self.⁵¹ While aspects of this self-annihilation are facilitated by the ways that identification works to incorporate the other, Erika's particular identification with an object can be read as a desire to obliterate the subject/object binary. Against Erika's desire for recognition as a subject, her desire to be an object can be read as a desire for self-annihilation or un-becoming a subject.

Here, it is useful to consider Erika's becoming-object as an assemblage comprised of relations between Erika and the Berlin Wall, the Wall's socio-historical place, and Erika's understanding of objecthood, among other things. Understanding Erika's desire to be an object as the product of overlapping discourses and particular material conditions allows us to move beyond considering Erika's psychological motivations, which necessarily remain opaque, and pushes us to consider the effects of Erika's becoming-object. Most immediately the Erika-Wall assemblage dissolves the difference between Erika and the Wall, they become parts of something larger than themselves and in that way, inhabit a structure of sameness. Against the idea of a stable subject, Deleuze articulates a theory of becoming, so that the coherence of the subject is abandoned in favor of the assemblage. Deleuze's theory of assemblage works to dismantle the difference between subject and object.⁵²

Considering Erika and the Berlin Wall as a particular assemblage allows us to think more critically about relationality and sexuality. Transgressing the subject/object binary leads us to new ways to rethink these terms. Most pressingly, it leads us to consider the ethics of similarity. If the goal of these unions is to obliterate difference as we currently understand it, what are the ethical stakes of that encounter? While Deleuze is not particularly interested in ethics, he is invested in becoming as a space that produces freedom from the strictures of subjectivity. Erika and objectum sexuality provide us with a new opportunity to bring relationality into a conversation about self-annihilation in explicit terms.

In elaborating on the possibilities of relationality and self-annihilation, I turn away from Deleuze and toward psychoanalysis because I would like to probe the internal dimensions of this turn toward objects. With regard to the anti-social thesis, objectum sexuality allows us to understand the annihilation of the subject as a perverse mode of narcissism. While Freud used the term to "denote the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated—who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it til he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities,"⁵³ objectum sexuals' mode of relating to objects through identification and seduction seems to reverse this process by putting the object at the

center of the relationship and relegating the individual to the sidelines.

When objectum sexuals discuss their relationships, we can see both versions of narcissism at work. Joachim A's statement that he "can reveal [himself] to an object partner ... in a way that [he] would never reveal [himself] to any other person" emphasizes Joachim's actions even as he seeks to underline the specialness of not only their bond, but the steam locomotive.⁵⁴ Without further elaboration it is difficult to understand the work that is going on in this moment of revelation. Is Joachim relishing the space afforded to him by the locomotive's lack of verbal communication, a space that human partners with their own needs and desires ignore? Is he imagining communication in another mode, a mode of hums and vibrations? Does he imagine that his partner has agency or is this simply a question of overwhelming love without the need for reciprocity? Erika's narrative of reciprocity is also focused on the self while expressing a desire to foreground the object. In an interview with *Good Morning America*, she says, "I will tell you that I know love is being reciprocated because it's what this relationship grows inside of me. What these relationships have done for me. The person that these relationships have helped me become."⁵⁵

My description of objectum sexuality as a form of narcissism is not a negative characterization of the phenomenon. Rather, I am following Bersani and Phillips and arguing that objectum sexuals allow us to conceive of love as impersonal narcissism.⁵⁶ Impersonal narcissism is a form of relationality that is built upon the shattering of the ego; "the self the subject sees reflected in the other is not the unique personality vital to modern notions of individualism."⁵⁷ Rather than overcoming the narcissism of the subject, which Phillips argues unleashes the violence of the individual, impersonal narcissism uses the shattered ego to valorize sameness. Self-annihilation allows the subject to focus on what he or she has in common with the Other rather than how they are different; individuality is less important than commonalities. Bersani writes that "the experience of belonging to a family of singularity without national, ethnic, racial, or gendered borders might make us sensitive to the ontological status of difference itself as what I called the nonthreatening supplement of sameness in *Homos*."⁵⁸ If we attach to sameness, we are free to lose ourselves in the Other because we do not see our individuality at stake. Bersani and Phillips argue that relating to others according to this model opens alternate models of relationality and other possibilities of ethics.

If we adhere to this logic, we can see objectum sexuals as opening possibilities for subjectivity, relationality, and ethics. In doing so, objectum sexuals literalize Bersani and Phillips' statement: "Every theory of love is, necessarily, a theory of object relations. Love is transitive; to conceptualize it is to address not only the question of how we choose objects to love, but also, more fundamentally, the very possibility of a subject loving an object."⁵⁹ This embrace of objects, of alterity, threatens to obliterate the subject/object divide and with that reframes anti-relationality as desirable and provides a way to imagine what an ethics of sameness might look like. This valorization of sameness also opens a productive conversation between theorists who advocate anti-relationality, those who work on new materialisms and those who focus on affect.⁶⁰ The resonances between the dissolution of the self, an investment in animacy (and its attendant politics of non-hierarchy), and affective attachments provide the ground for this new ethics and illuminate objectum sexuality's potentiality in a spectrum of life beyond the neoliberal.

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Notes

1. "Taboo: Forbidden Love" *National Geographic*. 2011. Available online at <<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org/>> Last accessed June 1, 2012.
2. Here I am referring to the way in which masochism was given its name by a patient who wrote into Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing. For more on the history of masochism and its nomenclature see Amber Jamilla Musser, "Reading, Writing, and the Whip," *Literature and Medicine*, 27(2), 204-222.
3. "What is OS?" Objectum-Sexuality Internationale—Homepage for Objectum Sexuals <<<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org/>>> Accessed March 10, 2009.
4. For a history of the objectum sexual movement, please see "The Red Fence," <<[objectum-sexuality.org](http://www.objectum-sexuality.org/)>>, Last Accessed December 2, 2011.
5. Many of the ways that we have become accustomed to thinking about objects embeds them within human networks as either mediators or tools. For example, we understand objects such as dildos and other sex toys as facilitating human sexual intercourse by allowing humans to have sex with each other or with themselves in a diverse array of permutations. Though one might grow attached to a specific object, what is at stake is not the object's particularity, but rather its utility. The object, in these cases, is a tool.

Alternatively, we might follow Luciana Parisi's analysis of sexuality to consider the way that objects function as mediators between humans. Though she also describes objects as tools that enable humans to have sex with each other in numerous different ways, Parisi focuses on these objects' role in "mediated sex." In considering interactions such as telephone conversations, instant messaging, and texting, Parisi transforms objects such as computers, telephones, webcams, and answering machines into sexual objects because of their increasingly critical roles in contemporary sexuality. Parisi writes: "In the age of cybernetics, sex is no longer a private act practiced between the walls of the bedroom. In particular, human sex no longer seems to involve the set of social and cultural code that used to characterize sexual identity and reproductive coupling." Her comments speak to the

way in which interactions with objects (machines in her examples) have restructured identity, sexual relations and objects of desire by making mediation and mediated representation the central mode of relationality. Luciana Parisi, "Introduction: Abstract Sex," *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-Technology and the Mutations of Desire* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 1.

6. Here I am bracketing the question of the communities that objectum sexuals form among themselves. There is further work to be done on the forms of relationality that these internet communities produce. These relationships are explicitly not sexual so I am not discussing them here, but they are symptomatic of new forms of relationality enabled by technology and late Capitalism.
7. Above all, Sigmund Freud understood the fetish to be metonymical. In his articulation of fetishism, objects were stand-ins for a phallus. He later refined this definition to argue that fetishism was the result of a boy's horror at realizing that his mother did not possess a penis. Unable to deal with his mother's "castration," the boy imagined an object to be his mother's missing phallus. According to Freud, the fetishized object is a "substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and—for reasons familiar to us—does not want to give up." Fetishism, then, functioned according to a logic of substitution; fetishists were men whose sexual desire for women was somehow diverted to objects. Their relationships to these objects was at once particular in that only certain objects were sexually inviting, but also generalizable since fetishists frequently collected their objects of desire so that number and type were both important aspects of their sexual interest. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* trans. and ed. James Strachey. (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
8. Objectum sexuals are frequently classified as having posttraumatic stress disorder because of the frequent absence of sexual relationships with other humans. This is read as a symptom of detachment and attributed to PTSD or an autism spectrum disorder.
9. A.L. "Expressions," Objectum-Sexuality Internationale—Homepage for Objectum Sexuals <<<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org>>> Accessed March 10, 2009.
10. Frank Thadeusz, "Objectophilia, Fetishism and Neo-Sexuality: Falling in Love with Things" *Spiegel Online*, May 11, 2007, <<<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/objectophilia-fetishism-and-neo-sexuality-falling-in-love-with-things-a-482192.html>>>. Last Accessed April 18, 2013.
11. A.L. "Expressions"
12. Sarah Boesveld, "Love Objects," *The Globe and Mail*, August 20, 2009. Available at <<<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/family-and-relationships/love-objects/article1259075/>>>, Last Accessed February 21, 2010.
13. Erika Eiffel, "FAQ," Objectum-Sexuality Internationale—Homepage for Objectum Sexuals <<<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org>>> Accessed March 10, 2009.
14. Rob Leigh, "Swedish Woman claims to be 'married to Berlin wall,'" *The Mirror*. 27 May 2008 <<<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-world/2008/05/27/swedish-woman-claims-to-be-married-to-berlin-wall-115875-20431772/>>>
15. Ibid.
16. Amy Marsh "Love Among the Objectum Sexuals" *Electronic Journal of the History of Sexuality*, volume 13, Accessed March 1, 2010. <<<http://www.ejhs.org/volume13/ObjSexuals.htm>>>
17. Ibid.
18. In her survey Marsh identifies some objectum sexuals who do not insist on gender as a central facet of their object lovers.
19. Erika Eiffel, "FAQ"
20. *Strangelove: Married to the Eiffel Tower*
21. In Erika's case, her commitment to the Eiffel Tower was formalized by marriage. She describes her decision to marry the Eiffel Tower as "my personal dedication to the Eiffel Tower and merely a manifestation of my love for and commitment to Bridges, not marriage by any conventions." By choosing to publicly announce her love and commitment with a ceremony she seeks societal recognition of her intimate relationship with, not only the Eiffel Tower, but bridges and objects in general. The discourse of marriage occupies an interesting space in the objectum sexuality community and with Erika in particular because she has multiple lovers. Erika Eiffel, "FAQ"
22. Erika Eiffel, "FAQ"
23. Susan Stryker "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix -- Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1(3): 227-254; Judith Butler, "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality," *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 57-74.
24. Brenda Cossman, *Sexual Citizens: The Legal and Cultural Regulation of Belonging* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 3.
25. See Amber Jamilla Musser, "Reading, Writing and the Whip" for more on this relationship between recognition and psychiatry.
26. Here it is instructive to note commonalities with discussion of biology or choice that have happened with regard to homosexuality. For a thorough analysis of these, see Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*, (New York: New York University Press, 2004).
27. *Strange Love: Married to the Eiffel Tower*
28. Rudi in German "The Thing with the Soul" Objectum-Sexuality Internationale—Homepage for Objectum Sexuals <<<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org>>> Accessed February 21, 2010.
29. Teresa de Avila, *The Interior Castle: Or, The Mansions*, originally published 1577. Republished in 2007 by Forgotten Books, <<forgottenbooks.org>>, 98.
30. Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 75.
31. Dominic Pettman and Justin Clemens, "Relations with Concrete Others: (or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Berlin Wall)," *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2004 (21): 137-145.

32. Jennifer Terry, *Loving Objects. Trans-Humanities*. Ewha Women's University, Seoul, Korea. In press. (2010).
33. *Strangelove: Married to the Eiffel Tower*.
34. Erika Eiffel, "FAQ"
35. A.L. "Expressions"
36. B.C. "Expressions," Objectum-Sexuality Internationale—Homepage for Objectum Sexuels <<<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org/>>> Accessed February 21, 2010.
37. "Forbidden Love,"
38. *Strangelove: Married to the Eiffel Tower*
39. *Strangelove: Married to the Eiffel Tower*.
40. For more on the fragmentation of the subject and the waning of affect in late Capitalism see Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).
41. *Strangelove: Married to the Eiffel Tower*.
42. D. "Expressions," Objectum-Sexuality Internationale—Homepage for Objectum Sexuels <<<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org/>>> Accessed February 21, 2010.
43. Leo Bersani, *Homos*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
44. *Strangelove: Married to the Eiffel Tower*
45. *Strangelove: Married to the Eiffel Tower*
46. "Forbidden Love,"
47. *Strangelove: Married to the Eiffel Tower*
48. Erika, "Expressions"
49. In their analysis, Pettman and Clemens attend to the political economy of the Berlin Wall and the role that that might play in the appeal that Eija-Ritter has for the Wall. Some of these theories might apply to Erika.
50. Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York; London: Routledge, 1995). 2.
51. *Ibid.*, 4.
52. For more on Deleuze and assemblages see Gilles Deleuze, "Desire and Pleasure," translated by Daniel W. Smith in *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, edited by Arnold Davidson, (Chicago, London; University of Chicago Press, 1997), 183-192.
53. Freud, "On Narcissism," trans James Strachey *The Complete Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 67-102, 72.
54. D., "Expressions."
55. Erika Eiffel interview with *Good Morning America*. Original Airdate, April 8, 2009. Accessed February 21, 2010. <<<http://www.objectum-sexuality.org/>>>
56. Bersani and Phillips.
57. Bersani and Phillips, 85.
58. Bersani and Phillips, 86.
59. Bersani and Phillips, 72.
60. I am thinking here of work by Mel Y Chen on Animacy, Lauren Berlant's work on Cruel Optimism, and Sarah Ahmed's work on happiness. Mel Y Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

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