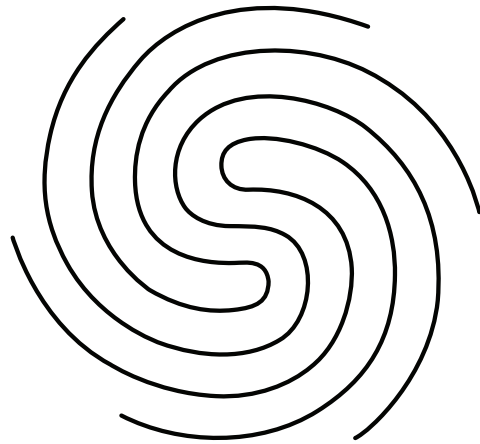




Psychiana is a journal of arts and letters that seeks to expand the discourse on value and its role in the contemporary psyche. Each quarterly issue uses a different lens to investigate gifts, goods, object fetishism, and the aesthetics of morality. Taking its name from an early 20th century mail-order religion, *Psychiana* publishes original writing and visual work, and includes unique objects commissioned specially for each issue.



PSYCHIANA

Spring 2012

ROMANCE



Simone Morris. *White Walls*
Eric Carlson *New Regular Shapes*
Rebecca Alexander *The Merger*



Piper Wheeler. *Glory!*
Not My Fault He Wants a Girl
Megan Berk. *Someone Else's Eden*
Gabriel Burkett. *The Odyssey*
Ulysses Pascal. *Adult Interventions*

ART
INSERTS

Kricket Lane. *Self-Help Aesthetics, Rule No. 1:*
Achromatic Underwear
Trading cards, double sided, ink-jet printed 2 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. Edition of 500
Nicole Lavelle. *You Are Like Tea That's Too Hot*
ink-jet print 11 x 17 in. Edition of 150
Tin Nguyen. *When I Touched You On the Arm*
ink-jet print on wallpaper. Edition of 150
Ross Young. *LIB*
Letterpress on linen stock. 5" x 5". Edition of 150

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Letter From the Editor

NO PIC NO REPLY:
The Value of Seduction and Despair in the Internet Age

The love story, (the “episode,” the “adventure”) is the tribute the lover must pay to the world in order to be reconciled with it.

A Lover’s Discourse, Roland Barthes, 1977.

P*sychiana* gets its name from an early twentieth century mail-order religion created by small town pharmacist Frank Robinson of Moscow, Idaho. Likened to modern day self-help books, *Psychiana* endeavored to teach its readers how to be happy, healthy, and good in an ever-changing consumer-based society. Although it remains questionable whether *Psychiana* had any real effect on a disillusioned and depressed nation, it sustains as one of the more successful models for modern pop psychology. Robinson directly engaged his pupils in a discourse on value by trading in the not-yet-commodified concepts of happiness, health, and abundance. It is the task of *Psychiana* to investigate the present day manifestations of satisfaction-as-commodity

in the hopes of developing an understanding of value and worth in our contemporary psyche.

The topic of romance has emerged from a personal investigation into the forces guiding my own romantic drive. Ever since I can remember, I have always actively pursued romance: for validation, confidence, company, or any other host of selfish reasons. It wasn't until much later, of course, that I realized all of those affirmations need to come from within before I can even think about attracting someone. Regardless, I have always ascribed a certain amount of value to attracting, and later keeping a boyfriend. It seems kind of simplistic to make these associations between romance and value, but I have always preferred the simplest narratives.

My own narrative begins with memories of agony filled adolescent days, writhing on friends' beds, wailing that *I just needed a boyfriend*, a late issue Green Day album pulsing through the stereo speakers. I was thirteen.

Why did I ascribe so much value to tricking some pimply pre-teen into being my boyfriend? It seems evident now, but during puberty the signifiers that defined my understanding of "relationships" could not have been more culturally defined. I wanted to replicate that warm, sickly feeling that occurs at the moment you make a perfect purchase – you know that feeling, it permeates up from the guts and wraps around your shoulders like, "Don't worry, it will all be OK." That's what it feels like to have a boyfriend, right?

Despite those early years of pre-teen anguish, my desperation later landed me a succession of willing partners on whom I could try out the many different relationship personas I learned through exhaustive sessions with The WB. Sometimes I was

the devoted Rory Gilmore, sometimes the naggy Summer Roberts, sometimes the oversexed Jen Lindley and sometimes the coy and evasive Joey Potter. Through this television tutelage, I was able to learn what worked and what didn't, and I spent my entire high school career perfecting the method; brushing past scores of adoring boys, several of whom caught my attention by instant messaging me dick pics¹. Each unsolicited IM wrapped up in a little bow, the perfect gift.

I hate to think that I peaked in high school, because there are obviously so many outside factors: the boys were inexperienced, their egos still lay in broken shards where their mothers had left them not so many years prior; my body was nubile, young, virginal, the unknown; we were all doing this for the first time, so whatever happened was OK. But everything changed when I went to college. Suddenly, the men were in charge; my genetics (read: my gender, my sexuality) were no longer enough to keep someone interested.

I spent most of my time in college battling the decidedly antifeminist caricatures I learned from The WB, which obviously alienated me from the Oedipal liberal arts students whom I pursued. Of the many excuses boys used to break up with me during that time, my favorite remains, "You're just too intense." Of course I'm intense: I'm a hyper-aware, deeply sensitive, *hysterical woman* who is realizing for the first time (at nineteen) that it's not okay to use my sexuality to manipulate men into loving me. And also, it just didn't really work anymore. No one likes to be objectified, and although I had spent

¹ The most memorable instance of this was the time my close friend's boyfriend black-and-white webcam masturbated for my fifteen-year-old viewing pleasure, which broke up their relationship and inaugurated ours. He went on to become the recipient of my first blowjob and later, my virginity.

years meditating on my own objectification, it never occurred to me that I was actually an active participant in this game.

Using models of object fetishism to define my relationship with relationships is not anomalous, but it is problematic. The eroticism of acquisition seems to translate so seamlessly to the satisfaction of having a romantic partner, of securing a mate. The comfort felt when swathed in a new pair of hot jeans isn't dissimilar to the comfort of being swaddled by a super hot partner.

I moved to New York about a year and a half ago in the wake of a serious relationship and entirely at a loss. It had taken many years, but I finally learned to define my own worth outside of my interactions with men (it comes from within), and I had been, for the most part, successful.² I thought I had become a self-actualized woman, where my stock was not linked to my sex appeal. That's when I discovered OkCupid.

Online, we are whittled down to our most basic selves: choosing our words carefully, we become eternally Laid Back yet Hard Working; we like the city, but also enjoy spending time in nature; we listen to rock music mostly, but enjoy hip-hop from time to time (never country). The social signifiers that attract real-life partners lose their nuance online, there's little room for self-awareness, and the glimmer in someone's eye can't really be transmitted through a screen.

So, like all good Fourth Wave feminists, I approached online dating by being utterly outlandish. My profile was just the right amount of coy sprinkled into an audacious, idiosyncratic eruption of

² I managed to get a boyfriend who loved and respected me, but more importantly, I excelled in both work and school and general Positive Mental Attitude.

truth (much like this essay).³ Although I had spent the many years prior trying to negotiate the game in my favor,⁴ I felt like I was back at square one, for the second time. Strangely, though, because online dating exists in a virtual reality where the six senses are whittled into just one, earnest truth is appealing. If you don't know anything about someone, a nugget of truth can become incredible bait. Unfortunately, I soon learned, those truth nuggets are significantly less charming in real life than they are on OkCupid.

I kind of went all out. I dated one, then five, and ten, then twenty, then thirty different people in the last year. I made intimate and not-so-intimate connections with scores of guys, for many of whom the only record remains as first names in my cell phone contact list; numbers without faces or really even memories. As well as distracting me for the better part of 2011, online dating also allowed me to comparison shop: using the same algorithm that enables Amazon.com to know that I want a pair of ankle boots, OkCupid knows what I want in a man, and knows how to keep me interested in the pursuit. By using a similar rating system

³ The singular nugget on my OkCupid profile that garnered the most interest from potential suitors (many of whom bestowed unhelpful tips on how to reduce my acid reflux): The most private thing I'm willing to admit: I have a lot of gastrointestinal issues. *"A girl whose heart always burns."*

⁴ The game, of course, refers to the colloquial term used to describe the method of seduction in which the seducer feigns disinterest in order to attract the other. This also can be described by the maxims, "play[ing] hard to get" and "he's got game." Much has been written on this subject, from feminist theory to self-help psychology, the most famous of which is Neil Strauss' 2005 book *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists*.

to HotOrNot.com and Netflix, the interface allows you to unconsciously define your own parameters; answering vague questions in specific ways tries to account for the loss of nuance, but unfortunately, it soon became clear that you can't really wink through a screen ;-).

I dated a politician, a DJ, an economist, several designers, several musicians, several photographers, a bartender, a comic book artist, a published author, a blogger, an editor, and - wait for it - a minister. Believeably, most of the details of the actual dates were quite banal, if not entirely forgettable. A few stuck around for a couple of weeks, others for a couple of months, and although it was never very remarkable, I learned more about myself during that year being single than I had ever before. All my life, I learned to make myself appealing by not oversharing; I learned to resign myself to playing the game. Recently, I realized that by being an exaggerated version of myself, I was playing my own game. I was testing these prospective suitors by objectifying their gaze; I knew exactly how they would respond to my absurd verity, my enthusiasm and my effusiveness without reservation.

In the end, my experience with online dating is entirely about the resultant stories. As Barthes describes in *A Lover's Discourse*, the love story is the singular episode through which romance can live on; the narrative exists as the penance the lover must pay to the world in order to be reconciled with it. As we grow up in the age of the Internet, our relationships exist through language as much as through sensation. The Internet allows us to develop as storytellers; we are inclined to reveal our histories without reservation, and to overshare online in order to create the romantic narrative, and by extension, the romance.

As my own ego inflated and collapsed in my year of online dating, I realized what I had known all along: that it's kind of OK to play the game. My experience on OkCupid allowed me to discover what I want out of a

relationship, but more importantly, it helped me discover what I want out of myself: It's OK to use social norms to enhance my already attractive qualities. My own compass has always skewed towards the very true, but sometimes the truth can only be interesting after a couple of lies.

Romance has historically been defined as a sodden history, a dramatic tale.⁵ The above narrative is my exercise in Romance: an indulgent personal history investigating the link between burgeoning sexuality and object fetishism. Only secondarily is Romance defined by the amalgam of desire, love, and despair that we employ today. This essay is self-reflexive and truly romantic: through the narratives that emerged from my year of online dating, I was able to define my romantic sensibilities; not through men, but through romance I am able to finally determine my worth. What follows is a declaration of sexual desire and despair, of sodden histories; a meditation on love mired in the aesthetics of morality.

⁵The complete Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of romance:
ro-mance noun \rō-'man(t)s

1. a (1) : a medieval tale based on legend, chivalric love and adventure, or the supernatural (2) : a prose narrative treating imaginary characters involved in events remote in time or place and usually heroic, adventurous, or mysterious (3) : a love story especially in the form of a novel
b : a class of such literature
2. : something (as an extravagant story or account) that lacks basis in fact
3. : an emotional attraction or aura belonging to an especially heroic era, adventure, or activity
4. : a love affair



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