Mattie Jones

Excerpt from “Love in 2020”

Project Description:

“Love in 2020” is a reflection on the landscape of love in a contemporary world. In this piece, I explore the experience of love—how we think about it, search for it, and sustain it—in a heavily mediated environment with rapidly changing values.

When beginning an essay, a writer is faced with the daunting task of selecting one of the infinite possible points of entry. They are burdened with the awareness that some routes will offer more direct passage to the point they are trying to make, but, more often than not, no entrypoint emerges as obviously preferable. This choice will not only influence the essay’s organization, it will perform much of the work setting the tone. Staring at a blank page, often the endless possibilities are blinding, even overwhelming to the point of immobility.

The overwhelming possibility inspired by a blank page is not unlike the emotional experience of dating in 2020. To understand the novelty of the contemporary love landscape, we must take a brief detour to a world yet unblessed by the Ed Hardy and low-riding denim of the early 2000s.

 The year was 1998. Bill Clinton's infidelity was making international headlines, and Larry Page and Sergey Brin were on a mission to organize the world’s information from their dorm rooms in Stanford, California. The pair had just officially launched their web-based search engine, a project previously given the unfortunate name “Backrub.” They settled instead on a typo for *googol*— a number denoting one with a hundred zeroes.

It was amidst this last dying breath of the twentieth century that I took my first. I learned to walk and talk during the fading reign of the VHS tape. But the world I first encountered was not destined to last. My young eyes blinked and the world shifted from analog to digital. Technology amplified the potential of computing power while shrinking the physical size of computers until they could be conveniently contained in the square of a pocket. Suddenly, the world was both bigger and smaller at once, the accessible range of communication zooming outward from local to global, while the distance between each person shrank to nearly zero.

 In 1946, fifty-two years before my birth, jaws had dropped at the unveiling of a ten thousand pound calculator, the grandfather of the modern computer. By the time I had started fifth grade in 2008, my overexcited father, a man with a lust for life and all things new, had given me an iPhone, a pocket-sized device that would render countless hardware tools—from landlines to alarm clocks and flashlights, as well as entire industries, such as GPS manufacturing—obsolete. And when things change at lightning speed, people tend to seek stability. Amidst the confusion of progress, I looked towards books for a sense of security. Specifically, it was the narratives of romance that spoke to me. Love was a bastion of faith, a constant theme lending narrative cohesion to a world busy being digitally remastered.

As the countless cliches embedded in our language suggest—love is blind, love is the answer, love will set you free—this salvatory estimation of love is not a unique experience. Love is bound to be a receptacle for our loftiest dreams—the union of lovers in marriage the essential element of a Shakespearean comedy, the lighthearted counterbalance to the gore of tragedy; unrequited love the quintessential lyrical fodder; romantic comedies the box office's favorite genre.

 Despite the privileged status it holds within the human narrative, even love cannot remain steadfast and wholly stable in the face of such a massive paradigm shift. Limitations such as proximity—the bounds of time and space, historically defining who and how we love—are no longer concrete barriers. The Digital Revolution has turned the dating pool into an ocean. For the first time, humans can have real-time, interactive conversations with anyone, anytime, creating conditions of exchange previously unimagined.

Coinciding with the Digital Revolution was a marked cultural shift, away from traditional values and towards a progressive framework. While the culturally prescribed architecture of mating that has defined recorded history—monogamous marriage—has remained mostly intact, it has lost its practical value and moral grounding. Marriage is no longer viewed as a social tool used to broker alliances between families. Women are no longer viewed as an extension of their husbands, virginity a measure of her worth.

At the same time that we have lost so much of our conventional understanding of the world, our range of romantic possibilities has been expanded exponentially. Birth control has allowed sexuality to become a phenomenon distinct from reproduction. We, then, are faced with infinite choices and no real reason to choose.

Love begins with connection. Where do we go when we want to connect in 2020? We go to the same place we go to seek answers to all of life’s eternal questions (*Am I Feeling Lucky?).* We go on the internet.

**Searching for the Needle in the Tinder Stack**

It was late evening on a Thursday in college, and I was sitting on my couch trading Tinder one-night-stand stories with my roommate, Anna. I had tried it out once after perusing the app casually for a few months, the whole time swiping with no intention of committing to meet anyone in person. He was blonde and handsome with circular glasses, and he held up his end of the conversation with ease. I had seen him in person before when he came into the coffee shop where I was a barista, and for some reason this was sufficient evidence that he wouldn’t sprinkle my dismembered remains along the Colorado River, a logical leap which turned out to be accurate. In person, we talked about his girlfriend. They were in an open relationship while she was studying abroad for the year. When I launched into a few passionate rants about free press that would’ve sent many men running, he listened politely without ever checking his phone. I went home with him.

In the morning, I noticed his bare white walls for the first time. He admitted that he only had paper plates and plastic utensils. He made me breakfast, boiled hotdog and a glass of milk. I waved goodbye and walked to my house down the street. Afterwards, he texted me and asked for a link to one of the articles I had mentioned. We sent a few messages back and forth. At the first natural lull in conversation, I stopped responding. Months later, I ran into him at the airport. We exchanged conversation, just as pleasant as it had been during our night together. He seemed interested, and I sensed that was no longer in a relationship. I waved goodbye and boarded my plane. I think of him occasionally, passively. For no particular reason one way or the other, we never spoke again.

When recounting this story to Anna, I tried to pull up the Tinder app for reference. As I spoke, my fingers moved mechanically. When I looked back down at my phone, I realized that, with absent mind, I had opened the Amazon app instead. A Freudian slip of the fingers. Shopping and mate selection had become inexorably linked in my mind because the processes offered me the same emotional landscape: the tedium of browsing, the pragmatic calculus of sizing up my options, and least frequently, the gratification of selection.

On a given Tinder spree, I might see a hundred faces, often not pausing on a profile for more than two seconds. In this way, 1.6 billion swipes are generated per day worldwide. Tinder’s interface is repetitive and gamelike. The user performs the gesture of grabbing each potential match’s photo and flinging it either to the right or the left, the right signifying limbo—the next round where they must choose you back before they can proceed to your inbox, AKA final elimination—the left signifying oblivion. After an extended session, you might feel a twinge of pain from an inflamed tendon in your thumb, another subtle reminder of how far we have outpaced our evolution.