

# States of Love, Sex and Intimacy across Virtual Borders\*

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## **Abstract**

U.S. feminist scholarship during the 1990s, concerned with the changing nature of the nation-state in relation to global processes addressed not solely economic structures, but also transnational frameworks that attended to the encounters that bring people into intimate contact. These cross-border accounts refused to see globalization as a new formation, but rather argued that it continued and exacerbated colonial inequalities, offering new and recycled vistas for understanding sexuality, love and intimacy. The nation-state, however, has not waned, but merely shifted its role to support capital restructuring and profit motives across borders, while monitoring more severely how bodies move across borders.

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U.S. feminist scholarship during the 1990s, concerned with the changing nature of the nation-state in relation to global processes addressed not solely economic structures, but also transnational frameworks that attended to the rapid and dispersed contact zones or encounters that bring people into intimate contact. These cross-border accounts refused to see globalization as a new formation, but rather argued that it continued and exacerbated colonial inequalities, offering new and recycled vistas for understanding sexuality, love, and intimacy. Just as steamships, trains, and the telegraph integrated regions and people across great divides during the late nineteenth century, so today, large migration patterns as well as technologies such as the media and the Internet make irrelevant national borders as people on the move and roving imaginaries bring people into intimate collusion with other bodies and lifestyles around the world. The nation-state, however, has not waned, but merely shifted its role to support capital restructuring and profit motives across borders, while monitoring more severely how bodies move across borders. Sex tourism, online pornography, erotic entertainers, and marriage brokers proliferate, intimately conjoining those who have access to technologies of mobility (Internet, visas, and strong currencies) and those whose very survival relies on the servicing of these desires. Thus, global inequalities today, filtered through relations of production and consumption, continue legacies of colonialism, especially notions of (sexual) difference. These permutations have a range of hopeful and damaging effects including the proliferation of sexual markets, the dispersion of kin structures, and oftentimes precarious labor strategies across vast geographies, setting people in motion in search of new lives and pleasures across the globe.

### **Colonial imaginary**

Globalization is hardly a new phenomenon. With the invention of the steam ship, coupled with sagging economies across Europe, colonists traveled to Asia, Africa, and the Americas in search of new trade routes, wealth, and adventure. Commerce

and sexuality came together in these spheres of exchange, or contact zones, ushering forth violent, even deadly clashes but also novel intimate exchanges and family configurations. The term conquest, or the subjugation of the other, was expressed through the sexual domination of the fertile territory, or the penetration of a woman's body. Thus, these moments of contact brought people, economic trade, and fantasies of the other into new knowledge formations and power blocs.

Contact with the "other" stabilized perceptions of difference, especially Europe's sense of itself as modern when set against the traditional, or primitive and hypersexual other. Colonial fantasies of the "exotic" lands and people they encountered were well documented in travelogues, diaries written by European travelers and friars as well as visual ads that confirmed Europeans' distance from the peripheries of the colonized. These fictitious renditions of the other created what Edward Said (1979) coined, orientalism, or an eroticized imagination in which Euro-Americans invented and projected notions of sexual excess onto the unexplored lands and inscrutable bodies of the people they encountered. The exuding sexuality of the "natives" as a natural fact of cultural and biological difference gained momentum during the late nineteenth century shaping the rise of the discipline of Euro-American anthropology, biology, and the sciences more broadly. The assumption that native peoples and culture were more primitive, or less developed than the colonists, sent scientists to the "New World" in the early nineteenth century in search of artifacts that could be brought back to the colony – plants, bones, and even living bodies of Africans, such as a Khoisan woman, Sara Baartman (popularly known as the Hotentot Venus). Europe's fascination with difference proved lucrative as Sara's naked body was vulgarly displayed and paraded around England and France as proof of the sexual excess of the colonies in contrast to the civilized state of Europe. Blackness and a primitive sexuality became inseparable, resurrecting a colonial fantasy that justified the inhuman treatment of black slaves brought to the Americas as a natural resource to be mined for amassing great profit for the propertied landowners.

In my book, *Love and Empire*, I find that Latin America's association with abundant love and sexual passion also continues to structure gendered opportunities, mobility, and citizenship. Over 200 international marriage broker (IMB) websites, advertising romance and marriage between U.S. men and Latin American women, lure in male viewers with pictures of young women in skimpy swimsuits, bracketed by luscious tropical settings, casting salacious glances at the Internet viewer. Women's bodies have long figured as the seductive force of regional and national trade, enticing investors and travelers from colonial times to current tourism brochures and, more recently, Internet marriage websites.

Cybermarriage industries took root in Mexico and Colombia, as in Russia and Asia, in the mid to late 1990s, during a time of considerable global economic and social transformations. The economic crisis in Mexico and other Latin American countries in the late 1980s, leading to the liberalization of "free trade" with the passage of NAFTA in Mexico in 1994 and increased trade between the United States and Colombia,<sup>1</sup> further entrenched these nations' dependency on foreign loans, businesses, tourism, and trade as the route to solve their economic woes. Furthermore, the opening of Latin America to foreign trade and commerce occurred at the time when the United States passed draconian legislation, erecting walls and entrenching border personnel and surveillance cameras to shut down migrant crossings at the busiest sites of entry into the United States.<sup>2</sup> U.S. cybermarriage industries launched their web encounters in Latin America starting in 1996, when

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<sup>1</sup> The United States–Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement was signed in 2006, although the governments of Colombia and the United States have long negotiated substantial trade relations. In fact, the recent trilateral trade agreement signed by President Obama on October 21, 2011, with Colombia, South Korea, and Panama will continue to devastate lower-level economies in these countries, especially for farmers (which make up about 20% of Colombia's workforce), while increasing social unrest, migration, and even the need to produce lucrative drugs such as cocaine.

<sup>2</sup> I am thinking here of the passage of Operation Gatekeeper passed in California in 1994 at the San Diego–Otay border region.

Internet technologies transformed communication, information sharing, and intimacy across otherwise difficult-to-cross borders. Of course, Internet-based romances are not entirely new. Newspaper ads assisted elite Mexican women in their pursuit of U.S. businessmen and diplomats living in Mexico City since at least the late 1930s and early '40s, when President Roosevelt fostered good feelings, tourism, and business relations between the United States and Latin America through a series of cultural exchanges meant to promote his "Good Neighbor Policy." Even as the Internet now stretches its reach to a more diverse clientele and mediates contact through a variety of interactive menus, Internet marriage brokers (IMBs) continue to market international goodwill across borders through the liberal logic of free trade and equitable exchange, redirecting personal strategies from the state to the marketplace, from the national to the foreign. These tactics of self-governance and participants' expression of themselves as free-market actors warrant a critical inquiry of the neoliberal contours guiding these virtual intimacies.

In particular, the global marketing of women on cybermarriage websites borrows from Latin American tourism and investment campaigns, especially the most recent branding of one country's best resources, titled "Colombia Is Passion." With the goal of uplifting its global image, Colombia exports a respectable middleclass image of the nation's gendered labor force through a video campaign depicting giddy shots of light-skinned married couples, alluring beauty queens, a sharply dressed woman speaking into a company headset, and the passionate swing of pop singer Shakira's hips around the world. The Colombian state's marketing of its citizens' passion to court foreign commerce naturalizes heterosexual romantic exchanges, rendering patriotic the turn to foreign marriage as a viable route to happiness, while also opening up new avenues for women to invest in themselves and their futures. In fact, various women I met at a Vacation Romance Tour in Cali, Colombia, explained their desire to upgrade and beautify their bodies through cosmetic surgery. These images and acts of (passionate) conversion transform the body

and nation into a moral but also productive surface, even as the body becomes a pliable tool for women to remake themselves, a natural resource that with the proper capitalist investment will yield the possibility of foreign marriage, mobility, and/or better opportunities in their everyday lives.

In an attempt to get at the complex entanglements of desire in the Cybermarriage industry, I had to grapple with interworking of intimacy, global capital, and state regulation of borders across the United States, Mexico, and Colombia. This led me to a transnational feminist approach that could attend to colonial legacies that privilege the racial and sexual contours of desire across borders, while also following the collusions and tensions between nation-states and transnational corporations.

My approach was influenced by M. Jacqui Alexander's scholarship, especially her article, "Not Just (Any) Body Can be a Citizen." Alexander (1994) situates her work in transnational perspectives that do not to homogenize the West or non-West; instead she situates contemporary transnational processes within the colonial governance of sexuality. Alexander illuminates the tensions between national identity and transnational processes. The article juxtaposes the ways Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas capitalize on colonial fantasies of exotic and racial sexuality to attract foreign investment at a time when legislation passes designed to protect women from domestic violence by reinforcing heterosexual marriage while criminalizing gay sexuality and intimacy. As she argues, the nationalist state uses sexuality to bring in transnational currency while blaming sexual decadence (non-reproductive gay sexuality and prostitution) for the breakdown of the nation (Alexander, 1994:6). These tensions take her back to colonialism where middle class respectability emerges as a nationalist response to colonial rule and a slave plantation economy, while deviant sexualities are relegated as criminal. Here a transnational lens, one that looks to the colonial emergence of transnationalism, defies heterosexuality as natural by depicting a sexual order mandated by colonial rule, nationalism, and current nation-state economic restructuring reliant on multinational

corporations and tourism. These colonial fantasies, coupled with economic restructuring also contribute to the explosion of sex tourism trades, marriage markets, and global labor migrations based on stereotypes of feminized labor with women's natural attributes of care, affection, and erotic sexuality.

### **Sex tourism**

During the economic decline of the 1980s and 1990s, various developing countries turned to tourism industries for economic uplift, leading to the "opening" of national economies to international lending such as SAP (Structural Adjustment Programs) loans. States could borrow money as long as they abide by strict guidelines including further cuts in social spending and the devaluation of currency to attract foreign businesses. As communist and socialist economies opened up to the "free market," where individual choice is heralded, more of the population discovered Euro-American ways of living, which polarized the wealthy from the poor. This dramatically increased women's "choice" to work in sex trades – sending women from the Former Soviet Union with few options for a living wage to Euro-American countries. In addition, regions with rapid increases in tourists, migrants, and pockets of wealth – such as Dubai, Spain, Japan, Brazil, and Colombia, are also attractive destinations for migrants working in sexual and entertainment industries. While today transnational corporations (TNCs), business workers, and travelers support this lucrative economy, sex tourism economies in Asian countries such as Thailand and Vietnam also accompany the expansion of military bases where brothels and entertainment bars hired droves of women to service the sexual desires of U.S. soldiers.

Given the displacement of traditional trades such as farming and production to factories at the borders of countries such as Mexico, Asia, the Philippines, and India, a broader swath of the population is forced to enter informal sexual economies where people on the fringes of new labor markets capitalize on tourist

circuits and appetites heavily reliant on their imagined association with sexual intimacy. Hardly a natural aspect of a certain groups' proclivities, the economic benefits of sex tourism often outweigh the dangers and risks of this form of labor given sexual industries bring in earnings three to twenty-five times greater than that which is possible in the local labor market. And given the migration of primarily male migrants before the 1980s, women have been left behind to care for their families, contributing to their displacement from rural zones to urban center or across borders to work in sex industries. Yet, this is not solely an industry for women or even confined to heterosexual sex as the Internet has expanded the niche marketing of sexual commerce.

Websites advertise regions friendly to lesbian and gay travelers in search of experiences of sexual freedom, or less inhibited sexual encounters, in addition to a heightened sense of themselves as consumers with more spending power. Euro-American fantasies of sexual freedom may ironically confine some sex workers to performing their sexuality within the confines of Euro- American expectations (Cantú et al., 2009). In addition, anthropologists uncover the local consequences of sexual economies and tensions between Euro-American sexual imaginaries and the material effects of these fantasies. These sexual fantasies reshape geographies and labor migrations, with at times positive outcomes such as generating new urban centers for the public expression of gay sexual cultures (Cantú et al., 2009). In other locations, sex tourism may negatively displace locals by abetting foreign businesses and profit while pushing out local business owners and labor markets (Brennan, 2004). Neither are these industries simply for male tourists as new tourism exchanges have emerged based on the sexual fantasies of Euro- American women in search of more passionate encounters with local black young men in Caribbean zones. These exchanges, labeled Romance Tourism, obscure the sexual nature of exchange through their iteration as romantic interludes that frequently include sex (Pruitt; LaFont, 1995). Payment for sexual exchange may not be confined to monetary exchange as part of the lure of sexual



commerce for many includes romantic interludes such as going to expensive restaurants or the exchange of gifts. That these intimacies transcend the strict exchange of sexual service for money allows tourists to imagine these exchanges as authentic, erasing the economic context that makes these exchanges desirable for locals. Neither tourists nor locals may even identify their acts as part of the sex trade.

There are two theoretical debates forging new insight on sex and love within the global political economy. The first has been to shift the debate on sexual commerce from that of prostitution, which has tended to focus on the moral character of buyers and sellers, to understanding sex as a form of labor. This shift is important given that these forms of labor and exchange may provide a necessary avenue for survival. Debates over the need to shut down prostitution characterize it as a moral threat to the social fabric, especially for tainting private sentiments with marketplace relations of exchange. The exchange of sex for money is conventionally placed in opposition to other more enduring and authentic relations. Thus, relabeling prostitution as sex work attempts to reroute attention from moral debates and back to the political economic context of profit, pleasure, and labor that shapes why sex work becomes necessary, and desirable, in the first place. Some scholars refuse to advocate the abolition of an industry that many rely on and instead argue for the need for better regulation and working conditions (Kempadoo; Doezema, 1998). Rather than focus on immoral behavior, scholars situate the industry as one that resides alongside other capitalist economies.

The second debate addresses the need to re-conceptualize Euro-American philosophical perspectives on love such as the assumption that authentic love and sex must be free from economic exchange to be purely altruistic (Zelizer, 2005). Euro-American beliefs in authentic love and sex have tended to polarize the intimate from the economic in ways that prevent us from seeing how sexual intimacies take shape in relation to circuits of capital and commerce. What makes these forms of capitalist exchange a debate within the context of globalization is the

centrality of difference such that Euro-American men and women turn to sex with subjects in poorer countries due to the (colonial) assumption that they are naturally less materialistic and thus more inspired by sexual passion and love. These imaginaries direct many tourists attention to non-Euro- American locations to satisfy their desire for a more authentic sexual experience where passion and human connection, rather than strict economic exchange, are more abundant. The separation here between natural passion versus relations focused on exchange have lead scholars to foreground the political-economic context, even as more enduring connections can be found even in the most commodified encounter (Bernstein, 2007). Here scholars also complicate whether sexual exchanges between Euro-Americans and those in industrializing countries can be thought of solely as a form of economic exchange divorced from the social-cultural arena of family intimacy or kin relations (Cabezas, 2009).

In fact, some sexual exchanges, however commoditized, may produce deeply intimate and meaningful interactions, some of which strengthen and expand kinship ties to include foreigners who crave more meaningful connections with others. For example, payment for sexual encounters or even romantic encounters may lead to the exchange of monthly stipends of money sent long after the interaction. Some Euro-American men continue sending money to women for family emergencies, a sibling's education, or to help with a family's living expenses, thus expanding the role of the sex tourist as simply consumer, to that of expanded kin. These ethnographic accounts complicate the terrain of sexual exchange from that of a marketplace exchange to one that includes tourists within family and kin arrangements. Eric Lorraine Williams argues that there are "ambiguous entanglements" between Western tourists and Brazilian women in Bahia that make the separation between economic and intimate desires almost impossible to separate. Others find that the exchange of money, goods, and visas with foreigners is part of their strategic approach to the expression of love and sex (Brennan, 2004), while others contend

that the exchange of sex or intimacy for gifts and money may actually heighten feelings of love (Parreñas, 2011).

### **Gendered and Sexualized States of Migration**

Feminist scholars have not simply followed the transnational movements of migrants, across borders, but generated a re-scaling of spheres previously thought of as private and intimate versus economic and transnational. While Ann Stoler (1995) gives us a deep sense of the colonial administrations investments in the intimate sphere of the home as a crucial sphere for the state to regulate race, sex, and labor, for other scholars, domestic labor and the care work of nannies is a global commodity that set in motion feminized labor migrants to countries such as the U.S., Europe, Japan, Spain, Dubai, etc (Parreñas, 2001, 2011). As the editors of *Global Woman* argue, love and care are the new gold of the global economy, profitable natural resources that reminds us of the colonial routes of current migration streams (Hochschild, 2002:26). Not only are there great profits to be made off women's migrant labor, it is not a coincidence that the sending countries (Philippines, Mexico, Central America, former African slaves, etc) are colonies and/or places the U.S. shares a militarized relation to. In addition, there is an implicit intimacy with feminized and racial otherness. The idea that domestic caretakers in a global market have a natural aptitude for love and care coincides with the women in first world countries who contract these migrant laborers while expressing their ability to work outside the home as feminist liberation. Thus, transnational feminist approaches question the unquestioned location of the nation as the boundary to contain ideas about feminist freedom, choice, and modernity. For who must do the labor of maintaining family and home while first world liberate themselves? And what role does the state play in refusing work visas to nannies and domestics, that maintains this labor as illegal, thus suppressing their ability to organize with labor unions and demand fair pay, time off, benefits, etc?

More recently, feminist and queer scholars who study migration and diaspora also push us to think critically about the role of the state in perpetuating Western normative ideologies. By honing in on non-U.S. populations, scholars question the naturalness of heteronormative gender and sexuality, and instead make room for alternative epistemologies to emerge. While there is conflict over whether Eithne Luibhéid's book, *Entry Denied* (2002), can be described as transnational because of its U.S. focus, I find it useful as to interrogation of U.S. state sovereignty as contingent upon determining entry and citizenship only to those who mimic gender, class, race and sexual norms, setting up a system of surveillance at the border to determine good subjects worthy of national inclusion from those who threaten heterosexual family and gender norms (prostitutes, single or pregnant women, Chinese laborers, etc). To put it more simply, gender, race, class and sexual difference are at the heart of state immigration laws and policies that determine eligibility for legal entrance into U.S. territory. One of the most salient chapters, "Looking Like a Lesbian," looks to the "scientific methods" used by immigration personnel to determine whether Quiroz is a lesbian. While her approach focuses on U.S. archival documents, Luibhéid refuses to answer the question of whether this Mexican migrant is or is not a lesbian, and instead interrogates the Western knowledge structures that cannot account for alternative ways of expressing selfhood that exceed sexual categorization. Luibhéid draws from Foucault's genealogical approach in *The History of Sexuality* (1990) to analyze the institutions, visual apparatus, disciplines, and practices that produce sexuality as a "truth," while leaving space for alternative expressions and practices of gender and sexuality to emerge.

Luibhéid's scholarship seminally brought our attention to the violence of inclusion based on normative conformity to the intersection of heteronormative family structures, patriarchy, whiteness, and private sexuality. In Manalansan's book, *Global Divas* (2003), he interrogates Western queer epistemologies through an ethnography of Filipino migrants. By centering his analysis of transnational sexuality through ethnographic fieldwork

with Filipino migrants in the Philippines and the U.S., his approach situates a critical framework from a geopolitical location that shares a colonial relation to the U.S. The book challenges U.S. constructions of modern queer sexuality that rely on the Western convention of the “coming out narrative”. He asks us to attend to the erasures of “otherness” when the queer left articulate a radical politics that demand one speak truth to one’s sexual alterity. For his Bakla interviewees, silence is not the comparative opposite of speech acts, but a transnational, or incommensurate moment between bakla and queer. The dissonance between bakla migrants who must remain silent about their sexuality opens up a discussion of difference as it relates to the power of the state, but also the occlusions of modern sexuality as emerging in the colonial relational context of racial and sexual otherness. For migrants under the gaze of the state, speaking truth to sexual deviance may land them in jail, and/or lead to their deportation back home. For this reason and others, sexuality, according to his subjects, may not be the most important aspect of who they are. He also questions the equation of liberation with leaving home and oppression with staying put. It is the misaligned moments in the book that a transnational approach attends to as the most productive for arresting the unquestioned residence of Western norms.

For those who turn to foreign marriage before or after migrating, the desire for a borderless world and the freedoms associated with unrestricted mobility is a seductive aspect of cross-border marriage. While sexual commerce across borders is heavily monitored, love and sex in the context of marriage promise a moral route to mobility otherwise unavailable to the majority of non-wealthy people in developing countries.

Foreign marriage offers an attractive avenue for those who hope to migrate not simply as temporary laborers, but with the possibility of residing long term in another country, and the ability to travel freely back and forth across borders. In fact, the desire for mobility, visas, and better opportunities are inseparable from the direction of cross-border marriages. For example, gendered

migration patterns that send Filipina entertainers, domestics, and nannies to Italy and Japan, Colombian sex workers and marriage migrants to the United States and Spain, and business men and tourists to Latin America and Asian countries, influence marriage patterns between couples with great disparities in earning capacity, across language barriers, and culture. These differences do not always result in exploitative conditions, however, as they form part of the economy of exchange between women and men. For example, the global appeal of Euro-American men with modern intimacy – equitable exchange, as well as a higher earning capacity and harbingers of the good life, in contrast to men who seek women for their traditional family values and heightened sexual intimacy, make for hybrid family forms that refuse binaries of the traditional or the modern (Schaeffer, 2013).

For those who do not want to migrate as low paid laborers or as undocumented, and for Euro-American men seeking an alternative to career-driven women, Internet marriage websites have exploded; they advertise women from the former Soviet Union, Asian countries, Latin America, and even some African countries who are seeking romance and marriage with foreign men (Constable, 2003; Johnson, 2007; Schaeffer, 2013). The global circulation of images of Euro-American life, migrants returning from various countries with money and commodities, the ease of Internet-based communication, and travel, all facilitate the trajectory of marriages across countries with histories of labor migration, colonization, military bases, and trade.

Scholars have noted the connections between changing political regimes and markets as they affect ideas about love, intimacy, marriage and romance. Less analyzed are how expressions of intimacy, love, sexuality, and family are shaped by structures of governance. In my book, *Love and Empire: Cybermarriage and Citizenship across the Americas*, Latin American women described their search for foreign men on-line as a critical avenue for self-realization, as modern subjects taking control of their lives rather than relying on destiny. Many women were cognizant that the force of their attraction as more passionate

and devoted to the family contrasted Western U.S. women considered by men as “selfish” for leaving the home to focus on their careers. Not coincidentally, U.S. immigration laws force couples to demonstrate “true” love as an indicator of one’s innocence, or unselfish distinction from the potential economic benefits of immigration and citizenship. Furthermore, as Latin American countries restructure their economies towards “capitalist democracies,” states must “clean up” the image of the nation. In the case of Colombia, the state attracts tourists and investors through the campaign, “Colombia is Passion.” Passion is transnationalized as a national product through a video showing images of enterprising workers alongside fertile raw materials – by wiping out dissenting, or merely poor populations; displacing people from their farms, trade, and land; and projecting an alluring image of the nation as a pure, innocent, motherly, but also alluring and eroticized woman. In a similar vein, some Colombian women turn to cosmetic surgery to project their eroticized passion and enterprising spirit, while rendering invisible the compulsory nature of femininity and beauty that permeate their everyday lives.

These forms of emotional innocence are central to the forging of what I call “pliable citizenship,” or the grounded ways Latinas become part of the most intimate structures of the family, the nation-state and the global economy. Women’s embodiment within transnational markets as passionate, and their bodies as raw materials that can be plially remade by development. In a similar fashion, access to U.S. citizenship relies on their innocence as women who fell in love with U.S. citizens, rather than strategically preying after men for a green card. Their perceived malleability and innocence assures they will not be a threat to the U.S. family or nation, and their passion and sexuality productive rather than destructive of the moral boundaries of the nation. Women’s mobilization of passion situates the Latin American nation in both the secular time of production, futurity and profit, as well as the sacred time of reproduction and eternal rejuvenation. Thus, against claims that this industry is part of the sex trafficking trade which positions women as victimized commodities of male desire, I

use the term pliable citizenship to underscore the ways women's virtual re-makings of their bodies and affective trajectories augment their local and transnational value, but also reinforce how states authorize moral migration and national inclusion, while justifying the surveillance and exclusion of illicit and dangerous bodies.

Given the heightened security of national borders and state sovereignty, virtual worlds and imaginaries offer a viable medium to transcend the limitation of bodies and borders. These imaginaries may prove fertile engagements with U.S. nationalism, itself a virtual space for generating dreams of a futurity beyond difference, race, pain, and suffering. The rise of the Internet in the early 1990s shuttled information and fantasies of elsewhere into one's everyday life, akin to other advances such as the railroad, ships, the telegraph, the postal service, the newspaper, photography, radio, and television. The spread of the Internet into Latin America accompanied the march of Hollywood and local telenovelas offering melodramatic solutions to economic and political problems – where chivalrous Western (or light-skinned local) men promise to transform any downtrodden situation into a glamorous romance. The romance of marriage also appeals to U.S. men, who, in chat rooms, discuss which countries and regions they should travel to in order to find a foreign wife.<sup>3</sup>

Men's perception of difference is not expressed racially but instead through fantasies of global multiculturalism that celebrate individualized difference as a marketable trait that promises to rejuvenate the self and nation. The paradigm of individualism negates the possibility of pointing to structural inequalities informing racial and sexual categories inherited from colonization and U.S. empire. In cyber-studies on race, the rise of the Internet alongside the neoliberal marketplace discursively shapes the idea that identities are flexible and the stability of race, gender, and the

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<sup>3</sup> On websites and in chat-rooms discussions, Russian women are often discussed as American women with an exotic flair, Asian women as petite and service oriented, and Latin American women as passionate and family oriented.



body obsolete.<sup>4</sup> Virtuality symbolizes a democratic palimpsest where all is possible for those who connect, offering a tool for the subversive spread of information and the intermixing of bodies across otherwise closed borders.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the idea that everyone has equal access to transcending nation-state borders (or the social consequences of race, class, gender, and sexuality) and to becoming someone new merges dangerously close to neoliberal dreams in which all who connect are promised new beginnings, unfettered mobility, and democracy.<sup>6</sup> It is in the virtual multicultural imaginary that a romantic ethic of individualism and an entrepreneurial, do-it-yourself romantic spirit comes to life. Through virtual romance, participants find confirmation in a sense of belonging that unmoors them from identities and opportunities traditionally tied to geographic, racial, social, and cultural locations.

To analyze global processes through affect foregrounds an individual's craving to become someone special in the face of a culture of insignificance and alienation affecting broader sectors of the population at the margins of modernity and society. To focus one's energies on romance, and especially foreign marriage, is to express one's desire to be noticed and to arrest the attention of another across great distance. Similarly, becoming someone is inextricable from the desire to become valuable in a culture increasingly predicated on visibility. In culture industries and the state imaginary, romance and marriage offer respectable forms of

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<sup>4</sup> For a critique of the turn to flexible identities heralded in cyber studies, see Schaeffer-Grabel (2006:891-914).

<sup>5</sup> The strategic turn to the Internet by the Zapatista indigenous movement (the EZLN) in Chiapas, Mexico, is an effective and powerful example of the subversive uses of the Internet. This technology enabled them to turn their local struggle into an international movement that helped to put some pressure on the Mexican government against further displacement of and violence against indigenous peoples and to spread support against trade policies such as NAFTA.

<sup>6</sup> This fantasy of global connection and transcendence is only available for the middle and upper classes, who have access to computers, although the spread of Internet cafes reaches more of the population.

female empowerment, placing intimacy and foreign love at the center of global dramas. In addition, desire is an act of becoming, of movement, of enacting oneself in the world through the image of how one is valued on a global stage.

While media is a powerful venue for fostering collective desires and possible worlds, the Internet is a unique place where those who have access can play a leading role in these broader social dramas. The Internet fosters what Henrietta Moore calls “fantasies of identity,” which are “ideas about the kind of person one would like to be and the sort of person one would like to be seen to be by others” (Moore, 1994:66).<sup>7</sup> While the colonial contours of Internet fantasies have material consequences, I am also interested in how women and men themselves occupy and destabilize what Lisa Nakamura calls “cybertyped” identities. Despite utopian claims that technologies such as the Internet will usher in a “postbody” era in which the stigma of race, gender, and class no longer matter, race continues to matter, albeit in forms that continually morph and restabilize (Nakamura, 2002:3-5). The present national narrative of arriving at a postracial moment reflects the ideology of nation building. Individual migrants continue to be lured in with the ideology, “you can craft yourself anew on these shores!” Americanization is itself a virtual fantasy emptied of racial and class strife, a temporal present in which the violence of indigenous conquest and slavery reside outside national borders and in the past. This story of marriage migration complicates where the lines of exploitation reside and how Latin American women who aspire to class mobility negotiate representations of their sexualized bodies in creative and meaningful ways, while also reproducing exceptional paradigms of the successful individual.

Claims to heterosexual love can lead to citizenship for some, or the stripping of rights for others. The benefits of international

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<sup>7</sup> Sherry Turkle also describes the Internet as a space where we can project ourselves into our own dramas as the producer, director, and star. See Turkle (1995:26).

marriages must include the ease of movement across national and everyday borders, but also to transcend secular spaces of calculation, surveillance, and other technologies of governance. The state mandate to be romantically in love, however, also extends into the marriage in the United States as women must be careful not to put too many economic demands on their husband, or be too critical of him or the U.S., lest she fall from the innocent loving migrant to that of the selfish and undeserving migrant.

Women's placement within transnational labor markets and entrance into U.S. citizenship rely on their role as raw materials and "pliable" subjects that can be re-made by development and molded into U.S. citizens. Their perceived malleability and innocence assures they will not be a threat to the U.S. family or nation, and their eroticized sexuality productive rather than destructive of the moral boundaries of the nation. Gendered emotions are naturalized into the fibers of the body as the productive sphere of the market meets the reproductive capacities of women's association with domesticity and family. Women's mobilization of passion situates the Latin American nation in both the secular time of production, futurity and profit, as well as the sacred time of reproduction and eternal rejuvenation. Thus, rather than construe women's erotic placement in the Western imaginary as simply the exploitation of gendered labor traded for the economic perks of marriage migration, I use the term pliable citizenship to underscore the ways women's virtual re-makings of their bodies and affective trajectories augment their local value, but also reinforce how states authorize moral migration and national inclusion, while justifying the surveillance and exclusion of illicit and dangerous bodies.

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