

DOSSIER: DIGITAL PATHS: BODIES, DESIRES, VISIBILITIES

Governing Virtual Bodies and Intimacies: Cybermarriage industries between the United States and Latin America*

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Abstract

This article explores the ways the foreign emerges as a fantasy of mobility in the Cybermarriage Industry uniting Mexican and Colombian women with U.S. men. While some women use the marketing of their bodies as passionate and erotic to attract opportunities such as marriage with U.S. men, Internet scholars during the 1990s celebrated the Internet as a utopian space for enacting oneself outside the limitations of the physical body. These theories, I argue, lack an analysis of the state and the political economy in their post-body analysis of Internet exchanges.

Key Words: Intimacy, Internet Marriage, State Governance, Cosmetic surgery.

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Latin America's association with abundant love and sexual passion continues to shape gendered opportunities, labor, mobility, and citizenship.¹ Women's bodies have long figured as the seductive force of regional and national trade, beginning with beauty pageants where Miss Coffee, Miss Banana, and Miss Flower enticed investors and travelers from colonial times to current tourism brochures and more recently, Internet Marriage websites. In particular, the global marketing of cybermarriage borrows from Latin American tourism and investment campaigns, especially the current branding of Colombia titled, "Colombia es Passion."² With the goal of re-sculpting its global image (from drugs and violence to an attractive and safe place to visit and invest), Colombia exports a respectable middle class image of the nation's gendered labor force through a three-minute 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 Shakira's hips on the global stage. In case we forget the point, women's bodies emerge as an important national resource alongside other natural exports such as coffee, flowers, and tourist shots of Colombia's beaches and ruins. As viewers, called upon as potential tourists and investors, we are invited to consume Colombia's fertile resources, including their citizens' passion, naturalizing heterosexual romantic exchanges as a lucrative route to happiness. For various women I met at a "Vacation Romance Tour"³ in Cali, they explained their desire to upgrade and beautify their bodies through cosmetic surgery as, an investment in themselves and their futures. These images and acts of

¹ Sections of this article come from my book, *Love and Empire* (2013).

² "Colombia is Passion" is a marketing campaign by the Colombian government starting in 2005 where they hired ProColombia to promote tourism, investment, and the branding of the country.

³ These tours are usually three-day social events held at five-star hotels where couples actually meet one another. Men usually pay from \$500 to \$1,000 for the event (not including their travel expenses), while women are often invited free of charge.

(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 re-make themselves, a natural resource that with the proper capital investment, will yield the possibility of foreign marriage or other opportunities.

In my book, *Love and Empire* (2013), I argue that the cybermarriage industry emerges during a time of neoliberal or “free market” capitalism and when the U.S. state continues to manage migration through the governance of intimate desires. The marketing of passion in the Colombian video bind its citizens to moral and gendered opportunities in Latin America and beyond, while romantic love and marriage ensure their mobility and potential citizenship in the United States. Neoliberalism is a term that attempts to capture the restructuring of some Latin American economies towards foreign investment while outsourcing labor and products. This economic strategy seeps into everyday life through cultural mandates that reinforce colonial divides separating Western countries who make produce highly technical products from the resource rich countries who export labor and raw resources. It also reflects the deepening of economic exchange into the intimate recesses of individual’s desires. Thus, during interviews, participants’ descriptions of love and marriage accompanied the language of reciprocal exchange, investment, and risk. It’s no coincidence that these Internet marriage 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 with Colombia, further entrenched these nations’ dependency on foreign loans, businesses, tourism and trade as the route to salvage economic woes. At the same time, the opening of Latin America to foreign trade and commerce accompanied the passage of some of the most draconian U.S. immigration legislation, erecting walls and entrenching border personnel and

surveillance cameras to deter migrant crossings. The possibility of virtual contact ignited the spread of Latin American marriage industries in 1996 when the Internet's reach saturated café's, the workplace and home for more people, spreading intimacy across otherwise difficult to cross borders.

Intimate contact with the foreign relies on the myth of re-making the self and national body, of purification, rejuvenation, and new beginnings. Latin American women described their search for foreign men on-line as a critical avenue for self-realization, of positioning oneself as more passionate than their western feminist counterparts, and thus deserving of the devotion by men who travel a great distance. 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. As in the case of the Colombian state, it projects itself as productive – through 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, and eroticized woman. In a similar vein, some Colombian women turn to cosmetic surgery to project their 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 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 and transnational value, but also reinforce the violence of how states authorize moral migration and national inclusion, while justifying the surveillance and exclusion of illicit and dangerous bodies.

As some Latin American women turn to technologies such as the Internet and cosmetic surgery, they understand the need to augment the ways their bodies gain currency in the global economy, such as through hyper-femininity, domesticity, malleability, sexuality, and family values. In this context, many of these women use technologies such as the Internet and, for some, cosmetic surgery, to re-configure their bodies in ways that translate across transnational imaginaries and places, and in ways that communicate their desire for social and geographic mobility in both exciting and dangerous ways. Thus, rather than turn to these technologies for their promise of universal, or disembodied citizenship, these women's deployment of technology is mediated by the desire for a corporeal affiliation to the promises of attracting opportunities across borders. There are mutual scripts shaping the virtual play of identity in highly eroticized fantasies across borders.⁴ For example, U.S. men are valuable to these

⁴ Jennifer González reminds us that on-line "passing" of racial identity has concrete consequences as much of the activity of "passing" is linked to racial fantasies of otherness.

women because of the belief that they are hard workers with a high quality of life and for their potential as equitable partners in the domestic sphere. Latin American women, on the other hand, gain currency to U.S. men as traditional, family-oriented, passionate, sexual and feminine, whether or not the meanings attached to these stereotypes correspond.

While many U.S. Internet scholars celebrate the ability of individuals to mold themselves into various modes of subjectivity dislodged from the stablesigns of the body, my research with Mexican and Colombian women demonstrates that the desire for pliable subjectivity is not merely an arena for play, but one that women embrace in the hopes of securing safe migration across class and national borders. Women discover avenues to use technology and representations of their bodies as de-colonial tools that help them improve their lives and those of their families. Yet what is oftentimes unexamined in theories of the body in cyberspace is the salience of neoliberal market values and state borders that constrain cyber-subjectivity, such a show women from the global South negotiate the expectations of a U.S. palate in ways that eroticize their difference from U.S. women. I argue that the concept of transcending the body or recombining one's identity in cyberspace is a privileged position that elides the labor of the body and asserts neoliberal values of choice and democratic notions of upward mobility. Behind the desire for mobility by some Latin American women searching for U.S. husbands are disparities of movement, since heightened border control, political unrest, and economic recession leave few options for either migrating or remaining in place. Women from Latin America utilize technologies of modern subjectivity to creatively transform the master's tools yet also perpetuate a dangerous terrain for resolidifying their objectified status and use value as malleable objects for Western desire.

In *Love and Empire*, I analyze interviews and ethnographic data with over a hundred men and women at the Vacation Romance Tours, through Internet chat rooms, via e-mail conversations, in restaurants, and in their homes to understand

the process by which participants turned to technology and the foreign “other” to mobilize dreams across borders. While the majority of women at the Guadalajara Tour are well educated, from the professional class, and have access to the Internet, the majority of female participants at the Cali Tour are more racially mixed, from the working class, and have less frequent access to the Internet.

For this reason, and because beauty is a form of social mobility in Colombia, many women turned to cosmetic surgery to attract men on the tours. Through their use of the Internet to find romance and marriage, many women described this process as a form of self-help, of discovering their “true” self that transcended local meanings of their identity. Similarly, women from Cali turned to cosmetic surgery to emphasize their desire to become more “authentic” in the eyes of foreign courtiers to bring into harmony the outersigns of the body with the inner self.

Modern Technologies and the Body

During the 1990s, scholars theorized the Internet as full of potential for the play of identity and self-transformation, especially by those who found refuge in the anonymity of cyberspace. A prominent early scholar of the Internet, Sherry Turkle, raises the possibility of escaping social hierarchies on the Internet, to transform the self, and to play with fluid and multiple identities. She states,

The anonymity of MUDs [multi-user domains]... gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones. MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion (Turkle, 1995:12).

Other feminist scholars have turned to the Internet as a space for theorizing other expressions of political affiliation that

exceed the confinement of the body and identity politics. For example, Shannon McRae says that all the “things that separate people, all the supposedly immutable facts of gender and geography, don’t matter quite so much when we’re all in the machine together” (1996:262). Theoretically inspired by Judith Butler’s work, many feminist scholars celebrate the queering of cyber interactions that contribute to the dislocating of sex and/or gender from a natural location in the body and detaching the visual cues of the body (race, sex, gender) from the inner realm of the self. Allucquère Stone asserts,

In cyberspace the transgendered body is the natural body. The nets are spaces of transformation, identity factories in which bodies are meaning machines, and transgender—identity as performance, as play, as wrench in the smooth gears of the social apparatus of vision—is the ground state (1996:180-1).

The radical potential placed in the play of cyborg identities is inflated through the notion that, as Mimi Nguyen states, “nothing in a cyborg body is essential” (2003:288).⁵ Internet interactions do, in fact, raise some fascinating possibilities for denaturalizing the assumed coherence between the inner and outer self. However, the emphasis on play and fluid identities has led to a theorizing away from the materiality of the body and the actual borders that limit one’s flexibility, mobility, and expression of subjectivity on- and off-line. For example, Teresa, a confident forty-two-year-old living in Guadalajara, described taking a break from her career as a journalist to dedicate herself to finding a romantic foreign partner online. She defended her use of the Internet as the place she could be playful and witty in order to judge how men responded to her intelligence, rather than simply her looks.

⁵ Nguyen’s critique here also draws from Cynthia Fuchs, “‘Death Is Irrelevant’: Cyborgs, Reproduction, and the Future of Male Hysteria,” in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (New York: Routledge, 1995).

Teresa said, “I can read between the lines in Internet conversations and quickly judge whether someone is open-minded and whether they respect a woman’s confidence and intelligence”.⁶ Interestingly, through various e-mail relationships, Teresa found that many U.S. men want amore family-oriented woman and less of an intellectual mate than do European men, whom she found to be more cultured, liberal, and open-minded. For this reason, she chose to use various online dating agencies and to target European men rather than attend the U.S.-based “vacation tour” introduction parties.

For many women from Latin America, success with Internet technology is mediated by their use value in the global economy as erotic subjects for first world consumption and as laborers in the service economy and domestic sphere. I focus on women’s voices and reasons for turning to new technologies (and foreign men) as actions that mark an empowering shift in their lives. Yet, I also acknowledge that their stories are complicated by men’s expectations, the compulsory expressions of love by the U.S. state, and the broader neoliberal advertising arsenal that celebrates technology’s capacity for unfettered mobility and pliable subjectivity. This does not mean that women themselves do not play with their identity, but that we need to be cautious when addressing questions of mobility and flexibility in ways that erase the continued salience of borders, the market place of desire, and state immigration control.

Embedded within theories of cyberspace are shifting understandings of the role of the body. Traditionally, the body was associated with the natural and immutable, with predetermined qualities assigned by “god” and the “fatedness” of human life. Through modern science, the body has been treated as the biological bedrock of theories on self and society – the “only constant in a rapidly changing world” (Frank, 1990:133). Internet scholars, again influenced by postmodern thinkers such as Judith Butler during the 90s, view the body as a social

⁶ This interview appears in more detail in Felicity Schaeffer-Grabiel’s (2004:44).

construction (1993). This concept of the body as social construction is also affirmed and reproduced incorporate advertising campaigns, which present the “natural” body as obsolete and the consumer body as an infinitely improvable and malleable entity. Popular discourses that accompany genetic manipulation, cosmetic surgery, and Internet cyber-sociality rearticulate the notion that the body is increasingly of less importance and is instead a malleable and democratic surface that can be changed at will in the search to become someone new.

Technology as Pliable Subjectivity

The promise of Internet marketing that you will become someone new, or even become the more “authentic you” unencumbered by the body, resembles the ways women described turning to cosmetic surgery at the Cali Tours. Colombian women’s use of surgery demonstrates new avenues for understanding the body in relation to scientific configurations of pliability, democracy, and mobility. At the Cali Tour, which takes place in a region with the highest black or *moreno/a* population (due to the region’s history with African slave labor), there were many more dark-skinned and working-class women than there were at the Guadalajara Tours in Mexico. And unlike in Mexico, where tradition carried more symbolic cultural weight, many female participants at the Cali Tour were young and had undergone cosmetic surgery. Because of the different political and economic climates and the fact that these women had less frequent access to Internet communication than did women in Guadalajara, snatching a man at the tour was a more urgent project. Some proudly flaunted extreme breast implants, others had a combination of breast and butt implants, and still others had undergone liposuction procedures. Celia, for example, was planning to have the fat sucked out of her stomach and transferred to her buttocks. I followed various couples on dates during and after the tour and spent the evening with them as the

translator. I accompanied an African American man, Seth (Who is a taxicab driver in his mid-forties) and his Afro-Colombian date, Celia, to a restaurant that catered to tourists.⁷ During our meal together, Celia excitedly told us that she was going to have a liposuction procedure done, even though, as Seth reminded her, this was a dangerous surgery. Celia explained that she had saved up money for several months to afford the \$1,300 for the liposuction (she would also use money that had been given to her by a previous U.S boyfriend). She told us that her sister, who is now married to a man in the United States and has had a successful liposuction procedure, contributed to her decision. While Seth and I both told her that her body was perfect, she explained that while she liked her body, she wanted to improve it by thinning her stomach and fortifying her behind. She said,

If I have the opportunity to change something about my body, to improve myself, then I will. Just like Seth made the choice to come to Cali [to the Tour], I also decided to improve my life by choosing to do the surgery. It's an investment in myself.⁸

Celia's desire, like that of many other women I interviewed, to invest in her body with the hopes of improving her chances of finding someone, indicates how women use beauty for their own aspirations and to willingly transform themselves into marketable products of exchange. Women described having to submit photos and physical descriptions with job applications. And women thirty or older complained they had a much harder time getting jobs and attracting foreign men who went after the young girls. These women thus

⁷ They both knew I was a researcher writing a book on the matchmaking marriage industry and as such I did not charge for my translating services, although Seth paid for my meal and offered me a "tip" at the end of a long night.

⁸ Other women I spoke to similarly described their multiple surgery procedures as an investment in their self, careers, and futures.

participate in a well-worn development narrative, similar to the one for which many men congratulate themselves regarding their journey to Latin America: if you can change your life, you should, if you don't, you deserve the consequences that await you. Modern states encourage a citizenry organized around self-help, or what Foucault labels self-cultivation, because it shifts the gaze from larger social critique (revolution) and the state, to the self (1988). Working on the body is equated with the embrace of an entrepreneurial spirit in which women's bodies become the object of self-improvement, self-help, and the promise of a democratic future. Hard work on oneself is equated with one's entrance into modern subjectivity and citizenship, where one can become transformed into the desired image and lifestyle. The shift in Cali from any reliance on the state – as a corrupt and violent force – has shifted to the arena of science new technologies, the marketplace, consumption (rather than production), and individuals as the arena for change and mobility.

For Celia, her soft voice, graceful gestures (reminiscent of women groomed for beauty pageants), and desire for an enlarged behind articulate a complex desire for a more pliable construction of identity, ethnicity, and sexuality that has both local and global currency, that situates her subjectivity as both embodied and translatable in a broader context. Depending on the spaces and social situations Celia moves through, she feels that she can rework the meanings of her race and class. Because the tours are held at expensive hotels with men searching for “high quality” women (and the class implications that accompany their desire for quality), women must upgrade their bodies to blend into these tourist zones so they are not mistaken to be prostitutes or “green card sharks.” Yet at the same time, these women garner currency in their local context and with foreign men for the embodied signs of authentic difference and hypersexuality. Perhaps influenced by beauty pageant culture, where women are groomed for respectable femininity, Celia alters her body in ways that confound the

boundaries between sex work and marriage, increasing the visible markers of class, ethnic capital, and sexual appeal toward the goal of local mobility and/or movement across borders.⁹

Women's sense of their bodies as pliable commodities is also a response to the foreign male's, and especially African American men's, erotic desire for large buttocks and a curvy body. Unlike the tours in Mexico, where the majority of men were white and Latino, 20 percent of the men at the Cali Tour were African Americans (including two from Europe). For Afro-Colombian women, emphasizing their physique may be more complex than merely conformity to the demands of the tourist market and patriarchal desire; it is also a chance to pleurably accentuate characteristics (such as large butts) that have been degraded by mainstream notions of ideal beauty in Colombia, characterized by whiteness, straight hair, and large breasts.¹⁰ Accustomed to being scrutinized on the grounds of physical beauty, these women capitalize on new cosmetic technologies and foreign configurations of desire to display their motivation and self-enterprising spirit in the face of limited opportunities for jobs, travel, and mobility at home.

Women's ideology of uplift resembles popular narratives of cosmetic surgery as seen in the onslaught of television reality programming. Cosmetic surgery proves to be an apt practice and popular metaphor for individuals who envision poverty as a personal flaw that can be remedied through Will power rather than a social problem based in unequal structures of power, opportunity, and continued repercussions of racial inequalities. In the popular reality show in the United States called *The*

⁹ For a rich discussion of how Venezuelan trans women invoke beauty to renegotiate their embodied currency vis-à-vis the nation, see Marcia Ochoa's, *Queen for a Day* (2014).

¹⁰ Frances Negrón-Mutaner makes this argument for the Puerto Rican diaspora through a theorization of Jennifer Lopez's butt. See "Jennifer's Butt," in *Perspectives on Las Américas: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, ed. Matthew C. Gutmann et al., 291–98 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

Swan, the power of science is embedded in the array of heroic surgeons (and one psychologist) who turn visible physical characteristics, such as crooked and yellow teeth, an overweight body, small breasts, and droopy facial features, away from a potential discussion of an economic system that fails to provide health care and education to those most impoverished and into a feat of science in which those who choose to improve themselves witness stunning possibilities.¹¹ This narrative is repeated in Colombian pageants in which television respondents focus on the success or failure of women's cosmetically altered additions, emphasizing an understanding of the body not as whole or natural, but as alienated pliable parts as well as a democratic surface available to all through scientific and artistic uplift. Beauty pageants and telenovelas also individualize beauty and romance as qualities attained through the entrepreneurial motivation of the woman, rather than as larger questions about how beauty is related to a patriarchal society, questions of access to expensive (and dangerous) surgery procedures, or examinations of the lucrative industry of beauty and fashion that accompany these popular events. In these contexts, it is evident that women's success, whether romantic or otherwise, is the responsibility of their own enterprising spirit and aesthetic alteration, rather than a question that is queried in relation to capitalism or the state.

What we witness in these notions of self is the sleight of hand from the alteration of the outer signs of the body to its meaning for the interiority of the self. For those transgendered subjects Allucquère Stone argues are the natural occupants of cyberspace, electronic and textual morphing of the body belies the harsh reality that prosthetic alterations by transgendered prostitutes speak to (2008). The association of flexibility with transgression violently erases bodies that can not escape the

¹¹ For a discussion about cosmetic surgery in the barrage of television shows such as *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, and others, see Brenda R. Weber's, *Makeover TV* (2009).

hegemonic readings visible on their bodies. Such is the case for transgendered subjects whose labor resides squarely in their bodies, evident in the self-narratives by Brazilian prostitutes who inject silicone into erotic zones of the body, such as the hips and butt, as a means of increasing the return from their sexual labor (Kulick, 1998). The use of technologies for many subjects of the global South are relegated to the increased marketability of the eroticized body, which then reinscribes race, class, and sexual differences, rather than enabling their transcendence from markers of difference. As Nakamura argues, Internet interactions continue to be shaped by cybertyped identities, or stereotypes of racial and gendered bodies, despite fantasies that the Internet will usher in a “post-body” era (2002).

The prevalence of “choice” as a central tenet of neoliberal market values and individualism corresponds with recent constructions of the body as pliable viapopular discourses of technology, science, and genetics. These new discourses and uses of technology and pliability continue the propaganda of neocolonialism, but also offer the possibility of providing Latin American women a decolonial strategy for performing themselves as ideal global citizens with superior reproductive and moral characteristics. The dangers of pliable subjectivity via technology and science have to do with the conflation of a consumer ethic and gene mapping, marketed as socially beneficial not only for the ridding of diseases, but for offering people the flexibility not only to be themselves, but to produce themselves, to alter the inner and outer reproduction of the self. It is worth recalling here that early cosmetic surgery was critical in erasing the markers of disease such as leprosy, enabling subjects to pass as able-bodied and free of disease. In this contemporary case, cosmetic surgery disassociates the violence and harsh economic conditions of everyday life in Cali from women’s bodies. Similarly, the body as a malleable resource can serve as the raw material for making oneself into a more appropriate citizen in which the skin stretches its meaning across global space.

For many women from Mexico and Colombia, technology offers a model of living that empowers the individual to act out against tradition and fate and to alter one's future. Thus these women's discourses of technology and foreign culture articulated their position as modern subjects in charge of, rather than at the mercy of, their fate. For some women from Cali, cosmetic surgery enables them to augment their body capital and chances of advancement in foreign romance, or to enter into a variety of labor markets. For women and men who do not choose to improve their chances of romance or personal uplift, this refusal to help oneself translates into a character flaw, or as a lack of motivation, initiative, and an unwillingness to change.

It is also apparent that a new language of privilege and modernity is being articulated through cosmetic alterations. It is through one's adherence to the norms of heterosexual femininity and male desire inscribed on to the body, rather than merely skin color, that one acquires a new language of global ascendancy. Cosmetic advances rearticulate long-enduring colonial legacies of racial difference as biologically based to create identities that are pliable, "democratically" available, and reliant on innovative technologies. Being civilized is equated with technologies of self-cultivation, with working hard, taking a risk, and jumping at opportunities that come your way. This is directly related to the role of U.S. state immigration in discouraging citizenship to those who may become a public charge, in other words, accepting only those whose enterprising spirit will contribute to the surplus labor of the nation.

The "State" of Love

During my interviews, rumors spread feverishly about a group of Colombian women who confessed at a party in San Jose, California that were not in love with their husbands before (and for others, after) they moved to the United States. Women must guard their hushed exchanges about love (and its absence)

closely, for fear of being perceived as calculating and manipulative, as a prostitute, lesbian, or even a criminal of the state. Even though transborder relationships and marriages might better resemble the kind of love that evolves from building trust and intimacy over time, and through sentiments of gratitude more so than romantic love (children/remittances), spouses are required to perform the giddy romantic couple as they pass through the scrutinizing gaze of ICE. Disclosing their lack of love is dangerous. Women could face steep fines (up to \$250,000) and jail for five or more years, even deportation if found out they used marriage for other purposes.

The state's curious protection of love as the criteria for citizenship actually protects the virtual ideology of the nation as equitable and democratic. Illegitimate marriages are scrutinized by consular and immigration officials who have developed an elaborate list of red flags that prove marriage fraud: Some include: large age differences; lack of a common language; wide socio-economic, cultural, religious backgrounds; initial contact via the Internet; the use of a marriage agency; and a brief time shared together. Bona fide marriages – those proven by romantic love – are confirmed by photos of couples engaged in leisure activities and evidence of love letters. The longer the courtship period the better, and couples must pass a litany of questions that prove cohabitation (such as what side of the bed one sleeps on, preferred meals, cleansing habits, etc.). Marriages procured over the Internet are especially suspect, leading to the passage of the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act (IMBRA), passed in the United States in 2005. Passed as part of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), it sought to diminish the possibility of abuse against “mail-order brides” by requiring international marriage agencies to provide Latin American female clients with U.S. men's criminal and marriage records before they communicate via e-mail or in person at the Vacation Romance Tours. In the congressional debate, one of the key arguments from a feminist NGO stated that because the majority of women who participate in the

cybermarriage industry come from lower income *countries* than the men they date and marry, unlike domestic on-line dating sites who match men and women of similar economic backgrounds (and thus were exempt from the criminal background check requirement). Stereotypes of women's relative poverty in relation to the men they married from the U.S. provided the basis for women's exploitation.

Couples must also prove legitimacy through shared financial practices, such as bank statements. John, in the process of petitioning to bring his fiancée from Cali over on a fiancée visa, had to provide paperwork of all his assets including proof of owning a car and a home. Thus the trajectory of immigration policy with neoliberal policies of self-sufficiency in the context of diminishing public investment, fits well with their criteria of romantic love as the basis for supporting self-sufficient and enduring heterosexual units (sponsors must legally support foreign wives for 10 years even in the case of a divorce).

While the state works to churn immigrants from "dependent" welfare recipients to "responsible" citizens, foreign marriage spouses, through the discourse of true love, must carefully negotiate their identification as desperate, poor, hypersexualized, or criminal versus innocent and moral subjects in love. One of the questions that remains, is: Despite these prolific risks, why does foreign marriage continue to be protected by immigration law?

I argue that heterosexual romantic love and marriage also perpetuate foundational myths of U.S.-style democracy and citizenship. Western notions of love symbolize the universal right to self-expression and support popular beliefs that love is deeply embedded in values of democracy, "free" choice, and the equality of individuals. Citizenship is based not only on the fact of marriage, but on the proof that "choosing" a heterosexual partner in marriage in this case with a foreigner) is increasingly the place for normative expressions of emotional and economic modernity. In other words, choice in marriage and love prove one's modernity, one's ability to choose, to enact oneself as a

self-governing body, and as egalitarian. The foreign desire to migrate to the U.S. and become a citizen via marriage imagined as a form of assimilation into democracy and proof that U.S.-style democracy highly desirable.

In fact, as argued by Elizabeth Povinelli in the *Empire of Love* (2006), normative understandings of love as foundational to “freedom” go back even farther, to the justification of secular government. Love as an act of choice – free from social or familial constraints – reinvigorates the founding moment of self-government for U.S. colonial settlers who prided themselves as having the capacity to detach from Europe because of a philosophical opposition to the constraints of familial, aristocratic, and religious power (2006:184-5). Self-government represented human freedom and universal equality under the law. The importation of pioneer brides by new colonists hoping to make a new life on the frontier coincided with the notion that subjects could make themselves anew, that they could be freed from their past. In the formation of the “self-made man,” as Povinelli states, “...the course of a man’s life should be determined by *his* life, the life *he* made, rather than from his placement before his birth in a genealogical, or any other socially defined, grid” (2006:185). Contemporary marriage migration strengthens this foundational fiction through women’s hope to re-make themselves across borders and to uplift families left behind through remittances. Returning home with U.S. stories and consumer goods proves one’s participation in the “American Dream” that mythically offers a stage to perform oneself a new.

That immigration laws and global economic trade relations render foreign marriage attractive and compulsory are missed when foreign marriage is equated with abusive men and industries who traffic women. Trafficking discourses project such a potent language of exploitation because they demarcate women’s “lack of choice” or bondage to patriarchal power in marriage and through her forced mobility through a sexual labor contract. These extreme scenarios are contrasted to

authentic marriages based on “true love”, erasing the histories of colonial and global contact that bring women in intimate contact with the West, as well as restrictive immigration laws that render foreign marriage a compulsory route to citizenship, economic opportunities, and a better life. The separation of intimacy based on choice from family traditions (or even the use of Internet brokers) relegates other intimate formations – such as the marriage of convenience (where intimacies develop over time and through mutual obligation and support) – as undemocratic and un-American – as traditional, backward and exploitative. Today, state immigration debates classify the marriage of convenience (also known as the “arranged marriage”), as a “sham marriage”. Marriages orchestrated for personal gain or other strategic purposes raise suspicion and define the limits of national borders and bodies. For mainstream society, from Hollywood to ICE, the marriage of convenience typifies a social contract that is not only outmoded, but a threat to modern societies based on love, or the freedom of choice, rugged individualism, and equitable governance.

Marital contracts procured out of need, or gross inequalities, rather than altruistic love continue to determine too much difference and the exteriority of U.S. national and racial boundaries. Forced contracts depict conditions of enslavement and forms of governance that contrast those that are freely chosen in the US. Modern U.S. definitions of freedom, as constituted through free choice and equality, are intelligible as the *freedom from* obligation, while I argue that for Latin American women, the marketplace of foreign marriage symbolizes the *freedom to* enter into contractual relations based on mutual obligations. I contend that it is the West’s stubborn sense of negative freedom, the *freedom from* obligation that continues to define authentic intimacies, sociality, and even citizenship. For this reason, love encapsulates the ideal Western sentiment to express an obligation that is freely chosen, unconstrained by social obligation (family) or economic restraints.

The focus on individual freedom as a non-binding relationship to others (what some Latin American women define as a cold, or alienating culture) – coincides with the shift in governance from the welfare to neoliberal state where individuals are encouraged to free themselves from an unhealthy dependency on the state, instead encouraging self-sufficiency and independence. Yet, idealizing modern sentiments of freedom as the departure from obligation bolster neoliberal state governance at a time when the state has increasingly with drawn, even pathologized, its obligation to citizens (evident in the demonizing of welfare recipients, the criminalizing and sexualizing of migrants, etc.).

Mexican and Colombian women express an alienated relation to citizenship not in relation to their exclusion, or alien status (foreignness) from U.S. citizenship, but via sentiments of abandonment in Latin America, especially their decreased value and disposability in the home, the labor market, and in relation to state power and national belonging. Josephina, a single mother and doctor from Guadalajara describes her turn to foreign men:

Women from our country, “The Bronze-skinned Race” are waking up from a long slumber that has lasted centuries and are now accepting their proper value (even though this is causing her to be badly treated, humiliated, tortured even until death... I am not exaggerating Felicity... it is true)... The most important, I think, [for a woman] is to recognize her proper value before herself and before others, and that she be respected as a valuable human being.¹²

The foreign serves as a viable strategy during a time when economic and political conditions at home make it difficult to earn a middle class wage, have stressed familial and social ties, and increased violent conditions for women. In interviews, Mexican and Colombian women blame Latin men and excessive state power for the breakdown of the family, law and

¹² Interview, November 21, 2001.

order. In other words, women blame the failed contract with men in marriage and the failure of laws and the state to protect their financial and physical well-being. Access to more equitable intimate exchanges and legal structures hold out the possibility for reciprocity, rather than freedom, that eschews the alienation of a culture of individualism in the United States. Thus, women's willing entrance into the foreign marriage marketplace as erotic objects of exchange demarcates not simply how women's sexualized body provides the conduit to labor exchange and citizenship status, but also explains women's subjective desires for more affective contracts that bind people together intimately, economically, and legally, offering more binding obligations between citizens and the state.

Also at stake is the role of the state in admitting an increasingly narrow contingency of migrants who can prove they enter as equal citizens and choose the United States out of patriotic love rather than economic need. To perpetuate the myth of the nation as upwardly mobile means inequalities must be expunged, expelled to bodies in need, and naturalized onto racialized bodies outside the nation. Sentiments of love project a patriotic spirit that strips one of economic motivation, fraud and the attending racialized and sexualized meanings attached to the body-as-threat biometric. Not only does whiteness represent a vehicle for safe mobility across borders, but it also marks the space of invisibility, the right to privacy outside state and social surveillance. That some Latin American women turn to foreign marriage migration as a moral, safe, and middle-class avenue to move across borders, takes on even more urgency in the context of media campaigns and laws that equate working class Latino/as who cross without proper documents with (sexual) immorality and crime. Marriage with U.S. men is more secure because the spouses' legal and social status guarantees them a longer stay than contract work and may potentially become a permanent form of relocation that affords them the ability to periodically return home. That some Latin American women turn to foreign marriage migration as a moral, safe, and

middle-class avenue to cross borders, and the freedom of movement when one arrives to the U.S., takes on even more urgency in the context of media campaigns and laws that equate working class Latino/as who cross without proper documents with (sexual) immorality and crime.

Scholars are just beginning to demonstrate the ruptures and remaking of kin relations due not simply to changing economies, but also structures of governance, especially regimes of illegality. As argued by Jennifer Chacon, in 1967, the U.S. state declared interracial marriage laws (such as *Loving vs. Virginia*) unconstitutional on the grounds of being racist (by protecting white intimacies and kinship) and as against the constitutional right to intimacy and privacy (2007:354-5). This same law, however, was not protected in regards to immigration laws. Sovereign control of the state to protect its borders has long trumped the protection of intimacy, especially for Asians barred from legally entering the country in the late 19th and early 20th century, affecting the ability of Asian laborers already in the U.S. to engage in heterosexual intimacies. During this time, white women who married a foreign man ineligible for citizenship (such as Asian men) lost her citizenship.

Today, enforced illegality (and criminality) of migrants who enter the U.S. without state authorization has led to laws that prevent the undocumented, including those with permanent residency, from receiving citizenship after marrying a citizen. Before marrying, the unauthorized migrant has to return to their home country and wait months, sometimes years to petition for citizenship (364). This may cause long delays when trying to return to the U.S. as those in the country without documents are barred from returning to the U.S. for 3 to 10 years. Of course, most gay couples do not have the right to cross borders via marriage and thus the benefits of citizenship. For those migrants living in the shadows of illegality in the U.S., their constitution as criminal can lead to the stripping of citizenship for others around them, including anyone who drives them in a car, hires them, or even rents them a room. The

undocumented find themselves quarantined, finding few spaces free from the intrusions of the state. According to one Mexicano I interviewed who had been in the U.S. for over 20 years, he found intimacy with citizens almost impossible after he divulged his undocumented status. Fear of the undocumented as criminal, or as spreading their criminality like a disease, serves to segregate populations affectively, even between those in the same family who worry that their loved ones will be detained or deported.

Claims to love are a privilege that can lead to citizenship for some, or the stripping of rights for others. The benefits of international 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. Thus the obligations of love violently dictates narrow gendered behaviors, while also opening up a space for women to make demands on their husbands and the state.

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