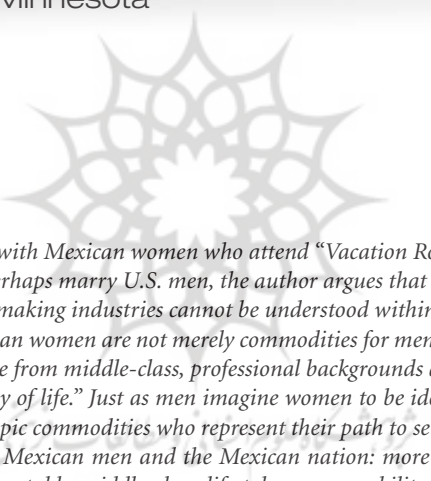


Cyberbrides and Global Imaginaries

Mexican Women's Turn From the National to the Foreign

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Through interviews with Mexican women who attend “Vacation Romance Tours” in Guadalajara to meet, date, and perhaps marry U.S. men, the author argues that women’s participation in these international matchmaking industries cannot be understood within the framework of the trafficking of women. Mexican women are not merely commodities for men to buy and consume. The majority of women come from middle-class, professional backgrounds and are influenced by fantasies of “the American way of life.” Just as men imagine women to be ideal mothers and wives, women construct men as utopic commodities who represent their path to self-improvement. U.S. men embody the opposite of Mexican men and the Mexican nation: more equitable and communicative marriage partners, a stable middle-class lifestyle, more mobility, and access to education and sometimes careers. By defining Mexican men as macho, women degrade the Mexican nation to construct themselves as having a more cosmopolitan affinity with the U.S. nation.

Keywords: *Internet; cyberlove and marriage; nationalism; globalization; Mexico*

As I approached the glitzy Presidente hotel where I would interview men and women at the Transnational Singles’ Party—otherwise known as the “Romance Vacation Tour”—the bus veered into Plaza del Sol, one of the wealthiest, most well-manicured, and most tourist-populated areas of Guadalajara, Mexico. As women began to arrive, I realized these were not your typical “mail-order brides” popularly thought to marry men from the United States out of poverty and desperation. On the

contrary, the majority of the women were well educated and from a small burgeoning professional Mexican middle class. They were confident, savvy, and cosmopolitan in their familiarity with U.S. culture through film, television, the Internet, encounters with tourists, stories from family living in the United States, and through their own travel abroad. The owner of the Latina Connection (TLC) Worldwide gave me permission to attend the tour for research because my bicultural identity set me apart from the “feminist type” whom he assumed would write a scathing report on these interactions. I, on the other hand, spoke Spanish and was part Mexican, an offspring myself of a mixed Anglo/Mexican union.

The owner’s distrust of “feminist types” has to do with critical activism by members of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and Gabriella Los Angeles, who have helped shut down mail-order bride agencies that cater to the Philippines. Although women’s activism has helped to bring these oftentimes abusive marriages into mainstream visibility, feminists and scholars alike have tended to situate all mail-order brides within the larger framework of the global trafficking of women. This scholarship and media on mail-order brides tend to focus on women’s lack of agency or women’s victimization in relation to global processes (Glodava & Onizuka, 1994; Ridenhour-Levitt, 1999; Tolentino, 1997; Gibbons & Pretlow, 1999). The trafficking of women has been defined as the underside of globalization that victimizes all Third World women’s bodies as cheap labor for First World consumption—whether they are factory workers, domestics, sex workers, or “servile wives” in the Internet bride industry. Although it is important to make these gendered neocolonial and imperial legacies visible in terms of women’s migration, this scholarship and media attention make particular assumptions about the ways globalization creates unequal gender, class, and racial norms across First and Third World countries. The implication is that women are the producers (and commodities) and men the consumers, that women travel as workers and men as pleasure seekers, that women are victims and men victimizers, and that U.S. culture dramatically alters local cultures rather than also vice versa. In this study, I locate a growing trend of cosmopolitan middle-class women who use global processes, such as the Internet and tourism circuits, to imagine and attain more stable and liberating lifestyles, equitable gender relations, and more opportunities than found in their local environments. Yet although scholars such as Arjun Appadurai (1996) celebrate the new postnational possibilities of the imagination that allow individuals throughout the world to imagine a wider set of possible lives than ever before, I am cautious not to uncritically celebrate these imaginaries but to place them within structures of power at the local, national, and transnational levels. Although flexibility and mobility may be accelerated under current global flows, I analyze the uneven and even contradictory ways this “global imagination” plays out in the desires of women from Mexico.¹ Desire for Mexican women and U.S. men makes sense only when analyzed through the lens of two countries whose differences mark the site of desire.

As new accounts of women who seek out international lifestyles slowly surface, these women emerge not as mail-order brides escaping poverty but as middle-class women affected by global fantasies of the “American way of life.” Women come to realize their gender and racial differences through a barrage of daily encounters with “foreign” U.S. culture. Mexican women turn to foreign men and lifestyles as a way to escape traditional value systems in the family, a corrupt and unstable government, and confining definitions of gender and womanhood. As women articulate their hopes to leave what is oppressive about Mexican men (and Mexico) for a seemingly more open

and liberating journey with foreign men (and the United States), they demonstrate how powerful such a shift in their imaginary—from national to transnational citizenship—can be. The space of the foreign offers greater prospects for self-improvement and growth through a more intimate and equitable marriage partner, opportunities to travel, better education, and sometimes careers (Kelsky, 2001).

Yet in the process of seeking love and marriage, women do not completely detach themselves from the nation-state or traditional roles. Women accentuate these exact notions of tradition in an attempt to attract male clients. Mexican women are aware of the national and cultural differences between themselves and women in the United States, which they use as the basis to accentuate and “sell” a version of traditional Mexican femininity that is desired by U.S. men. Furthermore, the family is still the most important institution women use to assimilate into U.S. culture, preventing more radical critiques of the legacy of neocolonialism perpetuated through global policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement that create an atmosphere of dependency and disadvantage for Mexico. In this article, my goal is not only to document this new phenomenon of love and migration propelled by both contemporary local and global processes but also to show how this recent phenomenon is a rupture in traditional gender expectations that has reverberated across the Americas and beyond. Cosmopolitan women from Russia, Japan, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and Vietnam also use creative means to maintain and improve themselves and the lives of their children through global circuits of products, tourists, and imaginaries (Fusco, 1997; Kelsky, 2001; Kojima, 2001; O’Dougherty, 2002; Ong, 1999; Thai, 2002). Women’s gender ideologies resonate with modern ideals of selfhood in the United States, as individuals seeking personal fulfillment (rather than adhering to social and familial commitments) through romantic encounters via the Internet or through matchmaking services. To contextualize women’s narratives within larger processes, I trace the changes affecting women through the 1980s peso crisis in Mexico. I also demonstrate how the immediate and global reach of the Internet brings new people, ideas, and fantasies into the intimate spheres of men’s and women’s lives.

Many Mexican women no longer see the futility of traditional gender roles that position men as head of the family. During the 20th century, various changes in Guadalajara, Mexico, including the rapid influx of people from rural to urban areas, industrialization, the secular and global expansion of commerce and services, and an increase in mass communications affected women directly. As Guadalajara transformed from a rural to an urban economy, women enjoyed better employment, education, and health care (Oliviera, 1990). The peso crisis of the 1980s especially affected single and middle-class women. Because of this widespread economic crisis resulting in a loss of jobs, large sectors of men migrated to the United States, opening up more job opportunities for the women left behind. Female work was no longer a temporary state or rarity but was incorporated into women’s lives as a rite of passage through which women could escape isolation in the home (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner, 1994, p. 13). When this newly found independence was coupled with higher levels of education, women began to want more equitable gender roles; they waited longer to marry, divorce rates increased, and a greater use of contraception resulted in fewer children.²

The peso crisis also shook the nation’s faith (as well as that of the international community) in a stable and moral governmental body in Mexico. As women began to earn their own money, they depended less on patriarchal family figures, the state, and government. Yet the discrepancy between middle-class women’s wages and their incorporation into the market as consumers of expensive goods and lifestyles imported

through the global economy compromised their ability to attain new gender, family, and lifestyle goals. For example, Spanish-language teachers at the University of Guadalajara's foreign language schools (with foreign-level tuition fees) make only \$500.00 a month, and the professional class, including doctors and lawyers, are paid more in social prestige than livable wages. In 1987, the minimum wage in urban areas fell to 58% of levels found in 1980, while the cost of living and food continued to rise.³ Similar to what O'Dougherty (2002, pp. 22-23) has documented among the middle class in Brazil, Mexicans turned to symbolic markers of class standing, such as foreign products and lifestyles, education, careers, and cultural and moral standing, to distinguish themselves from the lower classes as well as to claim an affinity with a global cosmopolitan class.

The following stories are the result of interviews I conducted with 32 women at company "Romance Vacation Tours" in Guadalajara and through e-mail correspondence. I worked with two marriage organizations with full Web site services. Mexican Matchmakers was a small agency owned by a North American and located in one of the most affluent neighborhoods of Guadalajara.⁴ TLC Worldwide, based in Houston, Texas, offers tours to Mexico usually four times a year. These companies attract hundreds of women through radio announcements, ads in the back of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and by word of mouth. There are more than 25 Internet companies offering matchmaking services and marriage with women in Mexico.⁵ Upon signing up with an agency, women give a photograph, e-mail or mail addresses, and a physical and personal description that companies then sell to men for varying prices. In exchange, women are invited to the "Vacation Tours" for free while men pay from \$500 to \$1,000. Their ages varied from 18 to 55 years; most were well educated and held an array of professional jobs. These included doctors, accountants, teachers, business owners, secretaries, beauticians, and models. Some attended tours out of curiosity, to practice their English, to enjoy a free night out, whereas others were serious about finding true love and, eventually, a husband.

Many accounts of women's involvement in these industries assume they are objectified by company Web sites and catalogues in which women are advertised as superior commodities (than feminist women in the United States) to be consumed by men in the global marketplace (Glodava & Onizuka, 1994; Tolentino, 1997). This proves to be an accurate account of the representational level, demonstrating companies' complicity in shaping men's expectations for docile, feminine, and sexualized Latinas. An analysis of the Web pages alone, however, does not get at the complexity of these relationships that ethnographic methods provide. At the tours, women showed up with girlfriends or family members and were confident and professionally dressed. The roles were also reversed at the tours: Men's bodies were on display for women to consume as they had to get up in front of a rowdy audience and describe themselves in ideal ways. Furthermore, TLC Worldwide often circulates small catalogues of men's photos and descriptions at the tours for women, who then are prompted to initiate e-mail letters and courtship.

There are many reasons why Mexican women want to marry a man from the United States, yet these desires often conflict with the types of men the agencies attract. Women in their late 20s and older hope to escape the stigma of being "older" and single in Mexican society, a society that generally assumes they are past their prime. Although marriage symbolizes positive qualities such as happiness, achievement, opportunity, and advancement, the state of being single is stigmatized as the exact opposite: lack of achievement, solitude, stagnation, and failure (Salazar, 2001, p. 147).

U.S. men, however, are told on Web sites that they can expect to date and/or marry women up to 20 to 30 years younger than themselves, accentuating the market for younger women.

The majority of women I interviewed came from a small but privileged middle or upper-middle class. In Mexico, middle-class status is based not merely on one's economic level. Other factors designating class status include higher levels of education, owning a car or home, having a job with a stable income, residence, having children in private schooling, technological access, and social and cultural expectations such as the desire for self-improvement. The acquisition of a tourist visa is also critical for traveling across the U.S.-Mexico border. From information collected at Mexican Matchmakers, I found that nearly half of the women signed up with the agency had visas, whereas another one fifth who did not hold a current visa have had one in the past.⁶

Women and (Trans) Nationalism

As women described why they wanted to marry a man from the United States, it became difficult to distinguish their accounts of Mexican men from the body of the Mexican nation. They looked to men from the United States to embody utopic relationships and lifestyles—egalitarian relationships with men who would share in household chores and offer a better way of life, more economic stability, and opportunities—qualities Mexico and Mexican men lacked. In interviews I conducted and in written accounts from agency books, women continually stated that they wanted a man who was loyal, understanding of and responsive to her needs, and hard working. When I asked why they could not find a man like that in Guadalajara, they shook their heads and voiced their dislike for “macho men.”

Anna is a 34-year-old widowed mother who works part-time as an accountant.⁷ Her children attend a private school, and she told me she juggled working and taking care of them on her own with the support of her family. According to Anna, men in Mexico are more *machista* than, presumably, U.S. men because they are threatened by the fact that women earn more than they do. She said,

Economically, they [Mexican women] are more stable than the men . . . they already have their own house, car and luxuries that many men cannot give them. And, even more curious, what angers men here in Mexico is that the woman—and for this reason they are more macho—that women are more successful than them. But, the good thing about people from other countries is that they admire this kind of woman.

While Anna's conception of Mexican men's machismo stems from threats to their power in the home and workplace, she interprets foreign men from First World countries as the opposite, the kind of men who respect strong and successful women. Anna keenly asserted that men in Mexico need to subordinate women to feel like men. Machismo, according to Anna, is a defensive state against women's elevated social and economic positions. Yet the fact that the majority of men from the United States come to Mexico to find a traditional-minded woman, in the hope of reasserting their masculinity and power in the home and workplace, complicates this image of the foreign “feminist man.”

When I asked women why they thought men from the U.S. differed from men in Mexico, they attributed it to the fact that Mexican men were coddled in the home by

their mothers and moved out only to expect the same from their wives. On the other hand, as Anna explained,

I have noticed that men from over there [the United States] are well-disposed to share in the chores. . . . I've seen something that almost never occurs here . . . over there they have told me, "I will cook for you" not like what they say here, "What do you mean I'm going to cook for you?" [she laughs hard]. Over there men are more independent from a younger age, I think that they learn to value all of these aspects, you know . . . and this gives them a little more maturity. It's liberating that they themselves feel this way and that they have fewer prejudices than men here.

For Anna, U.S. men's willingness to participate in "women's work" is liberating, as it opens up relationships to negotiation, flexibility, and communication. Although processes such as urbanization and increases in education and employment for women contribute to changing gender roles, it appears that women are changing faster than men.⁸ Guadalajara is a city in motion as many men cross into the United States to find work. For those who do remain, Josefina, a 52-year-old divorced doctor with two grown children, said "many want sex without commitment or sex in exchange for going out to eat or for going with him to the cinema." Josefina does not see a fair exchange between men whose earnings, lifestyles, and cosmopolitan outlook do not match her own. Again, she characterizes machismo as a juvenile or childlike state when compared to the paternal father/husband to the north.

Women's complaints about machismo reveal contradictory critiques of men that are both problematic and important to point out. First, women reveal racial and class biases in associating all Mexican men with negative macho qualities. I also, however, extend these negative characterizations of Mexican men as a critique of an irresponsible, abusive, and overly patriarchal government and nation-state. They also creatively verbalize their dissatisfaction with their subordinate gender position in the patriarchal family, culture, and society in general. There is little support of women's new professional careers nor more flexible and equitable gender roles in the family. Mexican feminists have recently brought attention to a backlash in popular TV shows, newspapers, and even a popular radio talk show in Monterrey. The host of this talk show, Oscar Muzquiz, solicits men to call in with stories of neglectful wives in search of the "Female Slob of the Year," or wives who are channeling their energy into careers rather than their families. Muzquiz attributes this shift to the "Americanization" of family values and says in an interview that Mexican women are increasingly confusing "liberty with licentiousness" and that Mexican women are turning us into "*mandelones*," Mexican slang for browbeaten wimps/feminized men.⁹ These popular discourses and images of women out of control are meant to morally pressure or discipline women's bodies back into the home and traditional gender roles.

In a similar vein, recent feminist scholarship on gender and nationalism focuses on the ways women are marginally positioned within national agendas (Enloe, 1989; Kaplan, Alarcón, & Moallem, 1999; Mayer, 2000; McClintock, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 1997) and how their reproductive roles are both biological and ideological (Kaplan et al., 1999; Mayer, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Women have historically garnered value for their reproductive role in populating the nation as well as serving as bodies to teach their youth how to be good citizens. Thus, women's role in the heterosexual family, as wives and mothers, has been mythically narrated to guard women's placement within

the private spheres of the home. Women who stepped out of these roles were marked as outcasts, prostitutes, whores, or *mala mujeres* (bad women).

Although historically, national projects have targeted women's bodies as the focus of disciplinary control (Foucault, 1978; McClintock, 1995), few accounts take seriously how women themselves disrupt the moral body of the nation through negative characterizations of men. Conversant with global scripts of family behaviors and structures, women pollute the boundaries of their own national boundaries by characterizing it as an overly "macho" male body. Women naturalize their defection from their own nation and highlight their affinity to another. They reverse the gender hierarchy by polluting the body of Mexico as a "spectacle of men out of control" (Kaplan et al., 1999). As we will see, women view themselves as having to defect from Mexico, a nation they equate with immature, restless, noncommittal, and backward men.

LAS MALINCHISTAS

By characterizing Mexico as a *machista*/macho nation, women respond to negative reactions from mainstream Mexican society toward their involvement with foreign men. For this reason, many women keep their interactions with the tours, e-mail exchanges, and dates a secret from friends and family. Lacking other outlets, many of the women I approached eagerly talked to me as a cultural outsider, yet my biracial identity reinforced the belief that I could relate to them as a woman who understands Mexican culture. Alicia, a single 33-year-old, owns her own photography studio and has traveled to the United States through a previous career with American Airlines. She has green eyes and light skin and asked that we meet in one of the new hot spots in Guadalajara, El Centro Magno. This is a hip, cosmopolitan, and expensive mall with a Hard Rock Café, Chili's (with higher prices than in the United States), Italian restaurants and cafés, clothing stores with trendy styles from around the world, and a multiplex cinema that features mostly films from the United States. She mentioned that most of her friends call her a "*Malinchista*." When I asked her why, she said, "'Cause I only date foreign men—Europeans, Canadians and Americans . . . I just don't like the men here—short, fat and dark-skinned . . . no-o . . . I like them tall, slender and well-dressed."

The term *Malinchista* has deep historical roots in Mexico. The union between the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and his indigenous concubine, Malintzin or La Malinche, has been mythologized as the birth of the first *mestizo*, or mixed-race Mexican. La Malinche has been narrated through Mexican and Chicano literature as the one who "sold out" her people to the colonizer, the enemy. This historical narrative of the origins of Mexico and Mexico's mixed racial heritage continues to infiltrate popular memory through colloquial language today.¹⁰ A *Malinchista* is popularly known as a traitor or "*la chingada*," literally, the one who has been "fucked over" sexually, or figuratively, by the penetration of foreign imperialism and policies.¹¹ Thus, the consumption of "foreignness" or foreign products is particularly intertwined with gender, race, and class, setting nationalism and Mexico's turn to modernity in constant conflict. The lighter one's skin color, the more he or she is associated with the upper class, the conqueror, modernity, wealth, and culture. Although middle-class women associate freedoms and opportunities with foreign culture, those who benefit less, especially poor men and the indigenous, internalize this "phallic" intrusion of imperialist and global capital as an emasculating and neocolonial process. For the elite of Mexico, the

United States and “things foreign” connote culture, professionalization, and status. This idea of boosting the economy of Mexico through foreign culture is further complicated by contemporary popular Mexican filmmakers, musicians, and artists who speak for the voiceless and condemn elite culture for selling out the country to foreign companies and buying into foreign taste cultures. The contestation over the national image varies depending on one’s gender, race, sexuality, class, and vision for the future.

Alicia characterized men from Mexico as short, balding, dark skinned, and overweight (and thus lazy) and therefore, lower-class, uneducated, and those with more indigenous roots. Conversely, she associated foreign men—the tall, slender, well dressed, and light skinned—with education, culture, and a professional class who wear suits. Alicia internalizes this very dichotomy between First and Third World countries, between the United States and Mexico, as a modern versus traditional nation, and she aligns herself with a more cosmopolitan class that extends national borders.

By describing men in Mexico as “macho,” women turn the moralizing discourse from their own bodies, from the accusation that they are the *malinchistas*. They instead degrade the national body with images of poor, uneducated, and emotionally abusive men. I am not suggesting that the women I have interviewed have not suffered from a macho culture. Their stories of neglect and abuse attest otherwise. Yet they conflate their individual experiences—with abusive, insensitive, immature, and adulterous men—with popular images of the Mexican nation. Women from Colombia, Asia, Russia, and Japan similarly justify their search for foreign men by degrading local men, which reveals how far-reaching this “personal” gender revolution has spread (Del Rosario, 1994; Glodava & Onizuka, 1994; Kelsky, 2001). In an e-mail letter, a woman from Colombia wrote to her U.S. suitor, “But, thanks to GOD there are good people who work hard, not like the bad people of Colombia.” Men who work hard are moral and upright citizens, unlike those men in Latin America, whom women envision as drug dealers, the unemployed, or lazy. Although women turn this discourse onto men as unfit fathers, husbands, providers, and role models, they do not discuss the lack of economic opportunities for men in Mexico that limits their ability to be as economically stable, well travelled, and experienced as men from the United States.

Yet it is unfair to say that all Mexican men are macho; in fact, today there is much more variety among men.¹² Women’s opposing constructions of men from Mexico and the United States demonstrate the power of their increasing interpellation as consumers, where commodities—including men—become fetish objects or signs that promise a new “self” and alternative lifestyles. As Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner (1994) argued, the image of the Anglo “sensitive man” in U.S. media is internalized as a softer and more open expression of masculinity constructed against the more aggressive display of masculinity expressed by racialized men such as Mexican immigrants and African American males.

How ironic, then, that what women want and the types of men these services attract are almost always at odds. Many men from the United States are looking for a traditional wife and family relationship they nostalgically think existed during the 1950s, before the breakdown of the nuclear family due to the social movements of the 1960s and mainstream feminism. Men also idealize love as outside rational time and space: They must look outside the bounds of the nation, outside capitalism, to find “true love.” Likewise, women in Mexico must leave the Mexican nation, what one woman characterizes as the “cradle of machismo.”¹³ They equate marriage and relationships in the United States with utopia of capitalism, democracy, and freedom within the First World.

Love, Work, and the “New Self”

These transnational marriages offer women dual citizenship and the flexibility to combine Mexican traditions of the importance of the family, a strong work ethic, and to enact their citizenship as consumers of the global marketplace. Women’s commitment to their “difference” from norms within Mexican culture and society serve to mark their symbolic move away from the Mexican nation-state to that of a transnational family, citizen, and consumer. García Canclini (2001) argued that through consumption, most Latin Americans experience sentiments of belonging and citizenship by forging similar taste cultures across national, rather than regional, borders. As more and more women join the professional workforce in Mexico and realize that through hard work they can buy what they need, they are less dependent on a man to embody this role.

Laura is a hard-working single woman in her early 30s who works 5 to 6 days a week for a company that imports and exports goods to and from Mexico and the United States. She lives with a relative and still has a hard time making the payments on a new small car she recently bought. In an e-mail she wrote to a wealthy man from Texas she is dating, she described her view on relationships:

I’m not looking for a man to take care of me, I am looking for a man that is ready to share his life with me, that knows how to work and who desires to grow alongside his partner. For me, it would not be pleasant to live with a man that sits around and hopes for good luck so that things go well. . . . I like to work and I would like to work together with my partner so that between the two of us we could make something together for our future.

The kind of marriage Laura describes sounds more like a partnership in which two people contribute equally to build an empire and to grow together. She does not make a distinction between love and the economy, the public and private, the individual and the collective. In bed and in the workplace, a couple should be contributing equally and working hard toward uplifting themselves and the relationship. This understanding of love as work echoes the discourse promoted by U.S. magazines and psychological research on love. Eva Illouz’s (1997) study on the parallels between love and capitalism looks to popular culture to trace these interconnections. She said,

Women’s magazines suggest that instead of being “stricken” or “smitten” by love, a woman is responsible for her romantic successes and failures, that she must “work hard” to secure a comfortable emotional future for herself, and that she should guarantee that a relationship will provide an equitable exchange. (p. 195)

Magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* are very popular with middle- to upper-class women in Mexico. This magazine mixes articles written in the United States with articles that are locally produced. Through this mixture of discourses, elite readers are asked to vicariously participate in emancipation even though editors know that women are expected to abide by more traditional norms (Illouz, 1997, p. 30). Middle-class women I interviewed are not satisfied with vicariously participating in new ideas of womanhood and marriage. Instead, they see themselves as actively participating in new flexible identities between the traditional and the modern and between Mexico and the United States.

In Salazar's (2001) study of women and marriage in Guadalajara, she concluded that the older women she interviewed based marriage on luck and destiny (p. 185). These are ideas that coincide with appropriate gender roles for women under Catholicism. Women are encouraged to be spiritually strong, like La Virgen de Guadalupe, and passive recipients of God's will. A woman should not actively seek a partner but merely happen to be in the right place at the right time. Women I interviewed, however, describe themselves within modern ideas of the self as an individual actively seeking self-fulfillment and happiness through their use of the Internet and these matchmaking services. As she explained her philosophy on love and life, Anna said,

I know from personal experience that if I need something I can achieve it if I go and look for it, if I save in order to buy it or if I work very carefully I can earn it . . . but I never wait for things to fall from the sky. . . . What's more, I think that happiness is found in the search and not in wait.

Anna bases love and marriage less on destiny than on capitalist relations in which hard-working individuals achieve success. The fact that Anna is Protestant-Christian rather than Catholic also shapes her understanding of women's role in the world. This version of Christianity, intertwined with Puritan ideals of hard work as well as capitalist relationships, asks followers not to be passive bystanders but hard-working individuals. Women base love and marriage less on a Catholic interpretation that teaches people to be passive recipients of God's will than on capitalist relations in which hard-working individuals achieve success.

Women look to the United States to be freed from cultural norms and hope to become architects of their own lives. This is a liberating prospect and has the potential for subverting the gender hierarchy in Mexico. As women garner confidence and independence through professional careers and exposure to stories of love and marriages from abroad, they begin to imagine new possibilities for themselves. Yet women also do not accept everything about American culture or a capitalist framework. Aware that women in the United States are more liberal, that families are nuclear rather than extended, and that many women are more materialistic in the United States, most state the importance of holding onto spiritual and family traditions. Many women, especially those with children, know that they will have to "sacrifice" their professions and families to find happiness with a foreigner.

Internet Encounters

Fantasies, stereotypes, and utopic desires comingle on the screen through the act of Internet letter writing. The Mexican woman writes herself into a script in which she finds a loving, supportive, and gentle husband in a far-away land. Stories and images of the United States as a land of opportunity—where men respect feminism and love strong, yet family-oriented, women—make their way into this tale. The act of writing to a faceless man from the privacy of one's home or workplace adds an element of mystery and the unknown. Away from strict families, the gossip of friends, and Catholic teachings of respectable codes of behavior, the woman finds herself alone and able to explore her new role with an audience that she hopes will interact with her with fresh eyes. With the spread of the Internet in Mexico, women participate in the creation of new gender identities not only as consumers of images but also as actors forg-

ing new personas. Part of the lure of the Internet is that women can express themselves outside of local norms and customs and learn new aspects of themselves as their audience extends across national, cultural, and racial boundaries. The Internet is a springboard for acting out changing times, sexual desires, and new identities. Sherry Turkle (1995) described the computer screen as the place where “we project ourselves into our own dramas, dramas in which we are producer, director and star. . . . Computer screens are the new location for our fantasies, both erotic and intellectual” (p. 26). Women turn to the Internet to express their hopes, dreams, and intimate desires and in the process, access information about other people and their lives.

The use of the Internet and agencies rather than social networks to find relationships also marks a new way of thinking about love, courtship, and marriage. According to Mexican family traditions, a woman is expected to wait patiently and passively for a man to make the first move. Traditionally, once a man publicly claims his desire for a woman, she is marked as his territory, and she may not see anyone else. This courtship period may last a couple of years or longer. During this time, the woman, called a *novia*, must not allow herself to be in places in which she would be a sexual target for another man’s desire. The man (*novio*), on the other hand, can have numerous sexual adventures with a variety of available women (Carrier, 1995).

For women, then, the Internet proves to be an ideal place for less restrictive forms of courtship. Although women’s bodies are guarded and watched closely, the Internet affords them the opportunity to communicate with or date multiple people and to develop sexual intimacy in a society that heavily moralizes women’s sexual activities outside of marriage. Because masculinity depends on expressions of independence and fraternity with other males, men are afforded much more liberty to frequent bars, clubs, and other social spaces. Blanca, a 52-year-old divorced homemaker (who has also worked as a nanny in the United States), explained how restricted she feels her movements are:

Right now I am very confined, I almost never go out. I go out once in a while into the street and they follow me, people speak to me, but I don’t like to get to know people off the street because I think, I *think* that they think that I am easy, and I’m not easy, I’m not an easy kind of woman.

I asked her whether it was also difficult for women to meet people at bars. She said,

Well, look . . . another time I went out with some friends, only one time, we went out at night. It’s not difficult, they had come up to me, but in reality they are people that are drinking, that think that if a woman goes to a bar . . . the men think that if one goes to a bar alone, she is looking for a sexual encounter.

The opportunities for women to meet a partner are limited to introductions by family and friends and thus extremely difficult for older women who do not have strong social or family networks.

Anna, for instance, finds herself isolated and unable to find a partner.

The truth is I’ve parted from my friendships and all social contacts that I could have had. But time has gone by and apart from feeling alone—in spite of having my kids and family—I felt the need to have someone else who I could express my feelings to and my thoughts about what is going on in my daily life. I realized that I couldn’t have a life as a hermit. Men that I have known I had only known through work relations. And the truth

is that due to my job, my work as a mother and as the head of the household, I don't have much time to have a social life.

Even though Anna lives at home and has the support and care of her family, she does not have the time or energy to build a social world that would allow her to meet and date people. In fact, almost all of the women I interviewed had weak social networks because of obligations to their families, children, and jobs. Not only is women's presence in public space questioned, but women are also socialized to attend to the family rather than friends.

Women also enjoy having more control over the selection process through Internet dating. Teresa, a single and confident 42-year-old, is taking a break from a stressful life as a journalist to nurture and develop herself and her personal life. She said,

At the bar, most people select each other by their looks rather than on intelligence. The atmosphere of the bar does not allow for more in-depth conversations where you really get to know a person. . . . Yet on the Internet I can specify the man I want. I ask them personal and political questions and if they are not interested in responding in this way, I know that they don't want a woman who is intelligent.

Rather than adhering to the concept of "love at first sight," many want to get to know the "inner life" of a prospective partner before delving into an emotional relationship. Teresa tells me she can be playful and witty and see how men respond to her playful intelligence. She 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. Interestingly, through various e-mail relationships, Teresa finds Europeans more cultured, liberal, and open-minded than men from the United States and has opted to use various online dating agencies rather than attend the U.S. "Vacation Tour" parties. Similar to the lure of online dating in the United States, the use of the Internet draws from modern ideas of intimacy and selfhood based on talk rather than passion and the desire for the advancement of the self through contact with others.¹⁴

Having a larger cultural context within which to compare themselves contributes to the rising number of women who feel that they do not have to settle for traditional patterns of marriage. Through conversations with men on the tours and through Internet e-mails and chat rooms, women garner ammunition to construct norms around love, relationships, and marriage not as natural but as culturally determined. Anna talked about her experiences with TLC Tours and e-mail conversations:

I think my country is renowned for having people and customs very deep-rooted . . . and from here that machismo still remains to this day very strongly rooted in the values of men . . . but, at the same time, I like to know other people who already consider this as a lack of maturity and that it gives guidelines so the woman has her place in society and in her life with men.

According to Anna, discussions with men who do not abide by the same cultural norms strengthen her convictions that men benefit from machismo whereas women do not. Anna also tells me that she has received some very good advice from people with whom she has been communicating. Because many women condone and perpetuate machista behavior, she is often unable to find others with whom she can share her inner thoughts and feelings.

Yet women are not entirely free to create themselves in these cyberexchanges. Because men write to multiple women, this can be an expensive process for men that involves not just e-mail access and translating fees but also the cost of sending women flowers and gifts and even visiting the select few screened out through writing. And because many men send women between \$500 and \$1,000 for English classes, women feel they must give the man what he wants, to be the ideal docile and appreciative woman who is available when he needs her. As Monica wrote in an e-mail to a man she is dating in the United States who sent her \$500.00 for English lessons,

Regarding my English classes, I'm very proud because they named me as the honor student. . . . I still don't know much but as I told you before, I'm doing my best to learn fast . . . and also I don't want to disappoint you."

Women can be constricted by the consumer's wants and needs and codes of reciprocity.

Conclusion

These women's search for U.S. husbands demonstrates how global imaginaries affect women's intimate lives. Global processes, by bringing people from unevenly developed areas more in contact with one another, provide middle-class women from Third World countries new scenarios in which to reimagine gender roles and extend what is possible in their local culture. Recent studies locate the "female underside of globalization" as the process whereby millions of women from "poor countries in the south migrate to do the 'women's work' of the north—work that affluent women (and men) are no longer able or willing to do" (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002, p. 3). Rather than extract raw resources from the Third World countries, wealthy nations hope to import workers who provide better care, love, and sex. In a similar slant, U.S. men look to Mexican women as more able wives and mothers (more dedicated, feminine, and willing to serve their husbands) to take on the role they say feminist, career-driven women no longer want. Yet women, too, look to men as better husbands and fathers than Mexican men and culture. Their perceptions of men from the United States coincide with the image of the globe-trotter: the sensitive, loyal businessman who is economically savvy, successful, and hard working—an image that is not always realized. Contrasting expectations produce uneven results, especially because U.S. men hope to replace traditional family and gender arrangements whereas some women hope to transcend them. As women increasingly create communities of belonging through consumption in a global marketplace, they see these marriages as an opportunity to solidify a transborder middle-class identity. Although Mexican women may turn to global circuits (such as tourism and Internet communication) and Western culture to express modern notions of the individual and relationships as well as liberal capitalist notions of consumer power, women incorporate these ideas unevenly and alongside traditional notions of family unity and codes of femininity. Thus, these intimate exchanges complicate an easy binary between the United States and Mexico, between the traditional and the modern, and between the global and the national.

Cyberbride industries target more diverse populations of women as Internet matchmaking services become a more accepted, accessible, and widespread means (for mostly the middle class in Mexico) of finding a partner that fulfills one's individual needs and desires. In this article, I hope to have disrupted an easy equation of the cy-

berbride industry, a global broker of love and marriage, as an institution that exploits poor, desperate, and unsuspecting women. Along with this is a hope for a more nuanced understanding of the ways emerging sectors of educated and misplaced women from the "Third World" use global processes to step outside the limits of what is possible at home. Women are savvy excavators of opportunities that come their way, offering more stable, open, and exciting relationships, marriages, and futures.

Notes

1. Aihwa Ong (1999) argued that scholars have tended to overlook complicated negotiations between the nation-state and transnational processes such as mobile capital and migration. Although cultural studies scholars have celebrated agency and hybridity for those who move between nation-states, Ong demonstrated that "flexible citizens" are often complicit actors in processes of liberal capitalism.

2. Levine and Correa (1993, p. 197) found that the national fertility rates declined in the 1970s and 1980s; the average number of children Mexican women bore lowered from 6.7 in 1970 to 3.46 in 1989. The author gathered this information from 1991 data from the United Nations Children's Fund.

3. In *Gendered Transitions*, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) quotes from Cordera Campos and Tiburcio (1989, p. 114).

4. Mexican Matchmakers, although a legitimate introduction agency, was recently closed down because they owed money in back taxes. The media in Guadalajara, however, forged a different story about the closing down of this company. For a week, media and radio programs incorrectly reported they were involved in the trafficking of prostitutes from Mexico to Russia in an attempt to ruin their reputation and to prevent women from joining any other affiliated agencies in Guadalajara. This company has reopened under the name "Mexican Brides."

5. It is difficult to say how many women are signed up with these agencies because some are members of more than one agency and the numbers of women change quickly. Mexican Matchmakers has anywhere from 200 to 500 female participants, although the numbers of "active" members may be lower. There are also more than 300 Internet companies advertising women from Asia, Russia, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

6. The middle to upper classes in Mexico are more likely to hold visas because they can prove their return to Mexico through stable jobs, bank accounts, and the ownership of cars and/or property. To move to the United States, women must obtain a fiancée visa. Matchmaking agencies provide detailed information on their Web sites or at the actual agency and sometimes even sell "immigration kits" with all of the relevant paperwork and information.

7. I have changed the names of all of the women interviewed, and unless specified, the quotes are from face-to-face interviews. All translations from Spanish into English are my own.

8. See Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994). Arlie Hochschild (1989) makes a similar argument in her U.S.-based study, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*.

9. See the article "Shock Jock Rails Against Mexico's Modern Women," from the *Christian Science Monitor* at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0218/p01s03-woam.html>.

10. This offspring was later coined by Jose Vasconcelos to be the turbulent beginnings of "*la raza cosmica*." See Vasconcelos (1997).

11. See Octavio Paz (1961).

12. Anthropologists such as Matthew Gutmann (1996) are careful to contextualize the changing historical, class, and regional meanings of manliness or machismo. In his book *The Meanings of Macho*, he also highlights some of the positive qualities of machismo, such as men's sense of caring and duty toward their children and families.

13. This quote is from Ursula Biemann's (2000) video, *Writing Desire*.

14. In his discussion of Internet relationships, Michael Hardy refers to Anthony Giddens' (1992) idea of modern intimacy to understand the broader contexts of Internet dating.

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