

***“Love Stops at the Border”:  
Marriage, Citizenship, and the “Mail-Order Brides”  
Industry***

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“If small-time con artists and Third-World gold-diggers can obtain green cards with so little resistance, then surely terrorists can do (and have done) the same... Yet while there is endless debate about the quantity and type of workers we import, there is very little focus or discussion on the foreign spouses Americans bring to the country — either through genuine relationships or fraudulent ones.”

- David Seminara, former tenured member of the US Foreign Service and consular officer.

## **Introduction**

The link between marriage, family, the economy and the nation is a powerful one. Recent events in the United States, from the adoption of the 1996 *Defense of Marriage Act* to states referendums on same-sex marriage during the 2004 presidential elections remind us that that more than being a private domestic arrangement, marriage is a political institution that participates in the constitution of public order. But despite the fact that international marriage is currently the primary reason why people migrate to the United States and that marriage migration to the United States has almost tripled between 1960 and 1997, increasing from 9 percent to 25 percent of all immigration. (Constable 2005: 4), it is striking that so few studies have tried to examine and analyse this trend along with its various political implications. Labour migration and illegal migration, by contrast, have generated a vast amount of analyses. While it is now well established that gender is a crucial factor in our understanding of the causes and consequences of international migration, the significance of marriage migration in the United States has received scant attention, and part of it is due to its association with female migration and dependency, as opposed to work and autonomy.

Yet, this has not prevented the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to identify transnational marriage and its fraud potential as a “threat to national security,” and one subgroup of marriage migrants has caught the state’s attentions: the so-called “mail-order brides” (Winston 2008: 1, 4). “Domestic slave,”

“subservience”: these key words in the excerpted quote at the beginning of this paper powerfully exemplify received ideas and apprehensions of what the “mail-order bride” industry is about, how it “perverts” marriage by making it about instrumental relationships, either from the husband’s or the bride’s perspective, rather than one based on “love”. In fact, it seems that for the general public, political and juridical uneasiness with the idea of a “mail-order brides industry” stems from the fact that it confronts us upfront with the important mythology of marriage being first and foremost a private act motivated by *disinterested* love - making us forget that it is also a public institution that participates in the constitution of public order. Yet, whereas proponents of same-sex marriages usually put forward all the material and legal benefits of marriage, and thus the need to expand it to same-sex couples, such a line of argument does not hold with mail-order brides. And whereas the US Supreme Court established clearly in 1952 with *Lutwak v. United States* that marriage entered solely for immigration purposes would be criminalized, the spring of the mail-order brides industry in the past twenty years marks for pause: “Once we begin to justify the mail-order bride industry based upon the social and economic benefits it brings to women,” Linda Kelly underscores, “the critical question arises: should marriage for benefits be condoned? That is, should we allow marriage to be sold?” (Kelly: 2001: 186).

In this exploratory paper, I argue that the mail-order brides are part of a security governance of migration. Security anxieties about this largely unregulated lucrative industry stem not so much out of concern for the freedom of the women being involved, but from the fear that it signals a “privatization of citizenship,” namely the uncontrolled sale of marriage for immigration and citizenship benefits. Rather than following a real transnational “free market of love,” the mail-order brides industry plays on various desires directly intertwined with globalisation flows and imaginings about the nation. As such, the figure of the “mail-order bride” should be understood as being part of a complex political economy of desire and security. Finally, I want to suggest that concerns over the

mail-order brides industry in the US inscribes itself in the more profound theoretical consideration of the historical role of “foreignness” as a “threat” or a “problem” in the constitution of the American political order, and that mail-order brides are seen as both agents of (re)founding and as a threat to the democratic order.

To better illustrate these points, I first propose a brief overview of the mail-order brides industry: its scope, its clients, and the services it offers. This section will highlight why the term “mail-order bride” is so controversial, to the point where the term almost becomes an empty signifier. Relying on Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality, I will then explore how mail-order brides get embedded in a complex security governance which links mail-order brides to other concerns such as marriage fraud and illegal labour migration. Finally, the last section will be devoted to the ways in which mail-order brides are seen as potential (re)founding agents of the national order. Both instances highlight how the border remains significant for the construction and regulation of immigrant mail-order brides’ identities and activities.

### **I – “You Don’t Actually Buy Yourself a Wife!”: Overview of the “Mail-Order Marriage” Industry**

Debates on “mail-order brides” and the “mail-order bride industry” are somewhat akin to debates as to whether one should use “prostitution” or “sex work”. This dichotomy is usually epitomized in the conscious decision to purposively use or avoid the term. For example, Nicole Constable, Kathryn Robinson and Lisa Anne Simons respectively prefer to use the term “marriage correspondence,” “transnational brokered marriages” and “international matchmaking”<sup>1</sup>. They also condemn scholarly studies that use symbolic referents such as “mail-order brides” or “marriage market”. Such

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<sup>1</sup> Even more, Simons quotes a member in a discussion forum who asserted that “[the term] probably originated by [sic] feminist propaganda in an attempt to put down the process and negatively affect public opinion on it” (quoted in Simons 2001: 61). To this, Simons adds that “[t]his quote substantiates my finding that women’s advocates themselves use the expression in a manipulative fashion to alarm and ultimately influence policy-makers” (Simons 2001: 61).

terminology, they caution, characterise women as no more than commodities. Using the term “mail-order bride,” insists Robinson, hides “the critical fact that these transactions are dealing with emotional attachment” (Robinson 2007: 484). More importantly maybe, Constable aptly points out that many of the co-called “mail-order brides” are not even aware of the term and its negative connotations. Instead, they see themselves as being involved in “pen pals relationships” (Constable 2003: 70). As it may surely by now be obvious and for reasons I will develop further in the paper, while conscious of the baggage it carries and its potential pitfalls, I nevertheless use the concept of mail-order bride for my analysis and here is why.

Talking about “mail-order bride” or “transnational/correspondence marriage” stems from a wish to position oneself regarding the individual freedom of the women involved. But were we to stop there, we would simply end up in the very irresolvable debate over identity politics that has somewhat paralyzed feminism: any identity or rights claim acts as contradicting “violating enablements” (Spivak 1993: 44). In other words, invoking specific identities, even for the sake of securing better rights or protections, end up shaping and constraining our desires, our political imagination as well as our very understanding of freedom. Thus, using a term such as “mail-order bride” may allow us to invoke a discourse of rights and protections, but it also reinscribes the designation of such women and enables their further regulation through that designation (Brown 2000: 232). Yet, I am critical of the ways in which analyses that reject the idea of “mail-order brides” implicitly ground it on a liberal understanding of freedom at the individual level (are mail-order brides free, are they victims or agents? To what extent?), thus building a fence around the “site” of mail-order brides and regulating it rather than challenging it or analysing it. Moreover, as my discussion about the “real” and the “virtual” will make it clear later, I think we should not neglect the symbolic power of naming this phenomenon “mail-order brides”: not *any* woman involved in a transnational marriage mediated through an internet marriage broker is thought of as a

mail order bride. For instance, were I to meet and marry a French man through the use of an international marriage broker, I would not be identified as a mail-order bride, I would not be the kind of woman one would think of when invoking the idea of a “mail order bride” – and yet, this would be a transnational marriage, and this would be a correspondence marriage. In short, while I am totally aware of the problems of using the term, I think using it brings to light the impact the category has on the securitization of these women.

The first challenge to any preconception of what the “mail-order bride” industry consists of arises when one tries to define its activity. “Mail-order bride businesses,” usually called “international marriage brokering agencies”<sup>2</sup>, do not sell women *per se*. These companies provide paper and/or internet catalogues featuring pictures of women listed as potential brides to be. What they *do* sell are contact information for men to contact these “marriage-minded” women. At the minimum, these websites offer a list of women’s addresses and contact information for the price of a “membership” or “subscription” cost. The means vary by broker, but most international marriage brokers provide customers with websites that include pictures and short biographies of prospective mail-order brides. Prospective brides often register for free or pay a minimal fee. For example, “Hearts of Asia”, one of the biggest international marriage brokering agencies, offers one introduction for 30\$ and 10 introductions for 75\$. Men can pay for individual contact addresses or pay for a package with a predetermined number of contact addresses. “Hearts of Asia” also offers a so-called “freshness guarantee”: should one of the women contacted by the male customer be no longer available, the agency will give the customer “2 free, foreign introductions of your choice”.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2005, US Congress defined international marriage brokers as follows: “The term ‘international marriage broker’ means a corporation, partnership, business, individual, or other legal entity, whether or not organized under any law of the United States, that charges fees for providing dating, matrimonial, matchmaking services, or social referrals between United States citizens or nationals or aliens lawfully admitted to the United States as permanent residents and foreign national clients by providing personal contact information or otherwise facilitating communication between individuals.” See “International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005,” subtitle D of the “Violence against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005,” Public Law 109-162, H.R. 34-02-116, 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2005. Available [online] at: <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h109-3402> (September 10, 2008).

Other services are also offered at different costs, depending on the brokering agencies. Some websites sell pre-written letters written in the native language of the bride to be or offer personalized writing services, flower delivery services, legal assistance for immigration services and, more importantly, “bridal tours” (So 2005: 407). The latter are the main source of profits for international brokering agencies, as the cost averages \$4,000US. Such tours usually include airplane tickets and planned social gatherings in specific cities where groups of men customers (usually up to 40) get to meet up hundreds of women. Accounts suggest that the usual ratio at such gatherings is 5-7 women for every man. Such tours also usually offer translation services and various updated catalogues of women<sup>3</sup>. It also includes a so-called “Do-it-yourself Fiancee Visa Kit”<sup>4</sup> that the customer can file up while being abroad, should he find a woman he likes and wants to bring her back to the United States right away. In this perspective, these agencies thus also act as immigration service providers.

Data or estimates about the number of women who advertise themselves as potential mail order-brides or immigrate to a Western country as a result of a mail-order marriage are hard to find. For one thing, the number of international marriage agencies appears to be quite high. As of 2003, conservative estimates established the number to be around 350.<sup>5</sup> However, some have “sister sites” (for example, [agoodwife.com](http://www.agoodwife.com) and [planet-love.com](http://www.planet-love.com)), while many advertise themselves as “pen-pal clubs” and are thus hard to take into account and usually not officially counted. As a result, it is hard to estimate how many women actually list themselves as potential mail-order brides: many sites advertise the same woman’s picture and ad, while some sites list “scam” pictures of models instead

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of such tours, see [http://www.russianbrides.com/anastasia\\_tours/tours\\_includes.asp](http://www.russianbrides.com/anastasia_tours/tours_includes.asp).

<sup>4</sup> See for example [http://www.russianbrides.com/fiancee\\_visa\\_fiance\\_visa.htm](http://www.russianbrides.com/fiancee_visa_fiance_visa.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Says Constable: “Scholes suggests that as of mid-March 1998 there were 153 listings for international introduction services on [goodwife.com](http://www.goodwife.com) and by early May of the same year, 202. As of August 2000, I found 350 listed. Under the category ‘Asian’, the number has increased from 55 in May 1998 to 89 in August 2000. The [goodwife.com](http://www.goodwife.com) [website] does not appear to include a number of pen pal clubs, including [oneandonly.com](http://www.oneandonly.com), [kiss.com](http://www.kiss.com), [firendfinder.com](http://www.firendfinder.com), and several other popular sites that do not charge women fees, nor does it include individually run personal web sites that aim to introduce men and women. My estimate of 350 agencies is therefore conservative” (Constable 2003: 38). In 2001, Donna Hughes found almost 500 marriage agencies and indexed 219 in a database, excluding those who were non functional (Hughes 2004: 3).

of real ads, while not simply featuring trafficked women listed against their will. However, a study of five mail-order brides catalogues done in 1999 revealed that, of the Asian women advertised, 20% were aged between 16 and 24, 41% between 21 and 25, and 24% between 26 and 30 (Scholes 1999). Interestingly enough, women coming from East Asia were on average much younger than their East European counterparts: the same analysis showed that 31% of women from East Europe were less than 25 years-old, compared to 61% of Asian women (Scholes 1999). No explanation has been given as to how this difference could be explained, neither has any comparative study been done on the topic. Finally, while strong evidence about the link between human trafficking and international marriage agencies remains hard to prove, some cases of human trafficking involving international marriage agencies have been found in Israel, Germany and the United Kingdom (Lindee 2007: 564).

As a result, the “mail-order bride industry” remains largely understudied and exact data on it remains hard to find, as no country is officially keeping information on whether people who apply for a spouse or fiancée visa have met through an international marriage brokering agency. The same lack of data applies to Canada. While Canada is usually acknowledged as being one of the favored immigration countries for mail-order brides, no statistics on their actual number exist (Abidi and Brigham 2008: 2). Nonetheless, assumptions about their increasing number led to the launch in March 2008 of a Canadian website intended to provide valuable information to incoming mail-order brides.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the only available data comes from the United States, and yet again, it remains approximate. As of 1998, about 70 percent of the women listed in mail-order brides catalogues were from the Philippines, followed by Russia, Ukraine and Latin American countries such as Mexico and Columbia. The Philippines remains the largest “brides supplier,” and is estimated to “export” up

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<sup>6</sup> The website was not a governmental initiative though. It was created by *Changing Together*, a centre for immigrant women in Edmonton, in partnership with the University of Alberta's Faculty of Extension and the Legal Resource Centre of Alberta. See “Canadian Law and Modern Day Foreign Brides” at <http://www.lawforforeignbrides.ca>.

to 20,000 women to foreign husbands annually (Lloyd 2000: 345). However, as of 2001, Simons expects the number of fiancé visas (K-1 visa forms) issued to Russians and Ukrainians to double over the next decade (Simons 2001: 167). In 1996, the INS estimated matchmaking marriages accounted for 2.7 to 4.1 percent of all immigration involving female spouses, which represents 0.4 percent of all immigration to the US (INS, 1999). The INS also estimated that in 1996 4,000-6,000 US citizens married by virtue of the mail-order bride industry, and that mail-order brides represented 6 % of the female aliens who directly received permanent residency by virtue of marriage.

Finally, one of the most intriguing aspects of the mail-order bride industry is that it is totally legal and almost totally unregulated. Canada and Russia have not yet set forth any legislation regulating the mail-order bride industry. The Swedish Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination conducted a 9-month investigation of the mail-order bride business and concluded that it was neither unethical nor unlawful. Interestingly enough, only in the Philippines, the country of origin of the majority of mail-order brides, are “mail-order bride” industries officially banned. *The Philippine Republic Act No. 6955*<sup>7</sup> or the “Anti-Mail-Order Bride Law” makes it illegal for a “person, natural or juridical, association, club or any other entity” to “establish or carry on a business which has for its purpose the matching of Filipino women for marriage to foreign nationals either on a mail-order basis or through personal introduction.” However, such law has proved largely ineffective: not only did some industries simply changed their names and vocations as “pen pals clubs,” but the great majority of them were located in other countries, usually the United States, where the country’s national law does not have jurisdiction. Finally, since many women list themselves on their own volition, companies seldom get sued for solicitation (Morgan 2007: 5-6). In fact, save for the Philippines’ ban on mail-order brides agencies, only the United States took action to better regulate

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<sup>7</sup>For full text, see: “Philippine Republic Act no. 6955”. Available [online]: [http://elibrary.supremecourt.gov.ph/republic\\_acts.php?doctype=Republic%20Acts&docid=a45475a11ec72b843d74959b60fd7bd645c3844bc0d95](http://elibrary.supremecourt.gov.ph/republic_acts.php?doctype=Republic%20Acts&docid=a45475a11ec72b843d74959b60fd7bd645c3844bc0d95) (September 17, 2008).

the international marriage brokers agencies. Passed in 2005, the “International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005” (IMBRA), which is part of the Violence against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005, placed some regulations on the agencies, notably requiring them to provide potential foreign brides with information on US clients' criminal history, and previous marital status.<sup>8</sup> The most promising aspect of IMBRA was its insistence on the need for data collection. Among other things, under IMBRA, fiancé and spouse visa applicants would be required to indicate whether they had met through an international marriage agency. All prospective spouses would also get a pamphlet that would include information about US immigration laws, resources in case of domestic abuses, and other useful information. However, an August 2008 report of the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) showed how ineffectively IMBRA has been implemented. So far, only two of the seven IMBRA requirements have been successfully put into practice (GAO 2008: 1). The pamphlet has yet to be produced, and while the US Citizenship and Immigration Services is collecting and maintaining some of the data required by IMBRA, the report notes that “most of the data are not in a summary or reportable form and other required data have not been collected”.<sup>9</sup>

## **II - Mail-Order Brides as Part of a Security Governance**

Even if the data on mail-order brides is limited and often remains approximate, it nonetheless begs some questions. While international marriage is currently the *primary* reason why people migrate to

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed list of all the requirements that need to be fulfilled by international marriage brokers, see the “Violence against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005,” [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=109\\_cong\\_bills&docid=f:h3402enr.txt.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=109_cong_bills&docid=f:h3402enr.txt.pdf) . For a critical analysis of IMBRA, see Morgan 2007 and Lindee 2007.

<sup>9</sup> For the complete report, see United States Government Accountability Office, “International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005: Agencies Have Implemented Some, but Not All of the Act’s Requirements,” 2008. Available [online] <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08862.pdf> (September 16, 2008).

the United States<sup>10</sup>, individuals of the same ethnicity currently constitute an estimated two-third of all marriage emigration couples (Thai 2008: 1). Therefore, if “mail-order marriages” account for so little of the global immigration population in the United States, where comes the need for two legislations about it, one in 1996 and the other in 2005? Why has this topic captured the popular imagination? I want to suggest that the uneasiness with the idea of a “mail-order brides industry” stems from the fact that it confronts us upfront with the important mythology of marriage being first and foremost a private act motivated by disinterested love - making us forget that it is also a public institution that participates in the constitution of public order – and that, by blurring boundaries between love and interests, the mail-order bride gets caught in a larger security governance<sup>11</sup> of migration driven by a fear of a “privatization of citizenship,” namely the uncontrolled sale of marriage for immigration and citizenship benefits.

Governmentality, as Foucault argues, expresses a concern with the ordering, administration and regulation of society: “If government is concerned with shaping and directing the actions or the conduct of others, ‘governmentality’ refers to the political rationality or ‘mentality’ that has made this concern its own” (Foucault 1982: 221). Foucault’s idea of governmentality emphasizes the circulatory and dispersed nature of power and the modes of governing through territorially spatialized practices it calls for. As such, technologies of security are literally management techniques that aim at organising circulation in such a way that “good” circulation be eliminated from the “bad” one. It thus ends up being characterised by procedures of intervening as well as

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<sup>10</sup> As Hung Cam Thai notes, in the United States, “[w]omen make up more than 65 percent of all marriage emigrants. Whereas marriage migrants make up about a quarter of all men who enter the United States each year, female marriage migrants constitute over 40 per cent of all women who enter. Furthermore, individuals of the same ethnicity currently constitute an estimate two-third of all marriage emigration couples” (Thai 2008: 1).

<sup>11</sup> Security governance denotes the various “structures and processes which enable a set of public and private actors to coordinate their independent needs and interests through the making and implementation of binding policy decisions” (Krahmann, quoted in Friesendorf 2007: 383).

representing (who are the ‘bad’ ones, who are the ‘good ones’?). We might thus say that representation here becomes a mode of intervention; security

is not a noun that names something, it is *a principle of formation that does things*. It is neither an ontological predicate of being, nor an objective need, but the progenitor instead of a proliferating array of discourses of danger within whose brutal and brutalising networks of power–knowledge modern human being is increasingly ensnared and, ironically, radically endangered (Dillon 1996: 16).

Securitization not only becomes a process by which friend/enemy distinctions get made, it also becomes a routinized technique of government.<sup>12</sup> Defining what type of migrant the mail-order bride is is not just technical, but deeply political. It involves “competing attempts to depict the domain ... in a way that grasp its real nature and represent it as a field for governmental intervention. Governmentality involves the representation of objects from reality as problematic, thereby attempting to reorder reality in terms of solvable problems” (Aradau 2008: 19). We thus need to ask: how are mail-order brides (instead of, say, “marriage migrant”) framed as a problem, how are they conceptualized? How do these representations also “intervene” in making the figure of the mail-order bride intelligible, and her migration amenable to intervention? From this understanding, we see that security becomes not only concerned about how referent subjects survive in such orders, it also engages how they come into being in the first place (Edkins 2002: 79).

This issue of representation as being a form of intervention is no mere theoretical concern here, as the very term “mail-order bride” is a contentious one. Indeed, what is fascinating about the “mail-order bride” is that *she exists while being non-existent at the same time*. Debates about “who”

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<sup>12</sup> Ole Waever is usually cited as the authority on the concept of securitization. He is credited for having coined the term (Waever 1995). Ever since, the term has lived on within the Copenhagen School of security studies as exceptionalization. As Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde explain: “Security is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicisation. [...] [It means] justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure” (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde 1998: 23-24). In addition to this side of securitization, the so-called “Paris School” of International Relations associated with the work of Didier Bigo has refined and expanded the meaning of securitization by highlighting its routinization side that stems from the everyday management of issues such as migration by professionals of security – which Bigo calls the “managers of unease”. This analysis is hence informed by both aspects, even though, as will become evident, it privileges the latter meaning in its assessment of the governance of marriage migration under the cloak of security.

is or is not a mail-order bride, definitions over her *reality* or her *virtuality* actually constitute modes of intervention. Let me highlight here some examples. While most people are not familiar with the actual process though which one “becomes” a mail-order bride or who the people involved are, a whole political economy around the term is already at work, thanks mostly to popular shows and cartoons in the United States such as *Seinfeld*, *American Dad* or *Bones* which all featured “mail-order brides,” and to some reports on the matter published in well-read newspapers and magazines such as *Harper’s*, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. For one thing, the term now carries strong negative connotations with it. Nicole Constable, undoubtedly the leading scholar on the topic, rejects the term for its negative connotations and for its misleading assumption that brokering agencies are actually selling women: “The label promotes the unfortunate connotations that women are commodities, who are bought by male consumers. [Such agencies] rather provide individuals with the information to locate their own matches... That women are often commodified... is not in question, but the fact that their images are commodified does not make them commodities” (Constable 2003: 168). She rejects the term and opts instead for one that, according to her, describes best the *reality* of these women: “marriage correspondence” or “transnational marriage”.

Yet, despite these academic accounts, the term “mail-order brides” is used in the United States immigration legislation. The term was used in the US immigration law (see Section 652 “Mail-Order Business” of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996,)<sup>13</sup>, while the more recent *International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005* refers to

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<sup>13</sup> This section highlights how the Congress’ main concern with mail-order marriages is its potential for immigration fraud: “FINDINGS.—The Congress finds as follows: (1) There is a substantial “mail-order bride” business in the United States. With approximately 200 companies in the United States, an estimated 2,000 to 3,500 men in the United States find wives through mail-order bride catalogs each year. However, there are no official statistics available on the number of mail-order brides entering the United States each year. (2) The companies engaged in the mail-order bride business earn substantial profits. (3) Although many of these mail-order marriages work out, in many other cases, anecdotal evidence suggests that mail-order brides find themselves in abusive relationships. There is also evidence to

“mail-order marriage”. Yet, while the international marriage brokers are defined, no legal definition of “mail-order bride” is given in both documents. The term is nonetheless used as an identifiable sign and marks certain women through the immigration process. By contrast, while the mail-order bride industry is totally legal and almost totally unregulated worldwide, the Council of Europe’s 2004 Parliamentary Assembly included “mail-order brides” into the category of domestic slavery (Parliamentary Resolution 1663) and called for its inclusion in the Convention on action against trafficking human beings, despite the rapporteur’s own admission that members were not aware “of any recent research undertaken in Europe on the subject of ‘mail-order brides’” (Gaburro 2004).

Finally, the term “mail-order bride” also functions as a debatable yet recognizable sign for the marriage brokers and their male customers. Says Mike Krosky, head of *Cherry Blossoms*, one of the oldest and biggest international marriage brokers: “It is an antiquated, uninformed expression. One hundred years ago there were mail-order brides. There is no such thing today” (quoted in Simons 2001: p. 59). In fact, some researchers on the mail-order brides industry noted that they could only use material with the permission from *Cherry Blossoms*, granted that they did not use the term “mail-order brides” and instead talk of “international personal ads” (Griggers 2000: 213). Yet, many agency owners feel that despite the fact that they personally deem the term inaccurate, it is a useful marketing expression that commands instant recognition: “People use the term when doing an internet search and this is why we still use it” (quoted in Simons 2001: 60). One thus frequently encounters the following paradox: the majority of websites offering mail-order brides catalogs will use the terminology to advertise themselves and categorize the women they feature, yet at the same

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suggest that a substantial number of mail-order marriages are fraudulent under United States law. (4) Many mail-order brides come to the United States unaware or ignorant of United States immigration law. Mail-order brides who are battered often think that if they flee an abusive marriage, they will be deported. Often the citizen spouse threatens to have them deported if they report the abuse. (5) The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that the rate of marriage fraud between foreign nationals and United States citizens or aliens lawfully admitted for permanent residence is 8 percent. It is unclear what percentage of these marriage fraud cases originate as mail-order marriages.” See “Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996”. Available at [https://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/legal/statutes/pl104\\_208.pdf](https://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/legal/statutes/pl104_208.pdf).

time will insist that “there is really no such thing as mail-order brides”. Such websites can be found by using “mail-order bride” as a key search term, yet either avoid the term in their presentation text or simply refute the existence of “mail-order brides” in the textual introduction of their main presentation page<sup>14</sup>. Interestingly, not only the marriage brokers, but also the male clients looking for “mail-order brides” also try to dissociate themselves from the concept, while at the same time relying on it. For example, in an informal poll done on one of the most popular mail-order brides websites, [planet-love.com](http://planet-love.com), the majority of signed-in members believe that the term should be avoided<sup>15</sup>. While the women’s images and short descriptions presented on the catalogs play on and correspond to the specific desires imagined to be encapsulated in the expression “mail-order bride,”<sup>16</sup> the broader text and presentation of the website insist on a negation of it: these women are “ladies,” not “mail-order brides;” “mail-order brides” do not exist, but intermarriages and international dating do.

But what if the distinction between the “real” and the “virtual” was misleading? What if instead of trying to distinguish the representation of mail-order brides on the websites from the

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<sup>14</sup> For example, <http://agoodwife.com>, one of the most popular mail-order bride websites in the United States, used to advertise itself as the “Mail-Order Bride Warehouse” and now presents itself as “the mail-order bride guide”. It still uses the term in its presentation and in various site sections devoted to women from different regions. Yet, in the introduction text, the webmaster ridicules the use of the term: “We also have the question of a Western woman vs. a Foreign woman. This is commonly referred to as a Mail Order Bride or MOB. While I am sure that it would take a lot of stamps to ship a Mail Order Bride I think you might have a problem with customs!” Similarly, <http://mail-order-brides-websites.no1reviews.com/> lists its own top-ten reviews of “the best Mail-Order Brides websites” yet starts its presentation by stating that “the description ‘mail order bride’ is very misleading, conjuring up images of women being bought like cattle and sent by Fed Ex to their predatory future husbands of whom they know nothing. The truth is very different and far less sinister, as you will see if you read our reviews and check out any of the sites we have listed below. The brides do not travel by post either!”. Such dissociation with the term “mail-order bride” is common to most websites.

<sup>15</sup> About 66% of voters voted “Yes, it’s a term that should be avoided,” while about 33% voted “No, there’s no need to avoid it”. These numbers are estimates though, as results were only shown in a visual graphic form, without the actual results in term of percentage being written. Results as of September 25, 2008, with 82 votes. See: [planet-love.com](http://planet-love.com).

<sup>16</sup> Women are often fully aware of some of the imaginary associated with the idea of what a “mail-order bride” is. Simons notes that several of her respondents openly admitted writing their ads in stereotypical ways that at least partially misrepresented them in the hope to get more letters: “A Russian woman, Irina, told me that although she never intended to do any housework, and fully intended to have a career in the US, her biographical note in the marriage agency listing “said what all ‘the girls say: that I am feminine, tender, love to cook.’ When I asked her if she did love to cook, she responded readily with ‘No! I hate to cook! But I knew if I put in the ad that I love to cook then I would get more letters. All I wanted at first was a lot of letters’” (Simons 2001: 95, 105-106).

actual women we tried to understand the “actual” and the “virtual” as being of equal power? For Gilles Deleuze, any “actual” being (say, the “real” woman who lists herself in a catalogue, as opposed to the “mail-order bride” represented in the catalog) is *already* an image; what something or somebody “is” already embodies a power to “become”. Here, the symbolic and the material are not distinct spheres of activities, with “mail-order bride” corresponding to the former (i.e. to the “fantasy world” attached to the term, the representation we have of it) and “marriage correspondence” to the latter (i.e. corresponding to the actual “material” truth of the activity in which the participants are involved and which we must ‘uncover’). If we understand the mail-order bride not as a defined subject whose “truth” and reality we must assess, but really as an *empty signifier*, as the result of many socially coded affects, we can dissociate ourselves from accounts that situate the mail-order bride inside a well-defined liberal framework that understands the mail-order bride phenomenon as a problem of contracts and/or human rights (does the prospective bride have all the information she needs to know about her future husband? Is the balance of information fair?), and instead, look at it as a problem of circulation, and security governance as representation becomes a mode of intervention.

From the state’s perspective, the figure of the mail-order bride emerges in a political field defined by the reality of other social phenomena to which a security mode of narration is being privileged, namely that of illegal immigration, organized crime, domestic violence, and human trafficking. Security governance denotes the various “structures and processes which enable a set of public and private actors to coordinate their independent needs and interests through the making and implementation of binding policy decisions” (Krahmann, quoted in Friesendorf 2007: 383). In the case of mail-order brides, issues around organized crime and trafficking were mostly put forward by

European leaders and NGOs<sup>17</sup>. Various members of Congress and of the US government have also contributed in putting transnational marriage under the security umbrella. Testifying before the US Senate in 1985, then Immigration and Naturalization Services Commissioner Alan Nelson claimed that up to 30 percent of marriage applicants were fraudulent relationships<sup>18</sup>, and mail-order marriages are mentioned in the hearing as being a problem. In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendments (IMFA) to combat the perceived problem of marriage fraud, introducing the 2-year conditional green card and deportation proceedings for violators (Winston 2008: 5). Yet it is undoubtedly high profiles cases of murdered mail-order brides (Susanna Blackwell in 1995 and Anastasia King in 2000) that prompted Republican Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas to call for a Congressional Hearing before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in July 2004 on “Human Trafficking: Mail-Order Brides Abuse”<sup>19</sup>. The security discourse here acquired another dimension, that of human security, with trafficking being put forward instead of illegal migration. Finally, the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005 (IMBRA) was reintroduced in September 2005 by Senators Sam Brownback (R-KS), Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA), and Representative Rick Larsen (D-WA). IMBRA was included in the *Violence Against Women Act* reauthorization, which was passed by both houses of Congress in December 2005. Yet again, with IMBRA, the security focus changed from trafficking to

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Giuseppe Gaburro (Rapporteur), *Domestic Slavery: Servitude, Au Pairs and Mail-Order Brides Report*, Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, April 19 2004. Available [online]: <http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/doc04/EDOC10144.htm> (September 10, 2008); the Council of Europe Action against Trafficking in Human Beings [http://www.coe.int/t/dg2/trafficking/campaign/Docs/Publications/Internet\\_en.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/t/dg2/trafficking/campaign/Docs/Publications/Internet_en.asp#TopOfPage), the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women <http://www.catwinternational.org> and the Solidarity Philippines Australia Network <http://cpcabrisbane.org/Kasama/2000/V14n1/Feb23Forum.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> See *Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Policy of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, on Fraudulent Marriage and Fiancé Arrangements to Obtain Permanent Resident Immigration Status July 26, 1985*, p. 30. Available [online]: <http://www.loc.gov/law/find/hearings/pdf/00139298779.pdf> (February 4, 2009). Though it is now known that the figures put forward by Wilson were fraudulent (see *Manvani v. U.S.*) and that IMFA was severely criticized for putting immigrant women in position of extreme vulnerability, the idea that marriage fraud was a privileged channel for illegal migrants to gain citizenship benefits remained strong in the wider public.

<sup>19</sup> See “Human Trafficking: Mail-Order Bride Abuse,” Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, Second Session, July 13, 2004. Available [online]: <http://foreign.senate.gov/hearings/2004/hrg040713p.html> (February 7, 2009).

domestic violence. Various prominent NGOs, including *Equality Now* and the *Tahirih Justice Center*, undertook various research projects to document cases of domestic abuse involving mail-order brides<sup>20</sup> and played a key role in raising awareness around the issue. However, as Kirsten Lindee notes, the fact that IMBRA was included under the *Violence Against Women Act* and not under the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (TVPA) reflects the fact that “the mail-order brides problem” was now being clearly framed in terms of domestic violence, not trafficking, thus making the problem one of individual security (securing safe international romance), not one of international security (international sex trafficking) (see Lindee 2007).

It is undoubtedly the 9/11 events that gave rise to a renewed security discourse on immigrants, as the U.S government reorganized many of the immigration administrative institutions and merged them under the Department of Homeland Security (Chacón 2008: 146). This new securitization of migrants – this “governmentality of unease” – puts them under greater police suspicion and intelligence service attention, which in return creates greater anxieties and insecurities for migrants (see Bigo 2008: 92 and Bigo 1998). Although mail-order brides are certainly not defined as “a security issue” the same way that terrorism is, for example, they are nonetheless made “intelligible” as part of a broader nexus of insecurity related to marriage fraud. A clear example of this securitization move is reflected in a recent November 2008 report released by the *Center for Immigration Studies*, a think-tank that defines itself by being animated by “a pro-immigrant, low-immigration vision which seeks fewer immigrants but a warmer welcome for those admitted.” In its study “Hello, I Love You, Won’t You Tell me Your Name: Inside the Green Card Marriage Phenomenon,” David Seminara highlights, as the introductory quote of this paper makes clear, how attention needs to be paid to marriage sponsorship “not just for the integrity of the legal immigration

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Equality Now, *The Willingness of “Mail-Order Brides Companies to Provide Services to Violent Men*, 1999. Available [online]: <http://www.equalitynow.org/reports/mailorderbride.pdf> (February 7, 2009).

system, but also for security reasons... The use of fraudulent marriage petitions is prevalent among international terrorists, including members of Al-Qaeda” (Seminara 2008: 1 and 9). The fact that in 2006-2007, 27% of foreign citizens gained legal permanent status by being spouses of US citizens (Department of Homeland Security 2007), the highest percentage of all categories, leads him to call for greater scrutiny of transnational marriage. In his list of common types of marriage fraud, Seminara lists “mail-order brides arrangements” alongside notably “cash-for vows weddings”, where Americans are paid to wed, “exploitative relationships,” where Americans petition for persons they intend to traffic or exploit and “heartbreakers,” where foreigners dupe Americans into believing their intentions are true, when they “actually just want a green card”. Here, mail-order brides are seen as excessive subjects, ones that are not only non representable, but also that exist as an anomaly. To name but a few:

- 1) Create a national marriage registration database;
- 2) Create a third option for USCIS adjudicators when a couple is interviewed to remove the foreign spouse’s “conditional status” on his/her green card, usually after two years of marriage. This third option would be a conditional approval extended for up to three years. With a supervisor’s approval, this third option would ensure that “would-be cheaters would have no guaranty that they would only need to remain married for two years”.
- 3) Eliminate the co-sponsor system for Americans filing immigrant visa petitions for spouse overseas, thus eliminating Americans living below the poverty line to sponsor immigrants.
- 4) Give the State Department and USCIS more resources to combat marriage fraud;

- 5) Give American spouses all immigration-related documents that the interviewing officer has access to, including previous tourist visa applications.

Seminara's policy recommendations call for tightened policing and customs-cooperation techniques that produce a security continuum, which can be defined as an institutionalized mode of policy-making that allows the transfer of security connotations of problems like terrorism, crime, or money-laundering to the area of migration (Huysmans 2000: 760). There is a complementary relationship between sovereign power and biopower, as "the power of the state and other authorities becomes diffused and increasingly reaches into the depth of the social by invading a widening array of social fields as a way of realizing the goals of managing and governing the life of the population" (de Larrinaga and Doucet 2008: 520). In his report, he comments on the fact that mail-order marriages are difficult instances for consular officers "when it's clear that the foreign brides are more interested in a ticket to the States than in love," and remarks that one officer told him that he would "sometimes take the more American guys aside and more or less tell them that their new fiancés or spouses were just desperate to live in the States and would leave them once they got their green cards" (Seminara 2008: 6). Here, Seminara as well as the officers who are concerned about establishing the truth of the love relationship all view the mail-order bride's migration through the lenses of *illegal* migration: "disinterested love" must be weighted in and proven. Interestingly, his anecdote highlights the current practice of security governance and the key role that bureaucrats and immigration officers play in enacting this governmentality of unease, thus sustaining Didier Bigo's point that securitization is, more than public discourses, a matter of everyday technologies employed by professionals of security, who often are in competition with other actors in the professional security field. Seminara's complaints about tensions between USCIS and consular officers, who, he believes, need more authority to deny or revoke marriage-based petitions they believe to be fraudulent. This makes the border, but also the interview with the USCIS adjudications officer,

significant sites for the construction and regulation of mail-order brides' identities and activities, as techniques previously used against criminals are used against migrants – and, since IMBRA, their husbands.

Ali Winston's summary of the usual current procedures to normalize a marriage conducted abroad or with a foreigner stresses well such policing techniques:

After procuring a marriage certificate, you file forms with the US Customs and Immigration Service (USCIS) establishing your relationship and requesting an adjustment of status for your spouse. The next step in the process is an interview with an adjudications officer... for a firsthand evaluation of your relationship. To support your partner's application – for legal permanent resident status, or citizenship if he or she already has that – it is wise to bring shared documentation such as joint bank accounts, leases, utilities bills and health insurance forms. Missing documents are often a red flag for adjudicators and are common grounds for denial. In a closed interview room, the adjudicator will question you and your spouse about particulars of the relationship, such as details of your first date, the appearance of your bedroom, or specifics about photos you have brought as evidence. Friends, family and children may also give statements in support of your relationship. Simultaneously, USCIS will conduct a background check by checking your names with the FBI's criminal database, the government's terrorist watch list (which, containing more than 1 million names, is criticized for being overbroad), and the Interagency Border Inspection System. FBI checks are supposed to take a maximum of 180 days – however, cases frequently drag on for years because of security checks" (Winston 2008: 1-2).

The control of mail-order brides at the border and through interview processes is not without reminding techniques employed by officials developed under the Page Law<sup>21</sup>, which targeted working-class Chinese immigrant women. Here again, officials had the tasks to try to distinguish the “real” wives from women bound to sex through the elicitation of biographical details, photographs, and the creation of case files. This policing of immigrants around sexuality as a way to “protect” the nation still remains a central feature of immigration today, and the relation mail-order brides have with the bureaucracy remains one of discipline and subjection within sexualized, racialized gendered, and classist parameters which enforces the idea of “ideal citizens” or “ideal migrants” (Luibhéid 2002: 43). Following various mail-order brides' immigration process, Nicole Constable notes, for example, a couple's success in obtaining the necessary visa: “Lisa was in many ways an

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<sup>21</sup> The Page Law of 1875 established “the policy of direct federal regulation of immigration by prohibiting for the first time the entry of undesirable immigrants. Immigrants designated as undesirable were those who could be classified as convicts, class labourers, and Asian women coming to work in prostitution” (Luibhéid 2002: 31)

ideal candidate to become a wife and mother. She was neither too old or too young, and had never worked at a bar or nightclub. Likewise, Ted was a white-collar professional” (Constable 2003: 105). Since Lisa didn’t fit the profile of the “desperate gold-digger”, and since Ted didn’t look like a poor abusive husband, their love relationship seemed *believable* to the immigration officer.

In the end, it seems that transnational marriage, especially those involving mail-order brides, therefore speaks to different political anxieties and calls for various security apparatuses coming from different actors. To name but a few: a fear by immigration official that marriage is only a state entered into for the sake of citizenship benefits; a fear of potential illegal labour migration fluxes, as marriage to a US citizen currently remains (this fear usually targets Filipinos and Mexicans, who “might only seek a way to be able to work in the US and bring their families with them”); a fear of domestic abuse, as mail-order brides might be the victims of violent American husbands; a fear of human trafficking, as some men might marry the prospective brides only to traffic and exploit them, and finally, a fear of terrorists using marriage to get into the United States more easily. While one might argue that issues of trafficking and domestic violent are embedded in a logic of human security that aims at helping women, it nonetheless “informs the biopolitical networks of global governmentalities and works in conjunction with – rather than against – the exercise of sovereign power” (de Larrinaga and Doucet 2008: 519): these two modalities of power are not necessarily antithetical.

### **III - Mail-Order Brides as an Agent of Political Re-Founding**

The securitization of marriage migrants, including mail-order brides, is consonant with Rogers Smith’s observation that the post-9/11 “war on terrorism” has resulted in renewed legitimacy for discriminatory policies towards immigrants as well as reductions in their legal rights, a reality that also endangers the rights of American citizens (Smith 2007: 116). Yet, if immigration as a security

domain is tied to the broader *problématique* of “the problem of foreignness,” as Bonnie Honig (2001) puts it, we should keep in mind the fact that foreignness also operates as an agent of (re)founding. In other words, at the same time that the mail-order bride appear as a potential threat to the regime, she also supports and re-enacts the myth of the United States as a nation of immigrants and marks the convergence of transnational capitalism, and ideals about a postracial citizenship. In this last section, I would like to briefly call attention to this other side of the “mail-order bride problem” that directly challenges, while being concomitant with, the governmental regime of security.

A quick survey of the content of various websites who advertise themselves either as “mail-order brides websites” or “international marriage brokers” quickly reveals that the prospective brides are depicted as “ideal immigrants” who, by their various qualities, would directly contribute to the welfare and growth of their adopted nation. Selfless, loving, family-oriented, smiling, non-materialistic, feminine, and unspoiled, are usually all attributes given to the proposed mail-order brides from all nationalities, be they Filipinas, Thais, Russians or Ukrainians. While deep anxieties are expressed towards mail-order brides, they are also pictured as being the privileged agents that can reinvigorate a nation whose values are going astray, thanks to unbridled capitalism and feminism. Mail-order brides are always seen as potentially dangerous because they might threaten two beloved institutions at the same time – marriage and citizenship – if they do not enter them in the most genuine way. A potentially loveless marriage is seen as doubly dangerous because of its disenchanting effect: “The affective health of both institutions depends upon immigrants’ being attracted to them not for the sake of money or other worldly goods but rather for the sake of a love, a devotion, or virtue that is seen as prior to the institutions in question and not as one of their ideological effects” (Honig 2001: 91).

But whereas security anxieties about mail-order brides generate questions about ‘How should we solve the problem of foreignness?’, seeing mail-order brides as agents of (re)founding generates questions about “What problems does foreignness solve for us?”. Here, I would suggest that the mail-order bride brings back an idea of love, of romantic marriage that feminism and capitalism are said to have destroyed; *she rejuvenates the polity*. From the prospective husband’s perspective, the ideal of a romantic marriage that offers “utopian vision of an organic bond, free of the inequalities of the public sphere of production” (Illouz 1997: 15) is sustained by the coming of the mail-order bride. Admittedly, love cannot be easily reduced to “ideology” or “false consciousness”; it is in fact often pictured as being one of the last refuges from capitalism’s demands. This understanding supports the idea that love evades “the categories in which capitalism has been conceived: the loved one is seen as being irreplaceable, it is a place of personal fulfillment to which other considerations should be sacrificed and, most of all, it stands above the realm of commodity exchange” (Illouz 1997: 3).

The discourse of prospective husbands emphasizes this aspect not only in regard to love, but also in terms of citizenship: citizenship and its potential benefits should, in fact, not be a concern for the women involved: only true, genuine, disinterested love should drive the prospective wife. Constable’s anthropological study supports this claim that men are generally very reluctant to link their marriage to political or economic aspects, and usually emphasized love as the single or most essential element of a marriage (Constable 2003: 116). Men often justify their search of a mail-order bride invoking a sincere desire to find “disinterested love” and create their ideal of a nuclear family with complementary roles, yet they do so via fantasies of mobility and tropes of neo-colonial global masculinity: at the same time that capitalism creates a sense of alienation and has led American women to go to the workplace and become “spoiled”, it allows for the development of the necessary technologies to find the Asian, Russian or Latin-American woman that will save the nation from

capitalism's most alienating effects. What we see is a new transnational masculinity that builds on colonial fantasies, yet rewrites them by drawing on a discourse of corporate multiculturalism: "[M]en imagine themselves as the benevolent engineers who racially uplift the moral fabric of the national family by importing superior breed of women" (Schaeffer-Grabel 2005: 334). Women from developing nations, their presentation in catalogues as being "naturally warm," "untainted by Western feminism," "interested in your true self" suggest a connectedness to nature, the possibility of a new, rejuvenated self, the same way that corporate multiculturalism promises new markets and comparative advantages (Schaeffer-Grabel 2005: 339).

While many studies have underscored how globalisation and the growth of information and communications technologies have allowed an extended commodification of the prospective brides to take place (see Angeles and Sunanta 2007), few have noted how in fact it also affects the prospective husband, and how the search for a "mail-order bride" can be partly linked to a prospective husband's own feeling of dispossession inside modern capitalism. Indeed, a clear sense of disempowerment, a sense of feeling devoid of meaningful relationships outside the realm of commodity exchanges characterizes some of the prospective husbands. Consider these various quotes:

"They [American women] were too interested in what I was worth [economically]. With women's liberation in the USA, I had them calling me, coming to my house... Now is so different from what I grow up with, so I thought that the best thing to do was to meet someone that can't just come to my house" (quoted in Minervini and McAndrew 2006: 115)

"There is nothing 'degrading' or 'belittling' about two hearts searching for love. Shame on the American media for bias and sensationalism! The hearts of intelligent, caring, and loyal women cannot be 'bought and paid for'. They must be won buy the gentleman. The only women I know of that can be bought by materialism are the ones presently occupying the nation we call home!" – Brian W, testimonial on his bridal tour in ST-Petersburg, [foreign-affair.com](http://foreign-affair.com)

"I will never date in America again. I just did not realize the differences in the way women were from one culture to the next. To actually meet beautiful women who are so nice, caring, and sincere, it was refreshing to meet women who are actually looking for real love, not just a penis with a wallet." Robert, testimonial on his bridal tour in Bangkok, Thailand (<http://russianguirllove.com> )

“American women put themselves on a pedestal and are neglecting US men ... It’s the same thing as when Ford and General Motors keep turning out bad products. You turn to the Japanese.” Americus Mitchell, husband of Maria Victoria Malevo, 21-years-old mail-order bride (quoted in So 2006: 395)

While this paper does not aim to do a textual analysis of various clients’ testimonies, I would nonetheless like to point out that all these quotes point to the complex intertwining of love, desire, capitalism and colonial desire that is at play here, and how mail-order brides insert themselves not only in a security governance linked to illegal migration, but also in the broader discourse of “the problem of foreignness” in regard to immigrants coming to the United States.

### **Conclusion**

If mail-order brides are now part of a security governance of migration, perhaps the next step would be to examine how they can be represented outside of the security domain, as “a politics of unmaking security functions as a political event by disrupting the abjectifying effects of security, on the basis of a claim to equality and universality” (Aradau 2008: 192). It is the *necessity* of security that needs to be questioned, as well as its fetishization which masks its ideological power (see Neocleous 2008): the more obvious, true and natural the call for security appears, the more it closes off all other oppositions and alternative discourses. Yet, this task of *desecuritization* is a challenging one, as the securitization of immigration remains a powerful discourse. It is this language of necessity that what we need to question, instead of presupposing like many authors do when they say that “[t]he 9/11 events made it clear that effective immigration and border control has become a *necessary* condition to maintain national security. That national security and control of international migration are linked is now conventional wisdom... International migration is not simply an issue of homeland security; it affects numerous facets of governance *necessary* for national security” (emphasis mine, Rudolph 2006: 2).

One way to get started on this desecuritization process might be to reconsider the way we think about marriage migration itself, usually conceive dialectically in relation to labor migration. Why is it, for instance, that the experiences of mail-order brides who emigrate to other places such as Taiwan, Japan or Singapore, are framed in terms of labor migration<sup>22</sup>, but not when they emigrate to Western countries such as the United States, Canada, and Germany? Many authors are keen to point out that it is the limited-time work contracts, as well as the near-impossibility of gaining permanent residence or citizenship, that explains why transnational marriage has gained such popularity, which makes the categories of “wife” and “worker” blurred ones<sup>23</sup> (Piper and Yamanaka 2008 168). If anthropologists or sociologists have well documented why such marriages materialize and how successful they are, much work remains to be done on the various facets of “mail-order brides” in Western countries in order to understand why, for instance, they are forever categorized as “brides” and almost never become “workers” or “cultural mediators” (Piper and Roces 2003: 5). Like labour migration, we could perhaps envision mail-order marriages as a private solution to a public problem for many of the migrants involved, be it in terms of marriageability prospects in various settings or lack of economic opportunities.

The symbolic political economy deployed by the sign of “mail-order bride” also reminds us that while new “transnational possibilities” do exist with these marriages (capital is not only

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<sup>22</sup> A huge literature is devoted to international matchmaking organisations in East Asia. See for example: Nakamatsu (2003 and 2005), the various papers from the *International Conference on Border Control and Empowerment of Immigrant Brides* (2007), Piper (1999), Suzuki (2004), Davin (2005) and Palriwala and Uberoi (2005).

<sup>23</sup> For example, in her study of Dominican sex workers who seek to engage in a correspondence process with former German sex tourists, Denise Brennan highlights how love is actually key: “May corresponds by fax with four or five foreign clients at the same time... Elena’s advice was simple: ‘You have to write that you *love* him and that you miss him. Write that you cannot wait to see him again. Tell him you think about him every day” (Brennan 2003: 161). What is interesting in her study is not to highlight how these Dominican women are abusing naïve German clients by pretending to be in love with them, but how in fact, the category of love is itself an *elusive* one: many of the sex workers she interviewed had in fact genuine affection for their clients, if not love, yet acknowledged that such marriages were clearly an advancement strategy not incompatible with romantic ties. In fact, Brennan’s study challenges even the very idea of “mail-order bride”: should these sex workers be considered as mail-order brides, since they are involved in correspondence relationships, the same way as other women who are not sex workers register to international pen-pals clubs are? If so, how does this affect the way immigration and governmental officers see them and evaluate them?

repressive after all), they are firmly anchored in nationalist groundings and imaginaries, themselves not dissociated from capital. While a marriage between a French woman and an American man is indeed transnational/transcultural, it is not the kind of relationship understood in the symbolic political economy of mail-order marriages. Similarly, black African women are not part of the “mail-order bride” political economy, as they are neither seen as being submissive nor feminine (Narayan 1996: 107). While being part of a security governance, with their bodies being constituted in geopolitical and security terms, mail-order brides are also perceived by their prospective husbands and depicted by the international marriage brokers as (re)founding agents of an ordered political community. In fact, the same way that the “natural love” of Filipinas is justified by many clients and employers of nannies, the “natural love and femininity” of mail-order brides is proposed as a solution to a society when relationships between men and women have gone astray. Says Arlie Russell Hochschild, who suggests that love and care might just be the new commodities imported from poor countries to rich ones: “In hiring a nanny, many such employers implicitly hope to import a poor country’s ‘native culture,’ thereby replenishing their own rich country’s depleted culture of care... Says the director of a coop nursery in the San Francisco Bay area: ‘This may be odd to say, but the teacher’s aides we hire from Mexico and Guatemala know how to love a child better than the middle-class white parents’” (Hochschild 2003: 24).

In the end, as migration gets more and more understood as a continuing process, rather than one simple migration move from one country to another, we need a more nuanced account of mail-order brides that reflects better the idea of a “transnational life-course perspective,” where a woman can be a mail-order bride, a mother, a worker, as well as a citizen and a political agent – not a simple threat to the national order and its security, nor a simple “naturally loving” bride. While not evacuating ideas of love, agency or victimhood, these various categories would nuance too-often black and white depictions of mail-order brides and their experiences. We have to assume that the

women are agents, and in many instances they use migration to expand their opportunities, without denying that their active decision to migrate can subject them to different types of victimization as well, since migrant women *leave and enter* gendered and stratified societies, each with qualitative and quantitative differences depending on specific contexts.

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