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## VIRTUAL' BRIDES IN THE POST-SOVIET CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Michael Paul Bégin

The Graduate School  
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'VIRTUAL' BRIDES IN THE POST-SOVIET CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

by

Michael Paul Bégin  
Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Wolfgang Natter, Professor of Geography  
Lexington, Kentucky  
2007

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### ‘VIRTUAL’ BRIDES IN THE POST-SOVIET CONTEXT

This project offers a multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach to understanding the contemporary post-Soviet ‘Internet bride’ phenomenon and the rationales, motives, and aspirations of the industry’s participants. As international marriage services have incorporated information and communications technologies (ICTs) to assist in the marketing of women of post-communist nations for correspondence courtship with Western men, the industry has furthered the globalization of marriage markets and the opportunities for communicative exchange among disparate nations and cultures. By way of case study, the project takes a special focus on the Belarusian/American segment of the industry, turning to personal interviews with participants and employing qualitative techniques to dissect marketing methods. The study gives primary consideration to processes and elements of globalization, postmodern consumer culture, and aspects of human sexuality (particularly sexual exchange theory), recognizing their interactive and mutually-constitutive nature that calls for their analysis through a Baudrillardian lens.

**KEYWORDS:** correspondence courtship, cyberspace, postmodernism,  
globalization, inequality

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Michael Paul Bégin

January 9, 2007

‘VIRTUAL’ BRIDES IN THE POST-SOVIET CONTEXT

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January 9, 2007

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DISSERTATION

Michael Paul Bégin

The Graduate School  
University of Kentucky  
2007

'VIRTUAL' BRIDES IN THE POST-SOVIET CONTEXT

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## PROJECT INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of marriage has persisted for centuries, particularly among patriarchal aristocratic classes finding privilege in expanding their power and influence through tactical marital arrangements with members of other nations, tribes or territories. In this way, marriage<sup>1</sup> has proven a mechanism through which the differential arrangements of space and power are strategically activated. In different periods and places, the international marriage market has also assumed proletarian dimensions, and has remained a recurring aspect of frontier life (Villapando 1989). One may recall Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano* and its story of the pioneering colonial farmer whose 'imported' bride is revealed as a strong-willed mute who uses her musical gifts as leverage against her new partner's demands. But this somewhat romanticized rendering, although compassionate to the hardships of women in such life-altering situations, did not offer much insight into the woman's former context—that is, the circumstances, conflicts, and compromises influencing her decision to adopt a new life elsewhere.

Under more contemporary conditions of advanced technocapitalism, the competition-driven socioeconomic systems of Western<sup>2</sup> nations have ushered in revolutionary social and technological changes that must be carefully considered in order to properly contextualize such phenomena. Here, attention must be paid to the increasingly mediated nature of social interaction in postmodernity. Social scientists have acknowledged the importance of mass media as cultural environments and their influence on identity, sexuality, and relationship behavior (Featherstone 1991; Carstarphen & Zavoina 1999; Meyrowitz 1983; Brod 1996; Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Pearce 1999). Primary to these considerations is *postmodern consumer culture*, which underscores the centrality of the commercial manipulation of images through advertising and the media, the constant reworking of desires through images, the aestheticization of everyday life, and the ascension of artifice (Featherstone 1991; Baudrillard 1981; 1983). As identity, sexuality,

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<sup>1</sup> Marriage is defined by the United Nations Statistics Division (online Demographic Yearbook, 2003) as “the act, ceremony or process by which the legal relationship of husband and wife is constituted.” See bibliography for a full listing of all online sources.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that references to 'Eastern' or 'Western' cultures, traits, or places in this work are not intended to imply an ontological basis for these categories (portions of the post-Soviet world are very 'Western,' culturally speaking). Rather, they refer to social constructs and representations, such as those of 'virtual' brides on Internet web sites. These references are much informed by fantasies, desires and representation, and not as they exist in 'real' life.



and relationship behavior become increasingly expressed through this predominant cultural paradigm, new *situational geographies* arise from interactions between electronic media and their users, transforming traditional relationships between physical settings and embodied social situations (Meyrowitz 1983; Pearce 1999; Springer 1996). The contemporary ‘virtual bride’ industry is understood to express these new geographies of postmodernism,<sup>3</sup> where, after McLuhan (1969), the medium is indeed the message to the extent that it organizes social interaction and structures an epistemology unique to the cultural, historical, and geographical contexts within which intimate relations are, at the very least, attempted.

The term ‘mail-order bride,’ a vestigial term evocative of colonial times when men in foreign lands would ‘send away’ for their future spouses, today conjures an image of a passive and somewhat helpless woman who, having fallen victim to dire or unusual circumstances, consents to her own commodification. Indeed, a ‘mail-order bride,’ pejoratively conceived, is a commodity that can be ordered to specifications, packaged, shipped, and consumed as any other household good, and documented cases abound in which the foreign spouse is treated thus. However, few women who voluntarily market themselves as potential wives to Western men are likely to see themselves in this light, despite observations indicating that the performance of a ‘traditional,’ domestic feminine identity is understood to function as an assist in their marketing to the Western men harboring fantasies of the ‘disappearing,’ family-oriented woman who, incidentally, must now be ‘imported’ from other countries—and usually at great financial cost.<sup>4</sup> An American man in his early fifties, having recently married a Kazakh woman in her late twenties, expressed this in my interview with him (see appendix, p. 182):

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<sup>3</sup> Another way to express the new situational geographies of postmodernism is through an examination of the new global cultural space created by processes of *globalization*. This new space is made possible through the proliferation of electronic media that intensifies interaction among otherwise disparate cultures. The new ‘global society’ that creates this space (Giddens 1994; Featherstone 1995) is one where culture runs parallel with prevailing economic trajectories, assuming a ‘betweenness’ as more and more individuals live on or between the borderlines rather than behind them. This speaks to a dissolution of the unitary and coherent images of modernity that have emanated from typically ‘Western’ cultural centers. These concepts will be explored in greater detail later in the work.

<sup>4</sup> It is not unusual for a Western man to spend thousands in his search for a ‘virtual’ bride once program fees, long-distance telephone bills, language lessons and other courtship costs are considered. Such expenditures are likely to engender feelings of entitlement to ownership, referring to the industry’s (less overtly coercive) ‘trafficking’ of women, to be explored further in chapter four. Although this point runs the risk of presenting women as ‘victims’ of the trade, it is fair to assert that many of these women are taking great risks themselves through their participation. This is supported by the numerous examples of violence toward and abuse of immigrant spouses reported in the U.S. and elsewhere.

What happened was I got fed up with American women's way of attitude.... seems that American women today are more concerned about career and when they have babies it seems they want to put their children in child care and want to have their career. Family is not important in American women's life today.

Men participating in the 'mail-order bride' industry have been observed as typically much older than the women they marry (Tapales 1993; Robinson 1996), with many harboring patriarchal fantasies of the nuclear family (Tolentino 1996) and lamenting the disappearance of 'traditional' women in their own territories, the loss commonly attributed to modernity and feminist ideas (Johnson 1999; Robinson 1996). It has also been noted that many Western men who marry immigrant women are explicitly looking for dependent and subservient wives (Narayan 1995). The gender and sexual reinforcement of loss and recuperation for Western men has been regarded as an accompaniment to a colonialist fantasy that brings into consideration notions of cultural conquest and rescue (Tolentino 1996).

To what extent does this trend affect immigration? Tables i.1 and i.2 (next page) are based on 2005 data obtained from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and provide an indication of the comparative levels of spousal migration from selected nations to the United States. Table i.2 refers to those obtaining legal permanent resident status as a product of family-sponsored preferences (including new spouses and other family members who are U.S. citizens). The information in Table i.2 reveals large gradients in such immigration by country, while Table i.1 offers an overall estimate of its size. These data provide rough indications of the extent of spousal immigration and the national and regional differences therein.

Table i.1: Persons Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident Status in USA (2005)

Spouses (conditional)	86,966
Spouses, entered as fiancé(e) (conditional)	20,490

*Source: 2005 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service)*

Table i.2: Persons Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident Status by Family-Sponsored Preferences (selected nations, 2005)

Belarus	53
Bulgaria	80
Guatemala	1,949
Haiti	4,363
Honduras	1,889
Indonesia	179
Lithuania	42
Mexico	65,369
Philippines	14,955
Poland	2,953
Romania	295
Russia	172
Ukraine	198

*Source: 2005 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service)*

### **i.1 The post-Soviet ‘virtual bride’ phenomenon**

Once a relatively small-scale, localized phenomenon circumscribed by the marketing limitations of paper photo catalogs, small-scale entrepreneurship, and word-of-mouth, the contemporary post-Soviet ‘mail-order bride’ industry now employs technologies that permit efficient and instantaneous flows of information worldwide.<sup>5</sup> This technological application has transformed the scope, density, and reach of the trade. Photo catalogs of women clients, an industry standard, now appear on Internet web sites (see Figure i.1, next page). These photos are now scanned, edited and enhanced using state-of-the-art digital imaging software. Moreover, in distinction from fixed forms of printed media, the Internet permits not only such innovations as audio sampling and streaming video for acquaintance-making, but also a more rapid rate of response and a higher degree of correspondence from a greater variety of people (Constable 2003).<sup>6</sup> In tandem with many other forms of commerce that have since gone online, these changes have also vastly transformed the profit potential of the industry, attracting a significantly greater level of investment while also introducing changes in marketing techniques, available services, and clientele. In short, the incorporation of contemporary technologies and marketing methods has transformed the traditional impression of the ‘mail-order bride’ into that of the online, globalized ‘virtual bride.’

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<sup>5</sup> The global nature of this industry is indicated with estimates of the number of web-based international marriage companies operating from the following countries or regions: Central and Eastern Europe (34), Ukraine (35), Russia (72), Africa (3), China (7), Philippines (15), Thailand (8), South America (15). The nations where online introduction agencies more commonly take the form of ‘dating,’ ‘pen pal,’ or ‘personals’ sites include the United Kingdom (118), Canada (8), United States (94). That each web agency may feature hundreds or even thousands of women’s profiles suggests the significant size and reach of the industry. These numbers are regarded as conservative estimates.

<sup>6</sup> As the Internet has transformed the demographics, both real and perceived, among the industry’s participants, such transformations have significantly enhanced the appeal and the incentive of online correspondence courtship for both men and women, with a consonant impact on the level and nature of cross-cultural and transboundary communicative exchange, as well as eventual migration. This connects directly with the geographies of *mediation*, or the technologically-induced transformation of the spatial and temporal organization of social life. This will be explored further later in the work.

Figure i.1: A Belarusian woman's web-based profile



## i.2 Postmodern consumer culture, sexuality and the ‘virtual’ bride

The vast opportunity presented by online communication introduces not only new opportunities for interaction, but also new styles.<sup>7</sup> This corresponds with a profusion of sexuality as well as its transformation. In his observations of contemporary sexual liberation, Baudrillard (1990: 26) dissects the notion of *limitless desire* and its connection with the postmodern consumerist paradigm of sexual commodification and feminization:

...sexual liberation, like that of the productive forces, is potentially limitless. It demands a profusion come true, a “sexually affluent society”. It can no more tolerate a scarcity of sexual goods, than of material goods. Now, this utopian continuity and availability can only be incarnated by the female sex. This is why in this society everything—objects, goods, services, relations of all types—will be feminized, sexualized in a feminine fashion. In advertising it is not so much a matter of adding sex to washing machines (which is absurd) as conferring on objects the imaginary, female quality of being available at will, of never being retractile or aleatory.

<sup>7</sup> Understanding that culture *is* communication (Hall 1959) becomes a very important point, as this establishes the basis for cultural transformation with the adoption of new styles (or technologies) of communication such as that which *mediation* has introduced.

The irony of this cultural paradigm, where the technologies and ideologies of marketing and consumerism render its subjects perpetual desiring machines of endless conspicuous consumption, is that the promotion of the *feminizing* is answered with the objectification of the *feminine*.<sup>8</sup> The diminished status of the feminine adopts a territorial dimension, where efforts to recover the repressed or disavowed feminine frequently take place in realms beyond national and cultural boundaries. This coincides, in parallel fashion, with patriarchal, postcolonial and orientalist mandates,<sup>9</sup> and employs particular technologies toward these ends.

Baudrillard (1993; 1994) identifies postmodernism as a significant departure from the modernist emphasis on the production and consumption of commodities in that it organizes itself around *simulation* and the playful manipulation of signs and images that circulate endlessly in consumer culture. This new social order is characterized by the appropriation of images in the construction of identities, where codes and models determine how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others. This contemporary paradigm governs not only social and cultural life, but also extends into economics, politics, and sexualities. Postmodernism is also viewed as responsible for the erasure of boundaries and distinctions once producing relevance and meaning in social life. Boundaries and differentiations between social classes, genders, and political leanings—once autonomous realms of social and cultural life—recede and yield to systems of simulation. The collapse of these distinctions, characterizing the end of modernity, represents an ‘implosion’ of everything into everything else. Here, the artistic becomes absorbed into the political, the political becomes thoroughly economic, and sexuality pervades everything. Differences between individuals and groups implode in a rapidly mutating social order.

Examining these cultural paradigms can assist in understanding contemporary struggles in intimate relationships and family formation, and why the ‘virtual bride’ business has become a global industry. As nurturance and mutuality in postmodern intimacies yield to the deceptive and narcissistic eroticization of power (Black 2003; Giddens 1992), the benefits for which individuals normally seek intimacy begin to evaporate. Accordingly, fewer relationships come

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<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard (1990) makes a parallel observation in reference to the seemingly unrelated phenomena of women’s liberation and pornography: the promotion of woman as subject accompanies her return as object.

<sup>9</sup> Although certainly relevant to the subject of study, the vast scholarship on patriarchy, postcolonial theory and orientalism (and their attendant sexualities) will not be consulted in depth, in the interest of devoting greater attention to the primary analytics identified in this work. These are to be used as analytic points of reference only, to be deployed in the data analysis. The impulses from these rich literatures will be briefly summarized.

to provide the spiritual and psychological benefits that real relationality bestows as narcissism gains ascension (Miller 1995; Lasch 1979). This theme is rendered in a recent film by the Italian director Gabriele Muccino, *Ricordati di Me* (Remember Me, My Love), showcasing the hardships of a dysfunctional Italian family suffering continually from narcissistic deprivation. As each is preoccupied with his or her own issues and struggles, all find personal fulfillment difficult to realize as they share extremely little as a family and continually attempt to extract their needs from each other. The picture presented to the audience is one of a family in crisis as each is starved for validation, support, and nurturance. Indeed, the audience witnesses at various points in the film family members grasping for identity by entreating each other for reflective feedback: “Tell me, how do I appear to you?”

### **i.3 Problems and intentions**

The contemporary ‘virtual bride’ has become an important metaphor of these and other profound cultural changes, and the interpretation and deconstruction of this metaphor is an important focus of this study. Moreover, while the Internet itself yields extensive visible evidence of the online element of this industry, the social, cultural, and economic engines powering it are more obscure, and merit closer attention. In the process, the work will also assess the relevance of Baudrillard’s ‘implosion’ thesis, deploying *globalization*, *postmodern consumer culture* and *sexuality* as the primary analytical inroads.<sup>10</sup> It proposes a multifaceted theoretical and methodological approach, focusing more specifically, by way of case study, on the Belarusian/American market segment. Throughout the work, it refers to data obtained from personal interviews<sup>11</sup> with Russian, Belarusian and American respondents, and employs qualitative methods to dissect online marketing techniques.

Chapter one opens with a comparative analysis of the countries relevant to the case study, followed by an assessment of the positionality of women in Soviet and post-Soviet social and family life and a general description of the industry’s men and women clientele. To illuminate both marketing strategies and the rationales for participation, the first chapter will then present

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<sup>10</sup> These analytics will be treated in greater detail in subsequent chapters. As will be shown, they are understood as intersecting and mutually constitutive elements.

<sup>11</sup> The bulk of fieldwork in this study was conducted in the summer and fall of 2004, in the Republic of Belarus and the United States. Interview data was obtained via e-mail, telephone, or face-to-face. Issues and problems related to the collection of field data in a highly restrictive, authoritarian republic are elaborated later in the work.

an analysis of textual material to identify predominant discursive and representational strategies employed on the websites of Internet-based international introduction agencies. Chapter two will elaborate upon the three analytics identified above from a theoretical/conceptual perspective, illustrating the interrelatedness of these elements and how they connect with the ‘virtual bride’ industry. Chapter three will offer an additional look at globalization, location/place, and their relevance to marriage markets in global cultural space, and will also assess how both the fieldwork experience and the author’s own positionality bear upon the study itself. Chapter four examines in greater detail the choices and chances presented to post-Soviet women through their ‘voluntary’ participation in this online industry, turning also to an expert informant to assess the extent of risk or danger presented to women clientele. The final chapter will turn to additional empirical material obtained from selected web sites and from an extensive personal interview with a Russian/American married couple. The final portion of chapter five offers both discourse and semiotic analyses of sampled visual material obtained from an industry website.



## CHAPTER ONE

### Contextualizing an Industry

One facet of marketing technique employed by international online marriage agencies involves descriptive personal accounts on their websites from contented—even ecstatic—clients extolling the virtues and benefits of their services. Of course, these testimonies work to persuade the as-yet-unconvinced Western man that seeking a foreign bride really is in his best interest, and that he should not hesitate to begin the significant (and, presumably, very worthwhile) investment of time and money in order to achieve the very same blissful fulfillment associated with having finally found one's (foreign) soul mate. In some cases, their contact information is also available, enabling potential clients to interrogate those willing to share their experiences or advice more personally.

While it is probable that such testimonies are quite easily cherry-picked by such agencies in order to make their services gleam and glisten (it is also likely that disasters and horror-stories are deliberately omitted), a greater challenge subsists in the industry's representation of post-Soviet cultures and places. The significance of place cannot be overemphasized in the considerations of these promotional strategies. "Place" also includes certain renderings of place—imaginative or actual, hyperbolic or unembellished—deployed on occasion as machinations of the rationales of industry clientele. An American bride-seeker may find encouragement in a website representing Russia, for example, as a wasteland of ideological obsolescence, cultural deterioration, and/or economic tragedy. Another online agency may represent Kazakhstan as a place simply devoid of marriageable men. Cultural tropes and mythologies of place speak to these representations, discursively constructing the women's motivations and the men's potential for contribution in partnership with a foreign spouse. To the extent that smaller firms (and their databases) are being purchased by larger consortia, these renderings may become less overt as such representations are more popularly internalized as incontrovertible 'fact.'

This chapter investigates these issues further, beginning with additional contextual description of this case study by means of a comparative demographic and socioeconomic analysis of the countries applicable. This is followed with a description of the online ‘mail-order’ process from the viewpoints of both owners and clientele. The final section offers a look at marketing language, including issues of representation. Before proceeding, it is important to emphasize once again the proliferation of ICTs as the means by which this industry has boomed within the past twenty years. The globalization of marriage markets has been greatly assisted by the Internet as increasing global disparities have become the basis for a complex dynamic of push and pull factors with which millions must contend. Understanding the Internet as a technological ‘solution’ that mediates these factors may be problematic, however, in that the globalizing forces permitting the rapid, transnational movement of various forms of capital (e.g, money, ideas, technologies, information) via the Internet may be the very same forces casting women into circumstances of trafficking, abuse, exploitation.<sup>12</sup> It is also necessary to consider the requisite place-based infrastructure, technical expertise, and web-based entrepreneurship toward an understanding of the supply/demand relationships of people, information, and the needs and desires that fuel this industry.

## **1.1 Country Descriptions**

The range of place-based push/pull factors reinforcing one another in migration decisions is expressed by the vast socioeconomic disparities between nations and regions considered in this work. This section offers a general socioeconomic and demographic comparison of the countries involved in the case study, presenting a view of their unique political, cultural, and economic realities. The greater purpose of this section is to provide a more catholic context with which to comprehend the relevant place-based circumstances fueling participation in this online marriage market.

### **1.1.1 United States of America**

With an ‘official’ population of 300 million and a growth rate of .59%,<sup>13</sup> the United States was founded on notions of multiculturalism and economic opportunity, earning itself a

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<sup>12</sup> The extent of these risks to Belarusian ‘virtual brides’ will be assessed in chapter four.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Census Bureau online (see bibliography for URL for this and all online sources cited in this work)

reputation for openness to foreign peoples (with some notable exceptions) and a vibrant and diverse industrial and informational economy. Its major contemporary concerns include overdependence on foreign oil, massive government debt, and excessive defense spending on imperialist military efforts, particularly in the interest of securing control over foreign oil reserves (Chomsky 2003; Leonard 1993; Schmidt 1995). An increasingly corporatist power structure in federal government also casts a shadow on future economic and political stability and democratic process. In addition, U.S. income distribution remains highly unbalanced, with approximately 40% earning less than an average resident of western Europe and the top 20% earning considerably more (Nelson 1994).

Structural changes associated with the rise of the information economy, a function of globalization and widespread economic restructuring, have introduced profound social changes in the United States, inclusive of those affecting intimate relationships, families, and gender realities. These structural changes have had numerous effects, the first of which being massive job loss in the industrial and manufacturing sectors over the past three decades (including middle management positions commonly occupied by men), mostly as the result of mechanization, downsizing, de-unionization, and decentralization of production (Faludi 1991). Labor, generally speaking, has lost power with respect to business at the same time that it has increasingly been shut out of policy-making processes by liberalizing government policies (Osterman 2000). Together with the more recent phenomenon of outsourcing of manufacturing jobs and professional skilled and technical jobs, the socioeconomic and employment structure of 21<sup>st</sup> century America is profoundly different as compared to post-war conditions.

As many American corporations ultimately rewarded years of hard work and company loyalty with pink slips, dashing hopes of economic security and prosperity for thousands upon thousands annually, families and communities also witnessed a similar deterioration of trust (Faludi 1991). The consequences of these changes were significant, and were not limited to the less personal arenas of social life. The attendant impacts on family life were tremendous, as job loss is frequently synonymous with divorce, dissolution of family ties, and uncertain futures. This contributed to a widespread loss of power for American men, no longer as capable of serving as the traditional pillars of patriarchal security and confidence in family life.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Understanding patriarchy as a foundational structure of all contemporary societies, Castells (1997) observes that in order to maintain the institutionally-enforced authority of males over females and

Simultaneously, these structural changes have introduced greater opportunity for women's participation in professional spheres, as the decentralized, 'high-value' information economy also requires a more educated, highly specialized workforce with strong management and communications skills (Reich 1991). This is corroborated by the observation that American women, generally speaking, enjoy higher levels of self-definition and empowerment, as assessed by the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM).<sup>15</sup>

The driving forces in the deflation of certain patriarchies in the U.S. and elsewhere can be attributed also to technological changes in reproduction and a multifaceted feminist movement.<sup>16</sup> Although feminism(s) promoted American women's participation in paid labor and career pursuits, ameliorated their political representation, and advanced their freedoms of self-definition and independence from systems of patriarchal control, this is not to insist that gender equality in personal, professional, and political spheres has been achieved. A significant element in dismantling family patriarchy in the United States, feminism(s) has nevertheless been unable to realize the goal of achieving a post-patriarchal social consciousness, as the persistence of larger patriarchal systems suggests.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.1.2 Republic of Belarus

Ironically described as "a small-scale Soviet Union at its finest period,"<sup>18</sup> Belarus was a constituent republic of the USSR for seven decades. With a population of approximately 10.2 million and a growth rate of -0.06%, Belarus maintains close economic, political, and cultural

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children in the family unit, patriarchy must permeate the entire organization of society—from production and consumption to politics, law and culture. The patriarchal family has been challenged also by the inseparable processes of the transformation of women's work as well as women's consciousness (Castells 1997).

<sup>15</sup> GEM is a composite index developed by the *U.N. Human Development Reports online* that measures gender inequality in three basic dimensions of empowerment: economic participation and decision-making, political participation and decision-making, and power over economic resources. Of the seventy nations for which 2001 GEM data are available, the United States ranks tenth on the scale at a value of 0.760; since GEM is a composite index, it does not account for 'natural' inequalities (i.e., differences) between men and women as a result of certain variables. For example, one factor that significantly influences the *ratio of estimated female to male earned income*, an element considered in calculations of the GEM, is the choice made among some women to opt out of paid work for the purpose of child-rearing. It is for such reasons that the GEM should be used only as a 'ball-park' indicator.

<sup>16</sup> "Feminist Perspectives on Reproduction and the Family," Stanford University online

<sup>17</sup> Dean, J. "Feminism in Technoculture" online essay

<sup>18</sup> BBC News, "Were Belarus Elections Free and Fair?" *Have Your Say* online opinion forum

ties with Russia.<sup>19</sup> It is marked indelibly by a series of tragic historical events, including the German fascist invasion and occupation during the Second World War, resulting in the loss of fully 10% of the population (about 2.5 million) in Nazi extermination camps.<sup>20</sup> The nation also endured the harsh impositions of the Stalinist regime, the deprivations of Soviet collectivist ideology, the devastation and loss caused by the widespread nuclear fallout from the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, and, more currently, an authoritarian government under President Aleksandr Lukashenko since 1994. Government restrictions on various freedoms continue, including freedoms of speech and the press, peaceful assembly, religion, and workers' rights, including the right to join independent unions and to carry out actions in defense of workers.<sup>21</sup>

Belarusian society is plagued with political and economic problems associated with economic transition, corruption, and the entrenchment of a patriarchal, authoritarian regime that pays lip service only to a commitment to democratic process, employing mainstream media outlets to distribute political propaganda as a measure of maintaining popular support.<sup>22</sup> The 2004 and 2006 elections were decried by international watchdog organizations due to negative results obtained by opposition parties and the bias of the Belarusian media in favor of the government.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the nation's relatively low per capita purchasing power parity (\$6,052 in 2003; compare with U.S. at \$37,562),<sup>24</sup> habitually high inflation rates, and low foreign investment persist in exacerbating the struggles of individuals and families in securing sound financial and employment futures in a system where restrictive economic policies and government intervention in private enterprise have been the norm for the past decade.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, online

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of State Background Notes, online

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch Overview, online

<sup>22</sup> Reporters Without Frontiers, *Belarus 2004 Annual Report*, online; Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), *Attacks on the Press in 2005: Europe and Central Asia*, online

<sup>23</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Republic of Belarus OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, online; International League for Human Rights, online

<sup>24</sup> 2005 United Nations Human Development Indicators, online

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Department of State Background Notes, online

Figure 1.1: Location of Belarus in Eastern Europe and political map of Belarus



That Belarusian women tend toward high levels of education, literacy, and advanced professional training is supported by high female literacy rates and a Gender Parity Index in tertiary education (2004) of 1.39.<sup>26</sup> Although Gender Empowerment (GEM) indicators are not available for this republic, Gender-related Development Index (GDI) data are available.<sup>27</sup> The 2001 GDI rank for Belarus is 48 out of 144 nations for which data were available (compare to the United States rank position of 5).<sup>28</sup>

Cultural expression and ethnic freedoms in Belarus remain troubled in view of the nation's authoritarian leadership. The 2005 campaign against Polish ethnic minorities, spearheaded by Lukashenko, has persisted per government claims that their pro-Western Polish neighbors are trying to destabilize the regime. Measures have included a recent expulsion of a Polish diplomat, the closure of a Polish-language newspaper, and the replacement of the democratically-elected leadership of a local Polish organization.<sup>29</sup> Freedom of religious expression, however guaranteed by the Belarusian constitution, has been restricted by authorities in practice; a 1996 constitutional amendment reaffirms the equality of religions and denominations before the law, but also contains restrictive language that mandates cooperation between the state and religious organizations for the purpose of spiritual and cultural preservation.<sup>30</sup>

Certain persistent social and cultural trends have not posed significant threat to such government concerns, especially as regarding marriage and family. This is evidenced by the observation that most women choosing to marry for the first time do so before the age of 26 (those women still unmarried after age 28 are generally viewed as spinsters). However, divorce rates in Belarus remain high. In 1996, every third divorce in Belarus concerned a recent marriage (i.e., one less than five years old), and the number of divorces registered rises faster each year than the number of marriages. For every 100 marriages registered, there were 55 divorces in 1993 and 14 divorces in 1965.<sup>31</sup> As divorced women, especially those with children,

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<sup>26</sup> *United Nations Millennium Development Goals Indicators*, online

<sup>27</sup> GDI is a composite index measuring average achievement in the three basic dimensions captured in the U.N. human development index: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. These are adjusted to account for inequalities between men and women.

<sup>28</sup> *United Nations Human Development Reports*, online

<sup>29</sup> Economist online (2005) "A Belarussian Headache for Poland:" Charter97 News (2005), online

<sup>30</sup> *U.S. Department of State Background Notes*, online

<sup>31</sup> 1996 United Nations International Human Rights Instruments, Core Document Forming Part of the Reports of States Parties (Belarus), online document

find it exceedingly difficult to remarry in Belarus (a function of predominant cultural perceptions, religious beliefs, and sexism), and considering that women far outnumber men in the higher age brackets<sup>32</sup> (see Figure 1.2, next page), it stands to reason that a Belarusian woman would consider looking elsewhere for a partner.

A brief look at socioeconomic and life quality indicators provides a basis for further comparisons. The 2003 United Nations Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>33</sup> ranks Belarus 53<sup>rd</sup> of 175 countries assessed, compared to the U.S. HDI ranking of 10. The results of a recent survey conducted by a research unit from *The Economist* formed the basis for the 2005 “quality of life” index, a statistical amalgamation of a variety of life satisfaction, social health, and happiness indicators. Accounting for margins of error and cultural variations in definitions of contentment, the index ranks 111 countries on the most significant variables including income, health, freedom, unemployment, family life, climate, political stability and security, gender equality, and family and community life.<sup>34</sup> On this index, Belarus ranks 100<sup>th</sup>, with a score of 4.978 (on a scale of ten) and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$7,200. This places Belarus between Moldova and Uganda in the ranking.<sup>35</sup> Compare this with the United States, ranking 13<sup>th</sup> and with a GDP of \$41,529, placing between Finland and Canada.<sup>36</sup> These indicators reveal that there is indeed a significant difference in socioeconomic health and life quality between the two countries, furthering the incentive for emigration from Belarus to nations such as the U.S.

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<sup>32</sup> U.S Census Bureau online. The 2006 ratio of men to women age 65 and older is 0.5, and 0.88 for the entire population (compared to 0.97 in the U.S.)

<sup>33</sup> HDI is a comparative measure of poverty, literacy, education, life expectancy, childbirth, and other factors for countries worldwide (a standard means of measuring well-being, and especially child welfare)

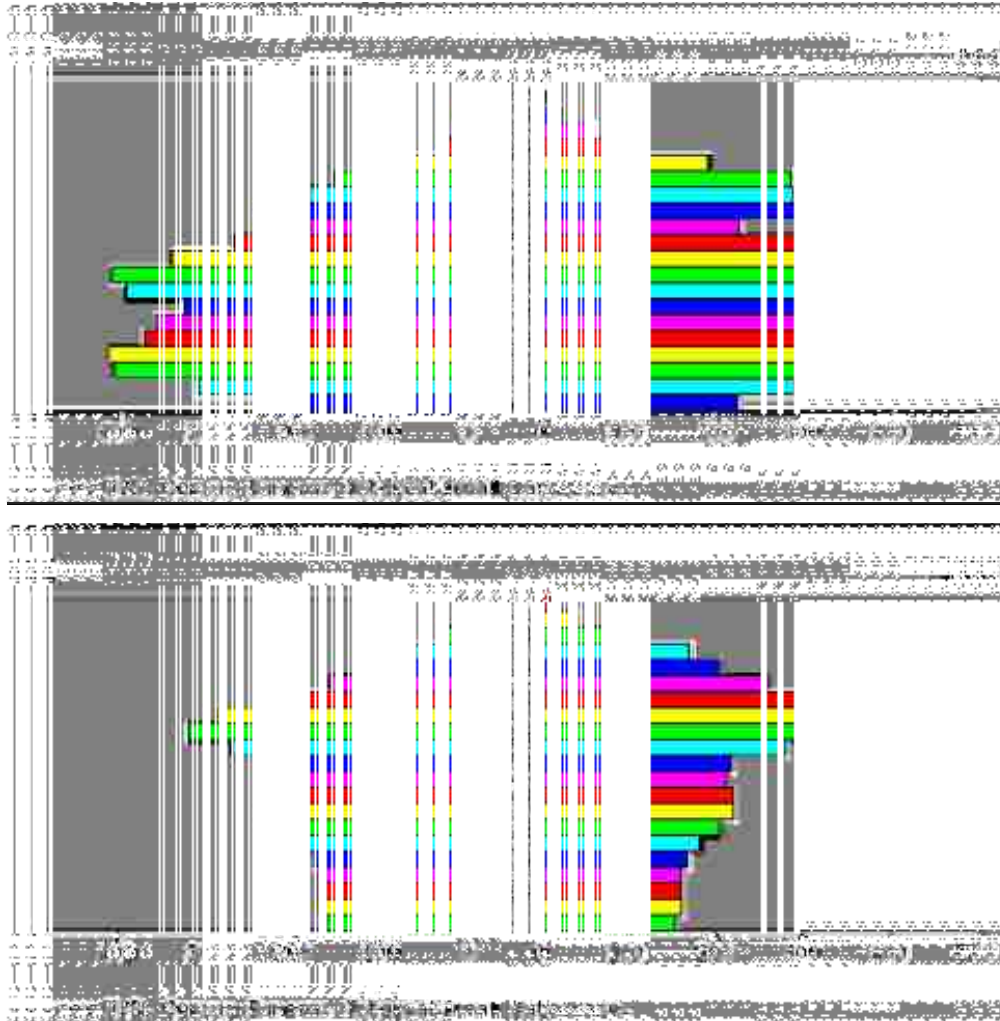
<sup>34</sup> Kekic, L. ‘The World in 2005’ (print edition), *The Economist* Intelligence Unit, country forecasting services, online

<sup>35</sup> The same study placed Russia at 105<sup>th</sup> in the ranking (between Pakistan and Nigeria)

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*



Figure 1.2: 2000/2050 population summaries, Belarus



## 1.2 The position of post-Soviet women

The expanding inter-regional socioeconomic inequalities, associated with the larger processes of globalization, have been extensively recognized as a serious global issue (Giddens 2000; Lindert & Williamson 2001; Pritchett 1997; Sala-i-Martin 2002). These inequalities are also gender-based (Newell & Reilly 2000; Seager 1997): women are likely to feel the effects of these hardships in all their forms more acutely than men generally do. Since the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, average levels of well-being have sunk across the region, adversely affecting women as the economic transition created significant hardships for many. Post-Soviet women are challenged to cope with heavier burdens that are often invisible because they are

traditionally expected to be domestic keepers, finding ways to satisfy basic needs at home with minimal resources. Compound these problems with fewer opportunities for education or employment, higher rates of alcoholism among men experiencing increasing difficulties fulfilling traditional roles, and poor or nonexistent social services and health care, and this amounts to a potentially persuasive argument for women's emigration to countries where hardships are fewer and life somewhat easier to bear—especially for young children. Thus women of post-Soviet nations are profoundly implicated as the radical socioeconomic transition in nations such as Belarus introduced new issues and struggles. The purpose of this section is to elaborate the contemporary position of post-Soviet women<sup>37</sup> in the context of these changes, with a particular focus on social and family life and the unique attributes of Soviet society against which these changes can be understood.

### 1.2.1 Changes and challenges

Women of post-Soviet nations have endured significant changes and challenges best expressed as functions of Soviet ideology and the social reflexivities introduced by the free-market system. Therein, the “competing forces of femininity and fatigue” (Visson 1998: 47) speak to the problems they face in juggling both traditional gendered identities (e.g, women as nurturers or domestic figures) and changing social expectations and circumstances. The former Soviet system, through its emphasis on equality of the sexes and the promotion of an ‘ideal’ womanhood (Kay 1997; Goscilo & Lanoux, 2006), succeeded in appropriating women's labor<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Any attempt at describing the general position of post-Soviet women is best commenced with an understanding of the sheer diversity that the term ‘post-Soviet’ connotes. Buckley (1997: 8) is particularly useful here:

The experiences of post-Soviet women are far from identical, notwithstanding certain similarities. One does not have to subscribe to post-modernism to be aware of immense variations across the post-Soviet states....The label ‘post-Soviet,’ while handy for quick reference to the states once part of the USSR, inevitably obscures the variations between Georgian and Lithuanian, Russian and Kazakh. Moreover, within each state different categories of women and men lead very different lives.

The above is supported by Drobizheva & Ostopenko (1995), who observed more than 100 different nationalities within the borders of the Russian Federation alone.

<sup>38</sup> After Koval (1995), women's labor was valued for more than its physical element: Soviet literacy programs allowed thousands of women from the working and peasant classes to receive qualified educations at professional institutes, technical schools, and universities. The influx of women into the working world responded to the basic postulate of Marxist-Leninist theory that work outside the home should be the basic condition of women's absolute emancipation, equality, and economic independence

as a means of accelerating productivity in address of the problem of economic growth (Posadskaya 1994). This typically saddled women with the notorious ‘double burden’ (Kay 1997; Posadskaya 1994; Goscilo & Lanoux 2006; Sargeant 1996; Visson 1998) of full-time work on top of a full plate of domestic responsibilities that many men continue to shun.<sup>39</sup>

The Soviet state assumed the role of a universal patriarch, subjecting and confining both men and women to specific gender roles toward the larger goal of building and managing the Soviet system while normalizing the “cult of masculinity” (Goscilo & Lanoux 2006: 9): that is, the male position as one of manager, leader, soldier (Ashwin 2000).<sup>40</sup> Early attacks on the traditional family legitimized government intervention in the private sphere, and normalized women’s labor participation. As ‘worker-mothers,’ women received ‘protection’ from the state, as well as independence through access to paid work, in return for obliging to their gendered responsibilities: Soviet society had also placed women “in a position of major and often sole responsibility towards the social reproduction of the household” (Bruno 1997: 61). Although Soviet families were supported by an array of well-entrenched social services and a distribution system that relieved them of some of their considerable pressure,<sup>41</sup> these benefits went into a

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(Koval 1995: 19). This ideal was never fully realized, as working women usually earned less than men in the same professions, unless their educational training was higher, and still comprise the majority in unskilled or low-skilled professions.

<sup>39</sup> Ashwin (2000:21) describes Russian men, for example, as not psychologically ready for involvement in the “despised femininity” of domestic responsibilities, relating men’s new position within the private sphere as a function of the traditionally ‘male’ responsibilities surrendered by the state: increased pressure and responsibility in an increasingly competitive economic environment.

<sup>40</sup> That this trend has, in part, been maintained gains support with Goscilo & Lanoux (2006) and Wilford (1998), who observe that in post-Soviet society, women are commonly constructed as the “symbolic form of the nation” whereas men are invariably represented “as its chief agents and, with statehood achieved, emerge as its major beneficiaries” (Wilford 1998: 3). However, the collapse of the Soviet state has, according to Ashwin (2000:2) “removed the institutional underpinnings of the gender order” where women are no longer guaranteed employment outside the home and motherhood has been “redefined as a private institution and responsibility.” That women of post-Soviet states have been compelled to adapt and assume a variety of identities and positions in the face of monumental social changes is evidence of their feminization and their association with traits of “irrationality, passion, enigma, submissiveness, and suffering invariably imputed to women” (Goscilo & Lanoux 2006: 9).

<sup>41</sup> Bruno (1997) observes that since money had little *de facto* buying power in the Soviet era, women participated in the construction of complex systems of barter and exchange of goods and services and cultivated networks of insider knowledge and information, requiring highly sophisticated business skills. These vital systems and networks, used to procure even the most basic of livelihoods and differing significantly from male entrepreneurship, fell to the wayside post-transition, but the business skills and entrepreneurial attitudes would prove advantageous to women in the new (and uncertain) free-market economy.

state of decline after Soviet communism fell in 1991, compelling many to find private solutions to child care, health care, etc.

That Soviet women met these pressures and responsibilities head-on is a source of great pride and a reason that the ideal of a Soviet ‘superwoman’ has persisted. This prompts observers such as Ashwin (2000: 21) to insist that “women imbued with the Soviet work ethic are going to be hard to chain to the kitchen sink.” This statement is laden with meaning and significance, as the free-market transition imposed a new set of circumstances to form a social reality defined by uncertainty and competition. With this, the old Soviet ‘gender order,’ defined by an ‘equality’ that was merely symbolic (Posadskaya 1994), has been reformulated in the context of rapid—indeed, revolutionary—change. One important characteristic of this has been noted by Bruno (1997), who observes that the new economic conditions have pushed the majority of women into entrepreneurship, especially as women continue to struggle to maintain their jobs and positions. Moreover, the labor market will become the site for increased competition between women and men (Ashwin 2000) and a sexualization of hiring practices (Buckley 1997) in post-Soviet states. This carries significant implications for the independence of women in the professional, domestic and reproductive spheres, but the new socioeconomic conditions and their attendant challenges have not rendered women as desirous of ‘liberation’ from the opportunity to augment their social status, and/or to materially support themselves and their families if they so choose. Indeed, Zabelina (1995) reports that, despite the difficulties in juggling both family and work responsibilities, 80% of women want to keep working.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the “universal pattern of women’s co-optation into revolutionary movements, with promises to ameliorate their social status in the new society” (Goscilo & Lanoux 2006: 10), appears yet again in patriarchal appeals to ‘liberate’ women from the necessities of working life: the collapse of socialism meant that it was “no longer necessary to pay lip-service to the notion of women’s equality” (Attwood 1996: 264), permitting a revival of the patriarchal family, the attempted re-domestication of women, and reassertions of male dominance after decades of concern for male supremacy.

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<sup>42</sup> Some exceptions to this have been noted by Meshcherkina (2000), who discusses the “new traditionalism” in Russia. The cultural mores of this new Russian elite are characterized by women’s longing for men to fulfill their traditional role as breadwinners (and men’s desire to resume their place as family leaders). Kay (1997) sees the more recent pressure exerted upon Russian women to return to the home as a logical progression from Soviet times: in either case, women are denied the opportunity to choose where they want to focus their efforts—forced liberation from above, whether by the state or by new patriarchal structures—works against the best interests of women (Buckley 1997).

### 1.2.2 New positions in new economies: image and identity in transition

Adoption of the free-market model, presenting characteristics of ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ of certain social groups (Bruno 1997), has also borne witness to “an intensification of propaganda promoting patriarchal relations between the sexes...and a massive exploitation of sexuality through the commercialization of the female body” (Posadskaya 1994: 4). This stands in distinct contrast to images of the strong and capable woman worker glorified during the Soviet era,<sup>43</sup> and accompanies the new free-market emphasis on traditionally masculine qualities—aggression and rationality, independence, competition, risk-taking (Attwood 1996). Feminized renderings of Russian women circulate widely via commercial presentations of female beauty, fragility, and fashion in *Cosmopolitan* or *Burda Moden*. In Ukraine, Pavlychko (1996: 309) documents the patriarchal myths that have multiplied as a response to the “culture shock of post-totalitarian freedom which has destroyed all former taboos.” The net result of these myths takes the form of pornography and the sex trade—an assimilation of Western ‘freedoms’ and cultural values that also gives rise to beauty pageants and ‘mail-order brides.’

Yet these developments are not exclusively viewed as deleterious or exploitative. They have also been seen as a way for some women to gain “release from the austerity and hardship associated with the Soviet era” and to regain “a correct gender identity, which communism is feared to have destroyed” (Kay 1997: 82). Indeed, the rejection of the Soviet image of strong working women has fueled arguments for a return to the ‘essentially feminine’ woman who also lives with a sense of purpose and a belief that paid work is a vital source of personal development. However, that the integration of the free market has also accompanied calls for women’s return to their ‘natural mission’ has been supported with evidence of increased discrimination against women in various spheres of opportunity, including wages and advancement. An increase in job segregation has also been observed, despite the reality that post-Soviet women have mastered a great number of specialized professions, including those traditionally occupied by men (Koval 1995).

The women of post-Soviet nations opting to move beyond the framework of the family to obtain self-realization and self-expression in *any* creative or productive activity, usually requiring great investments of time and concentration, experience very strongly the limitations

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<sup>43</sup> Despite these images, discrimination against women, however latent, in all areas of life was pervasive in Soviet society (Sargeant 1996).

and disadvantages of this 'new' patriarchy. To them, 'emancipation' over the last forty years meant a loss of dignity for women, who were reduced to a cheap source of labor that could be plugged in anywhere without regard to specific capabilities, prerequisites, or ambitions (Kiczkova & Farkasova 1993). It meant the loss of identity, as women had little chance to become aware of or determine what it meant to be a woman and to express it in their lives, their social roles and their personal expectations. The paradigm of 'catching up' and being equal usually meant adapting to the existing male model as well as negotiating the tensions between self-sacrifice and self-advancement. In my fieldwork, these tensions were best expressed in the candor of 'Svetlana,' a Belarusian woman in her early twenties, who had recently established an online profile with a web-based marriage agency when we met for an interview in 2004:

I would be lying if I said that there were no Russian women who wanted career and looking for self realization, because I know it's very important for me... my work, my job... and the main...aim of my life is self-realization and I will do it in many ways.....We can talk about self-realization and career, but I am also a romantic person, and I want true love... so I really want to find this kind of man, who will really love me and for sure I would never leave a man who really loved me. But it's...I understand it's impossible to find this love and to find self-realization and to be successful in career (*laughs*)... for me it's a kind of dream.

In Soviet society, the certainties and restrictions of the Cold War were eventually replaced by new possibilities for constituting personal identity, along with new means of defining others (Eisenstein 1998). Categories of gender, class, and nationality have become more fluid in post-Soviet societies, even as new ways to contain and organize such identities are developed and imposed. As such, where the pendulum of emancipation had previously swung too far toward 'equality' in Soviet times, it has since moved toward the counterpole of difference, individuality and uniqueness (Kiczkova & Farkasova 1993). This stands in ironic juxtaposition to the socialist paradigm of equality through paid work that carried with it the assumption that female difference<sup>44</sup> meant female inferiority (Eisenstein 1993). As noted, post-Soviet women generally have similar levels of skills and qualifications as men but are only marginally

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<sup>44</sup> Visson (1998) asserts that Russian women, for example, do not accept feminist notions of total equality between the sexes. Despite this, Russian men generally regard women as inferior to men—a stance that was reinforced by teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church, which taught obedience of the wife to her husband.

represented in planning, decision and leadership positions; in addition, their remuneration is significantly lower.

Visson (1998) further contextualizes the social and demographic issues facing post-Soviet women with descriptions of the cultural realities of typical Russian family life and the sexual ‘balance of power.’ A sexual ‘double standard’ is noted, where extramarital affairs for men are understood as more of the rule than the exception, as Russian families are traditionally patriarchal in structure. Perevedentsev (1995) and Buckley (1989) have observed a numeric disproportion between the sexes (especially in the higher age brackets) as a result of past wars and higher male death rates during peacetime. Issues of Russian population decline,<sup>45</sup> moreover, are compounded by a general disinterest on the part of women to produce enough children to reverse this decline. Kay (1997: 89) aptly describes the conflict felt by Russian women on the issue of motherhood:

The combination of career and family has been neither an easy nor a happy one for Russian women in the past and, having witnessed this in their mother’s generation, young women are left confused and unsure of their position and aspirations, which are often contradictory. On the one hand, the axiom that “every woman is above all else a mother” has been forcefully instilled in them and they are for the most part unwilling to contest it. On the other hand, they realize that having a baby will restrict their opinions, impinge on their freedom, demand their time and attention, and hinder the personal development so many of them hunger for.

But the reservations about raising children also stem from problems related to shortages of adequate housing, financial woes, marital instabilities, and family conflicts.

In sum, the collective position of post-Soviet women is problematic not only as a function of cultural and historical precedents, economic crisis, and recycled or reformulated patriarchies, but also as a function of Russia’s somewhat schizophrenic position at the “geographic and discursive crossroads between East and West” which has produced a “dizzying wealth of subject positions—Western, striving to be Western, redeemer of the West, non-Western—which intellectuals, political leaders, writers, filmmakers, and more recently, pornographers have employed at will in the name of national interests” (Goscilo & Lanoux 2006: 23). As long as women of post-Soviet nations continue to emblemize nation and nationality,

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<sup>45</sup> The more recent, dramatic drop in fertility rates in Russia emblemize a national crisis, presenting yet another tenuous situation for women, as ostensibly ‘private’ issues related to reproduction come under public scrutiny and state control (Goscilo & Lanoux 2006).

then their own interests will be defined (or rather, enforced) by patriarchal constructions of ‘proper’ femininity and womanhood. However, as more contemporary shifts and reconstitutions of post-Soviet identity and culture have inspired new subject positions as well as the (somewhat sparse) formation of feminist and women’s political action groups in Russia and the Baltic states (Lipovskaya 1997), there is opportunity for change in places where die-hard political ideologies and gender systems persist.

### **1.3 Marriage online: tapping into the post-Soviet market**

Working from both ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries, the marketing savvy of online international marriage entrepreneurs is, at times, based on an intimate knowledge of the customer base. This is not necessarily difficult to achieve, as some Internet bride ventures involve stories of men or women going into business after meeting their own matrimonial needs. This was the case with Mrs. Oksana Boychenko-Gaertner, who began the “OksanaLove” agency<sup>46</sup> in the United States after her successful experience as an industry client from Kazakhstan (see appendix, p. 164). Mr. Ashley Neal, an American entrepreneur who met his current Russian spouse at a Siberian disco before launching the (now offline) “Foreign Secrets” agency, assists American men in the hunt for “traditional girls” from Russia and other former Soviet states. Neal claimed to have arranged more than 150 marriages within the first two years of business and, in 1999, videotaped more than 1,000 women for his online warehouse. Some of these video profiles became the basis for the “Faces of Siberia” agency, which specializes in video-based profiles of its women clients. Neal has claimed that, of the men who travel to these destinations through his agency, 90 percent get engaged. On tours arranged through his overseas offices, men clients choose among women they surveyed online, and are introduced to up to eight women per day.<sup>47</sup>

Neal’s business is like those of other web entrepreneurs in the former Soviet states, where political and economic restructuring has permitted greater free-market investment and companies are reaping terrific profits from the harnessing of Internet traffic. The high volume of such traffic allows for greater visibility, such as that enjoyed by the numerous and popular online

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<sup>46</sup> See bibliography for URL for this and all web-based agencies referenced in this work

<sup>47</sup> Stoeltje, M. “Online Service Offers Love from Russia” *The San Antonio Express News*, Dec. 27 2000.



dating agencies, all of which indicate a global transformation of social relations, just as these relations become increasingly mediated by rapid technological change.

Other online marriage agencies entered this market through related business ventures, such as travel and tourism. This was the case with “AngelikaMinsk” an online introduction agency based in the Belarusian capitol. In a personal interview with one of the company’s introduction managers (see appendix, p. 135), the company’s origins were explained:

...actually we worked with the owner before with another company, a travel agency and we talked a lot and we were friends... and we saw that so many nice women came to the agency to travel and most of them are single and divorced and they can't find their second partner... so we tried this company.

In this example, the market for such services in Minsk became apparent with the recognition of an observable trend: single or divorced women venturing outside the country for the purposes of ‘romantic’ travel. Here, the logical move from ‘travel agency’ to ‘online marriage agency’ came from the identification of demand potential that also carried with it profit potential. The same agency also offers a host of individualized related services—the further commodification of desire and demand—in the form of translation services, visa support, ‘date support,’ etc.

Mr. Vladimir Zaplitny (see appendix, p. 190), Belarusian co-owner and founder of the Vitebsk-based “Russian Queen” marriage agency, is perhaps best described as a postmodern ‘informational entrepreneur.’ In a translated interview that took place in his business office in the summer of 2004, I was apprised of the conditions in which his online company was founded:

....when people have trouble finding information he usually has the market solutions for the people. That there are a lot of beautiful and clever women who couldn't find a good match and the financial part of this equation is very important. It's one of the most important problems at this moment in Belarus. When he first started the work...the women came and they paid money and he took their information but the technology of his work was very simple. But it was impossible for them to do it to themselves because there wasn't Internet so they used his help.

In this case, the owner saw an opportunity to satisfy a demand predicated on lack of access: demand becomes a function of the general (un)availability of such technology and the equipment and infrastructure it requires. Technological and informational access then becomes market

access as entrepreneurs such as Mr. Zaplitny utilize their existing capital and resources to enter another market.

Market access, of course, is also a function of scale and reach. A smaller company in a smaller city, cataloging information from the online profiles of local women, may not garner a great deal of attention even with the benefits of global Internet traffic. However, its connections to online informational networks (i.e., web-based consortia), may prove the most effective means of marketing information for profit. The existence of online ‘virtual bride’ consortia (e.g., the ‘Angelika’ network) confirms this, evidence of which surfaced in a personal interview with Tanya, an administrative assistant from the “Russian Queen” marriage agency (appendix, p. 185):

....our own web site does not bring in very much money at all.... because it's small, it's not well known. Men just occasionally come there.... sometimes we buy information.... but the profiles of our girls go automatically to 40 very big international web sites of our network and from here we have much profit.

Through such cooperating networks, profiles such as those found at “Russian Queen” are automatically featured on a host of other websites marketing women from other locales. In this way, the women’s profiles ‘go global’ in the sense that an online user can find them in the same online spaces as those of women from other post-Soviet nations (or even other world regions, in some cases). In other words, a user is not required to know about the existence of a place called ‘Vitebsk, Belarus’ in order to gain access to information about some of the women from this place. In one sense, the otherwise place-based information automatically goes to the user through casual or incidental searches for women clients based on desired characteristics. This ‘placelessness’ of the information obtained, and of certain interactions that result, becomes an important theme in contemplations of this industry, aspects of which will be treated in later chapters. First, more on how women become clients.

Figure 1.3: The main page of the “Russian Queen” marriage agency



#### 1.4 Online opportunity? The Internet ‘mail-order’ process for women clients

Attracted to online agencies through local advertising or word-of-mouth, most women initiate their participation by establishing a personal profile, usually consisting of a small collection of photos (amateur or professionally produced) and the required biographical information. Agencies invariably publish this information at no cost to their women clients, although do not promise to maintain their profiles indefinitely. A nascent agency requires a sufficient database of profiles (typically, at least 300) in order to establish a viable business. Once a company has constructed a web page with a standardized, searchable profile catalog, the only data not immediately available are the women’s contact information, which can be purchased individually, in bundles, or as part of a subscription package. For example, the online introduction agency “A Foreign Affair” charged 9 USD per address, but also sold them in bundles of fifty for 50 USD (Johnson 1999).

Women can also access these agencies through hired local agents who serve as ‘coaches’ throughout the process. Most of these agents are single, middle-aged women working from their homes (Johnson 1999) and advertise their services in local newspapers. They are neither directly affiliated with the online agencies themselves, nor receive pay from them. With them, women can receive helpful advice about preparing photographs for submission, preparing biographical

information, learning their options, and sending off materials for a fee. Especially if the online agencies do not offer these services directly, some agents will offer auxiliary services such as professional photography, translation services, and suggestions for women who may be less successful on the market. Some agents also compile profile catalogs of men who had been rejected by earlier clients (Johnson 1999).

Both agents and agencies very strongly emphasize the importance of photo quality in constructing profiles. The reason for this is very obvious: men tend to place high value on physical attractiveness when seeking a female partner. ‘Svetlana’ corroborated this point during our interview (see appendix, p. 174):

...in the Ukraine, the agencies have very high quality photos. The photos are very professional....most of them can be used in magazines. Because I know that they are making makeup, and they are making hair, and it seems that they are using a computer to take out blemishes in the face, so the skin is perfect. So anyone who looks at it will say "she is so beautiful"..... there is a story about when a man who came to the agency... he saw the woman, and he immediately went away! (*laughs*)

Thus, it is regarded as in a woman’s best interest to obtain the best possible photographic representations of herself while also maintaining a certain standard of representational ‘honesty.’ Understanding the importance of content quality in the maintenance of profile databases, some agencies establish set participation requirements and/or may offer free or reduced-cost, professional-quality photo preparation services. These services may include hair design and make-up services, attire and accoutrement, professional imaging, exotic backdrops, and, in the case of digital photography, digital enhancing to conceal blemishes or other physical ‘imperfections.’ The diversity of images/representations is also highly emphasized, as women who are photographically represented in a variety of ways are more likely to appeal to a broader base of men, contributing further to the profitability of their marketing.

Equally important are the accompanying biographical sketches, which offer an abbreviated, descriptive encapsulation of the client on a number of parameters including physical dimensions, date of birth, profession, marital status, number of children, language ability, and brief self-descriptions including the desired characteristics of a potential mate. These sketches offer searchable criteria (e.g., age), allowing men clients to narrow their searches according to the specific characteristics they seek. As profiles are typically assigned client numbers, men

clients are also able to use these as reference numbers to facilitate future searches or to order contact information.

It is important to note that some online agencies, such as “Gimenev,” now feature a searchable database of profiles of available *men* of various nationalities/ethnicities who have voluntarily submitted their profiles. This has materialized as a result of the demand from women clients for access to information on available men. At the “Gimenev” website, women can access these profiles by selecting the Russian language option from the agency’s main page. As of this writing (December 2006), the agency features approximately 600 such profiles in its database.

### **1.5 Seduced into participation? The online ‘mail-order’ process for men clients**

Men who are serious (or not) about finding a ‘virtual’ mate will find an impressive amount of choice online. The post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe and Central Asia comprise a significant share of the global online marriage market, of which Belarus itself is a representative portion. The “Gimenev” online agency, by way of example, features profiles of more than 22,000 women from various states of the former Soviet Union, with a “guarantee” of more than 200 new profiles added each week. An initial visit to the agency’s main page allows the visitor to view the database in either Russian or English. The English portion of the site offers immediate access to the searchable profile database. Each profile offers a selection of photos of the featured woman, and basic information such as name, place of origin, date of birth, age, zodiac sign, physical dimensions, marital status, and language proficiency. Additional information, listed in a separate section, includes religion, education, occupation, hobbies, and brief descriptions of self and desired partner. New members are given the option to obtain a limited number of contact addresses at no charge, whereas VIP members can obtain contact information for any woman in the database. The “full service mail” option offers professional translation of any letters involved in an exchange, and costs 9.95 EUR for a single translation. Discount rates apply for service ‘packages.’ The agency requires payment, which is applied to the user’s account, before service is provided. The agency calls for reasonable expectations: “We do not guarantee that the girl’s letter will be promising but we do guarantee that she will get your letter and read it.”

“Gimenev” also offers a ‘free’ catalog of profiles (distinct from those for which a client must pay to obtain contact information), comprised mostly of women in their forties or fifties, as well as a matchmaking service for those “tired of long correspondence with different women,” where the client can place his search in the hands of an experienced manager. The client is promised responses at the end of each month from several women whose own search criteria are met by him. Additional questions or problems can be directed to the agency’s online customer support service.

The online marriage agency “A Belarus Bride,” with offices in Vitebsk, Belarus and Akron, Ohio, is a service that is structurally very similar to the “Gimenev” agency. Ostensibly owned and operated by a Belarusian/American couple, it features a much smaller database, and offers two different service categories: ‘full service’ and ‘already engaged.’ The former is a “complete [lifetime] membership package for men who are serious about finding their mate.” The latter is for those who have already found a potential foreign spouse by some other means and desire only the peripheral services this particular company offers: flower and gift delivery, e-mail service, translation service, foreign language classes (English, French, German, Spanish), and travel assistance.

Based on the narratives embedded within each profile description, “A Belarus Bride” claims more intimate knowledge of each woman client. Penned by one of the owners, each descriptive profile is written from the perspective of personal experience with the client. An excerpt from the profile of “Sveta” (#3BVB) illustrates:

Sveta was referred to us by her mother Ludmila, who is an old friend of Nina. Sveta and her family all have excellent reputations in Vitebsk. Sveta is a stunning woman with blue eyes and blonde hair. Irina and Elena had a nice talk with Sveta, they describe her as being intelligent, kind, soft spoken, very humble, and a bit on the shy side. We like Sveta's family, we like Sveta.

Each profile is concluded with a subjective assessment of each woman client, written by the agency’s co-owner, that offers a numeric ‘rating’ of her (on a scale of twenty) on a number of criteria: “Looks,” “Personality,” “Sense of humor,” “How good a wife she would make,” “How easy [sic] would she adjust to life in the West.”

A number of such agencies, including the Belarusian “AngelikaMinsk,” offer guest apartments to accommodate men who desire to meet Belarusian women personally. In the case of this particular agency, which offers a personalized matchmaking service for men, the same photo catalog is available within their management office, and men may arrange several meetings with interested women within a week’s time. This is a more costly alternative, but may produce more immediate results for those involved. The same agency offers a letter forwarding service, flower and gift delivery, translation service, and tours of the Belarusian capitol.

Other agencies take their services a step further by organizing group tour packages, whereupon their men clients go ‘on tour,’ meeting women personally at organized social events. Frequently, men use this as an opportunity to meet women with whom they have corresponded for some time. Some tour itineraries are international in scope, and promise clients an opportunity to meet literally hundreds of women during the course of their tour. One such agency, “Elena’s Models” (see Figure 1.4 below) claims to take romance tourism one better by managing all aspects of pre-arranged dates for individual clients. We will return to this particular feature of the industry in chapter five.

Figure 1.4: The online presence of “Elena’s Models”



## 1.6 A look at marketing language

It has been pointed out that the marketing language employed on such websites indicates what such agencies know (or believe) of their men clientele. This section will provide some examples of such marketing language in an effort to document the variety of strategies of representation/marketing of both Western and post-Soviet women (and men) and their respective places.

Although marketing strategies differ widely, as will be shown, the important underlying assumption among these agencies is that Western men are largely dissatisfied with Western women, and that the legitimacy of their dissatisfaction, in turn, legitimizes their services. An example from “A Belarus Bride,” which also makes some qualitative comparisons with the ‘products’ of other sites, illustrates:

We "weed-out" the scammers, the women who are simply looking for a ticket to the West, the "spoiled" women, and the trouble-makers. You can find these women on the "Mega Sites". Yes, we have some of these women here in Vitebsk, I guess they are all over the world. We will not represent that type woman. However, there are some really nice, honest, and sincere women here who we classify as the "old fashion" type women. These women are a joy to know, they are a refreshing difference from the Western women we are all so sick and tired of. These women are good, decent women who really want to meet a good and decent man. If you are a man who wants to find the woman of his dreams, you have come to the right place here at our agency. If you are sick and tired of "Western" type women, you have come to the right place.

The “Chance for Love” dating network, operating out of Lansing, Michigan, offers a description of Russian women that targets the elements of the market comprising the demand for ‘traditional’ women existing outside Western feminism:

Have you ever been to Russia? Let us help you to have an impression of what you will find in a Russian wife. The Russian woman likes to look pretty. She likes to dress well when she walks in the city street to her destination. She wears a dress and pumps or a suit with a blouse and jewelry. She is concerned about her weight, her hair, how she presents herself. She thinks gym clothes are for the gym. In Russia, she doesn't have a choice to stay home to take care of her husband, house, and children - for her, it is a dream. There, she willingly works to help her family to survive. Education is important, a good occupation is an asset. Many women know 2 or more languages and hold degrees from universities. Each Russian woman I know is willing to learn - to learn English, to learn about cultures, various cuisines, philosophies, politics, to learn in all aspects. The Russian woman's attitude about herself is feminine. She expects to be treated as a lady, she is the weaker gender and knows it. The



Russian woman has not been exposed to the world of rampant feminism that asserts its rights in America.

“Elena’s Models,” makes an attempt to ward off the attitudinally troublesome:

We do not promise you the moon and the stars. We also do not offer "mail order brides". Our ladies seek PARTNERS, not just passports or a better life. If you seek a life-time partner that is intelligent and educated - and at the same time holds marriage and family as her first priority - you are at the right place. If you seek a "mail order bride", we do not have them. Our women are real people, and they seek real love and relationships based on mutual understanding and respect. They seek somebody to love, to talk to, to laugh with, to cry with, and to share their lives with - to be together forever through thick and thin. Most of our ladies hold advanced degrees and many work as professionals. The women we represent have high moral and family values. It is important to understand that they are not "selling themselves" but seek suitable partners. If you also seek a PARTNER and will consider the option of meeting them in Russia or countries of the former Soviet Union, we will be happy to assist you.

From “Amalei-Minsk:”

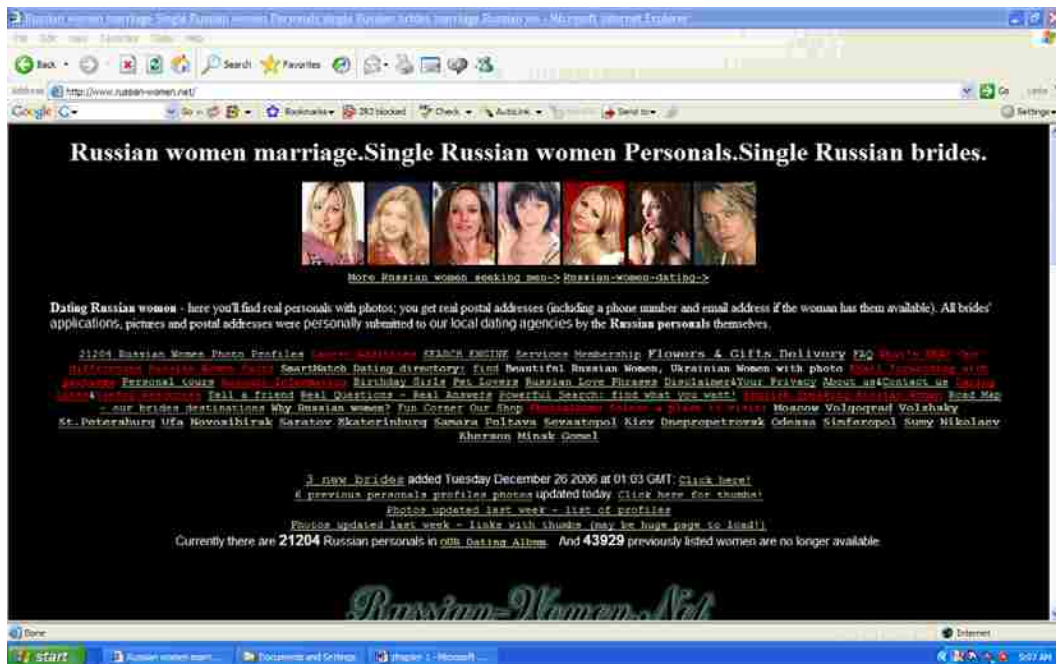
It's not a secret that Belarusian women are the most beautiful, smart and the best housekeepers in the world. In our database there's a great number of Belarusian women who dream of finding the partner in Europe and America.

The “First International” agency provides some definitions on its main page that offer direct evidence of their intended clientele:

The term "Russian women" here and throughout our site is used to identify all women from former USSR, not just Russian women...They are now all separate countries, but women there share many of the wonderful qualities that most men are looking for in a woman, such as dependability, loyalty, commitment to marriage and family. We hope that the term "Russian women" does not offend our female members from other republics. We have chosen it because the majority of people in all these countries speak Russian, as it was the common language in the USSR. The term "mail order brides" or "mail order bride" is used here only as a tribute to tradition. The authors contributing to the site find this term misleading, and even somewhat offending to women, if taken literally. However, because the official organizations, including INS, still use this term, and lots of people type "mail order brides" in their search engine, we feel we ought to use this term for its implied broad meaning, related to our entire industry.

The preceding evidence reveals how these agencies interpret the desires of their potential men clientele and the characteristics they seek in a partner. Interpretations vary from agency to agency, and women clients are represented in various ways as well. As can be seen, some of these sites take care not to represent their women clients as ‘mail-order’ commodities by avoiding or discouraging the use of the term ‘mail-order bride.’ This can be understood as a means of promoting the best interest of the agency by ensuring that women are paired with ‘good’ men, although it remains difficult to determine whether these agencies are paying lip service only to this goal.

Figure 1.5: The main page of the “Russian-Women” marriage agency



One can also find a variety of literatures online intended to promote the industry and prepare potential men clients for the market. One of these sites, *Russian Brides Cyberguide* (see p. 242 for URL), written by a Russian businesswoman, offers the curious a cultural view of Russian women and their motives for involvement, including a demographic explanation for their participation in the industry:

The real and fundamental reason why women look for a life partner abroad is that they are not happy in their love life and cannot find a suitable partner in Russia. It's that simple! The demographic reason behind that is that there are 10 million more women in Russia than men,

or only 88 men for 100 women. Some women are destined to stay single. The cultural notion for a Russian woman is to get married and have a family; this is the necessary condition of success for a woman. This is why even successful career women feel unfulfilled if they don't have a husband and family, and some of them use search for a partner abroad as an option. They do it because they want to meet a suitable partner for marriage. A married woman, even if she is struggling with everyday surviving and not happy with Russian family model, won't divorce her Russian husband to look for a foreign husband. Russian women do not choose between Russian men and foreign men. They choose between staying single for life and having her own family. Russian women want MARRIAGE, to love and be loved. Security and a better life go as a part of the package.

Representations of post-Soviet places, post-Soviet life, and post-Soviet men are also used to assist the marketing of women from these nations. The following is an excerpt from 'Tom,' a bride-seeking client who offers his personal experiences and observations on the Russian-women.net website:

Many ladies in Belarus have never been treated gently and tenderly. I had the words (you are so tender) said to me numinous [sic] times by many ladies. And this was not a bedroom statement. My lady told me the other day that she was so happy that I keep my promise's [sic]. This stemmed from the fact that I telephoned when promised. She said (our men never keep their promise's) [sic]. The fact is life is very harsh for many of these ladies. They walk to a bus stop get on to a packed bus for their ride to work. After work back to the bus a quick stop to pick up the days [sic] food and back home. Forget about going to a restaurant some of the ladies had not been to a restaurant in years. If you find this hard to believe consider this if you make \$50 a month. And dinner for two is \$10. How often would you go out? At home forget about a vacuum, microwave, dishwasher, clothes washer or dryer. No pre cooked food every thing [sic] is prepared from scratch... The following is an excerpt from a December 3, 2000 article printed by Night Ridder [sic] with photos from the New York Times. Health Crisis fells Russians. (Diseases and social problems are killing thousands daily). A number of diseases and social problems- from tuberculosis, AIDS smoking and alcoholism. Are killing thousands daily and could cut the population by a third midway into the next century. Russian's male life expectancy 59.8 years about the same as Pakistan's. Health experts consider drinking and smoking two of Russia's biggest scourges. 700 men die prematurely each day from cardiovascular diseases and cancer caused by tobacco. An estimated 82 men – many of them young die each day from excessive alcohol consumption. The birth rate has flattened, in large part because many women can't afford to have children....So with this as a backdrop to your life, we are the prize. And we men must understand that these ladies are also diamonds. Treat them with love and respect.

“Russian Brides,” an Australian online marriage agency, offers three “real reasons why men go for Russian brides:”

FAMILY VALUES – The main difference between Russian women and Western women is that Russian women do not suffer from the “Cinderella syndrome” so common to Australian or USA females. Over-independence and feminism have not spoiled their belief in traditional family values. Unlike their Western sisters they still put family ahead of career.

AGE DIFFERENCE – of 10 – 15 years is regarded as absolutely normal in Russia. If you are 40+ you could be easily married to the Russian woman in her 20's, 50+ in her 30's, etc. An average man can attract a much younger and more beautiful bride in Russia than he ever could at home.

EASIER TO FIND - With 10.000.000 more Russian women than Russian men currently living in Russia the number and variety of Russian brides there available to you is just huge. You can find Russian bride exactly to your taste and much easier and quicker than in Australian or USA.

The above examples reveal a range of methods of representation of post-Soviet women, and offer the user several rationales for the concerted pursuit of a ‘virtual bride.’ Taken together, these rationales constitute a discursive construction of post-Soviet social and cultural life that serves to perpetuate the industry and expand market demand. This discursive construction can be summarized thus:

- Post-Soviet women are culturally different in the sense that their values and priorities, as compared to Western women, are more conducive to family and marital stability
- Although not to be regarded as ‘for sale,’ women of post-Soviet nations have special incentives to marry Western men that make the likelihood for a successful match much higher
- Western men have a competitive advantage over post-Soviet men in the sense that, through the promise of citizenship via marriage, they can offer women greater stability and security.
- A Western man stands a better chance of attracting a more desirable partner in this market because of cultural differences and sheer numeric advantage (referring to the population statistics listed in some of the above examples)
- Western men have a unique opportunity to lend humanitarian ‘aid’ to post-Soviet women suffering from the hardships of struggling transitional economies and social breakdown

The preceding points can be used to make some inferences about how Western men are constructed by this industry:

- That many Western men are concerned with competitive advantage, and can thus prevail in this orientation by allying themselves with ‘non-competitive,’ family-oriented mates.
- That Western men comprise a diverse group: some are narcissistic and competitive; others are compassionate and want to be needed; still others believe in traditional gender roles for both men and women (or a combination of these)
- That many Western men are, by and large, dissatisfied with Western women for a number of reasons, have failed to relate with them, and will more likely find success in relationships with non-Western women.

Furthermore, it is important to note that these online agencies are not exclusively focused on meeting the needs/demands of Western men; they must also serve the interests of their women clientele. To the extent that these businesses are focused on successful matchmaking, they must gain more intimate knowledge of their clients in order to establish favorable reputations via word-of-mouth. As success breeds success in most spheres of business, an agency must secure a steady and reliable database of women clients to continually attract new men clients. A favorable reputation, earned through successful matching, can help guarantee this database. “And they lived happily ever after...” is the key to viability for legitimate web-based international matchmaking businesses.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ‘Virtual Brides’ in Global Cultural Space

This chapter will expand upon and illuminate the three analytics vital to an understanding of this industry. They are *sexuality, postmodern consumer culture, and globalization*. These themes are understood as being ultimately conjoined and dialectical. Especially as rapid social change comes as a function of revolutionary developments in technologies that compress both time and space, it is important here to develop an understanding of the *global cultural space* that produces and is produced by the social and behavioral phenomena being examined here. To accomplish this, an initial discussion of the relationship between spatiality and social process is offered. This is followed by considerations of the integration of the cultural, the technological and the sexual into this relationship—a necessary task since the global cultural space is a mediated one: it is produced, in part, by technology and the sexual, political, geographical, cultural, behavioral, and economic drives that fuel its production and the technologies of globalization. In addition, this chapter gives further consideration to the pervasiveness of sexuality in postmodern configurations of global cultural space. Concepts and theories presented in this chapter are supported by interview data gleaned from an extensive conversation I had with ‘John’ and ‘Katya,’ a Russian/American married couple living in the United States whom we will revisit later in the work.

#### 2.1 Integrating the Social and the Spatial

Spatiality is socially produced; the social is spatially produced (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1985). Spatiality is both the medium and the outcome of human agency and social practice. Understood in this way, “social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing ‘in’ space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial” (Soja 1996: 46). Castells (1983) echoes this by asserting that the spatial is not merely a ‘reflection’ of society, it constitutes the social. This postmodern turn in spatial thought carries significant implications for human geography, as identified by both geographers and theorists who observe that spatial forms are always social forms (Giddens 1984; Soja 1985), and spatialities carry the same importance to social theory as

do the dimensions of temporality. In this tradition, spatiality wields great explanatory utility in the description of how networks of power/knowledge are inscribed in and produce space, and how identities and subject positions are constituted (see Gregory 1993). In support of this, Soja (1996: 46) recognizes that “even in the realm of pure abstraction, ideology and representation, there is a pervasive and pertinent, if often hidden, spatial dimension” and that material geographies and spatial practices “shape and affect subjectivity, consciousness, rationality, historicity, and sociality” (Soja 1996: 77). The realm of ‘pure abstraction, ideology and representation’ is what he refers to as *secondspace*, which is distinct from the *firstspace* of concrete materiality, of spatial forms that can be mapped. *Secondspace* gets elaborated further (Soja 1996; 79):

In its purest form, *secondspace* is entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies. This does not mean that there is no material reality, no *firstspace*, but rather that the knowledge of this material reality is comprehended essentially through thought. In so empowering the mind, explanation becomes more reflexive, subjective, introspective, philosophical, and individualized.

Thus, *secondspace* is a realm of abstraction, an imagined and imaginary space inscribed into the empirical that is produced through the processes of thought and rationality. *Secondspace* champions, and is championed by, the mind in a cultural form that gains ascension through the privileging of rational thought. It is argued here that there are some important affinities between *secondspace* and certain aspects of *cyberspace*—a spatial expression of the machinate mind that introduces a seductive and cyborgian epistemology—as evidenced in the industry under examination. But first, we need an understanding of Soja’s (1996) *thirdspace*.

## **2.2 A dissolution of boundaries: integrative opportunities in *thirdspace***

We can thank Lefebvre (1991) for his ‘metaphilosophical’ approach to integrating what once were unitary and bounded notions of the spatial, the social, and the historical. This production of a cumulative ‘trialectics’ is “radically open to additional othernesses to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge,” freeing social inquiry from reductionism, binarism, and “the compacting of meaning into closed either/or opposition between two terms, concepts, or elements” (Soja 1996: 60). Soja (1996: 60) clearly derives inspiration from Lefebvre in his articulation of *thirdspace*, which “transforms the categorical and closed logic of ‘either/or’ to the

dialectically open logic of ‘both/and also.’” *Thirdspace* “envisions a complex totality of potential knowledges but rejects any totalization that finitely encloses knowledge production in ‘permanent structures’ or specialized compartments/disciplines” (Soja 1996: 57).

*Thirdspace* becomes essential in this study, because the global cultural space within which this industry thrives is at once a space of the technological, the sexual, the economic, the historical, the geographical, the cultural, and the behavioral. *Thirdspace* provides the necessary intellectual/theoretical precedent for a more holistic understanding of such phenomena and a better opportunity to address the primary questions posed in this study. It permits an understanding of the sociospatial that is at once thoroughly technical, where the technical is also thoroughly sexual, where the sexual is also thoroughly cultural, and where the cultural is also thoroughly global. Space becomes an extremely important common denominator for these, not to be taken as separate and bounded elements of analysis. This opens up possibilities for a discussion of *cyberspace*, which is at once a social and technical space, and the postmodern cultural paradigms that write and are written by this unique space. Before this can take place, it is necessary to recognize that cyberspace is a socially-constructed, mediated space infused with networks of power/knowledge that imbue it with an erotic and seductive quality. This brings us to the next section.

### **2.3 On sexuality**

Although this work cannot do justice to the sheer diversity of approaches and methodologies in the existing literatures on sexuality, it nonetheless cannot be overlooked in this study. For Whitehead (2002: 161), all sexuality and sexual practice is imagined, experienced and acted out in a mental-physical plane where nature, power and pleasure entwine, interact and reinforce each other in ways largely, if not wholly, beyond human comprehension. Giddens (1992) recognizes the malleability of sexuality, itself a social construct operating within fields of power and the reflexive narrative of the self. This section will elaborate the most important aspects of sexuality as it relates to the industry under examination. It is important to note that, in *thirdspace*, sexuality is understood not only in terms of biological and behavioral drives, but is also spatially, socially, culturally, and technologically located. From here, it becomes useful to point to existing work within human geography on the sexuality of space, including studies that reveal how sexualities and space are mutually constituted (Castells 1983; Adler & Brenner 1992;



Bell & Valentine 1995; Duncan 1996; McDowell 1995). Observed here is a scholarly precedent for understanding how cultural variations or reconstitutions of spatiality invariably result in changes to sexuality, and vice-versa. The next section elaborates this in greater detail with a look at the foundational engines of technology and the systems of power/knowledge embedded within the seductive space created by postmodern constructions of ‘cybertechnology.’ This is then followed by an examination of the sexualities of global cultural space and the significance of place-based demographic realities of sex ratios and their bearing on relationship behavior and decision-making.

### 2.3.1 Cyberspace, cybersexuality and seduction

After Heim (1991), the allure of computational objects is underscored by our symbiotic relationship with information machines and, ultimately, a mental marriage to technology. This marks a desire for fulfillment that extends beyond aesthetic enjoyment. *Eros*, as the ancient Greeks understood, originates from a feeling of insufficiency or inadequacy. On a primal level, *Eros* is a drive to extend our finite being, to prolong something of our physical selves beyond our mortal existence. It is through this that we seek to extend ourselves and to heighten the intensity of our lives in general (Heim 1991: 63). *Eros* comes from that which reminds us that our experience and knowledge is limited—that we are only imperfect fragments of cognition and awareness.<sup>48</sup> Thus machines, the machinate minds that produce them, and the spaces they create, are constant reminders of human fallibility; yet paradoxically machines are created for the very purpose of ‘repairing’ the condition of incomplete cognition.<sup>49</sup> The computational machine, and eventually *cyberspace*, present evidence of this. The desire to surpass ourselves takes on a binary logic<sup>50</sup> expressed in the very machines created to achieve these ends, and the power

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<sup>48</sup> After Marcuse (1955), the uncontrolled *Eros* is just as fatal as *Thanatos* (the death instinct) in the sense that both strive for a gratification which culture cannot satisfy. The instincts must therefore be inhibited and deflected from their goal; civilization requires the effective renouncement of gratification as an end in itself. Thus, as machines proliferate in the postmodern world, as social life becomes increasingly technical, we are constantly reminded of our limitation, awakening *Eros* to exponentially greater degrees. This accompanies a similar awakening of *Thanatos*.

<sup>49</sup> The circular irony of this unfulfilled promise, and the angst it generates, is expressed in Baudrillard’s (1990) observation of the postmodern cultural paradigm of *seduction*, to be elaborated in a later section.

<sup>50</sup> The dualism inherent in the Platonic bifurcation of mind and body is implicated in the belief that omniscience (and thus immortality) can only be achieved with the mind’s *abandonment* of the body. Thus, the primary route toward enlightenment, perfection and ascension is through the ‘liberation’ of the mind from the ‘sordid’ and ‘lustful’ desires and passions of the body. This belief system, based on

amassed by these efforts accompanies the seduction of that power. The dystopic vision of a highly individualized, postmodern technosociety, and the space it creates, was captured by Gibson (1984: 51), who invented the term ‘cyberspace’ in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts....A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding....

The characters in *Neuromancer* experience cyberspace as a place of rapture and erotic intensity—a supervivid *hyperreality* where ordinary lived experience seems dull and unreal by comparison. The ‘cybernaut’ is offered an opportunity to escape the ‘prison’ of the body to emerge in a virtual world of digital sensation.

The seductive lure of cyberspace accompanies the pervasive *disenchantment* and *demystification* of modern technosociety and its tendency to scrutinize and uncover everything—even women’s bodies.<sup>51</sup> The pervasive promise of sexual information—the sexualization of information—also appears as fetish. After Baudrillard (1996: 75), the fetish object has an absolute value; it lives off the ecstasy of value. If a *fetish* is simply a sexual stand-in or substitute that generates ecstasy, then we can speak of the fetishization of knowledge and information itself.<sup>52</sup> This is where data/information networks take on an erotic quality, and sexual desire becomes appropriated by informational networks. Essentially, the sexual desire *for*

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Platonic principles, valorizes the mind over the body. As a fundamental element of Western culture, this belief had profound and lasting effects on the way ‘proper’ behavior was conducted and encouraged the exoticization of non-Western cultures, who by and large were constructed as projections of that which ‘rational’ and ‘self-contained’ Euro-types rejected in their own psyches. This dualism and its attendant hang-ups are still prevalent in Western culture, and offers great explanatory power in the underlying processes of orientalism and how this relates to the behaviors and motivations of the men participants of the ‘virtual bride’ industry.

<sup>51</sup> The postmodern condition of pervasive liberation from traditional confines (social or sexual) accompanies an intolerance of difference and the undiscovered. This connects well with Baudrillard’s (1990) observation that a ‘sexually affluent society’ cannot tolerate scarcity of either sexual or material goods. In a society where sexuality pervades everything—where sexuality is everywhere—sexuality in effect disappears because it can no longer be differentiated from anything else, rendering it unrecognizable. The accompanying disenchantment of everyday life awakens *Thanatos* as meaningful systems of social interaction are replaced by the paradigm of *simulation*.

<sup>52</sup> The fetishization of information also explains the prevalence of cyberporn: the machine presents the lure of unlimited consumption of sexually explicit material that continually beckons the user to return and, in a sadistic sense, uses the user.

is replaced by the erotic experience of obtaining sexual knowledge/information *about*—especially as this desire for knowledge only creates more desire through the process of its very satisfaction. The potential for the abuse of immigrant spouses introduced through online communication and correspondence is implicit in this process. This point gained support from ‘John’ during our interview:

....a man can go off and lure a woman here for three months and just cycle through a bunch of them—you know, he is at no risk to make the marriage successful. If she comes here and takes her shot and goes back then she never gets another fiancé visa again.... And sure there’s quite a bit of abuse of the system by the men here.

### **2.3.2 Cybersexuality and the ‘virtual bride’ industry**

As cybersex is characteristic of the same drives that motivate the creation of virtual space (a sexuality that is spatially and technologically produced), the privileging of informational access, of knowledge and the intellect, renders the body—indeed, everything that exists outside the non-human, machinate realm of perfect knowledge and consciousness—as feminine and feminized. This expresses the dialectical relationship between sex and power as computing machines transfer power, in the form of knowledge and access, to the user. This transfer of power is experienced as, and associated with, the erotic. Ironically, it is a de-eroticized eroticism that expresses a kind of disembodied and narcissistic sexuality. Evidence of this surfaced during my interview with Katya:

....a guy we know—he is looking for another one now—they got married and she is Ukrainian..... The picture he saw on the Internet—beautiful—he just fell in love with this picture. Of course when he went and visited her and later on when they got married it got worse.

Cybersex becomes an expression of an increasing identification with the technologies it employs and the techno-spaces that generate it—a cyberspatial colonization of sexuality and the body.

The ‘disembodied sexuality’<sup>53</sup> characteristic of cybersex, to which a strong attraction exists in postmodern consumer culture, has been recognized as a ‘comfortable’ substitute for the complexities of human emotion and the difficulties in managing them in the context of human relationships (Springer 1996). As sex is increasingly mediated by and through ICTs, sexual expression becomes less about emotional mutuality than an ‘ownership’ of sexual experience with an objectified ‘other.’ This narcissistic ‘privatization’ of sexual experience emulates the cultural transformations enforced by the hegemony of global technocapitalism. This connects well with Eisenstein’s (1998) critique of the patriarchal discourses and practices of global capital—the privatized transnational state consists of similarly privatized individuals and expresses their sexualities in cyborgian terms. In other words, the enchantment and eroticism of real relationality dissipates through the machinery that mediates the transnational access of information such as that offered by the online ‘virtual bride’ industry.

### **2.3.3 Sexuality and global cultural space**

After Altman (2001), sexuality is a domain greatly influenced by global forces, both cultural and economic, and globalization is most likely to break down existing taboos and initialize a gradual convergence of sexual behavior across societies. Sexual mores and values change constantly as societies come in contact with external influences and new technologies. Globalization and global cultural space brings “a far denser and faster system of diffusing ideas, values and perceptions, so that a certain self-consciousness about and understanding of sexuality is arguably being universalized in a completely new way” (Altman 2001: 38). This resonates with Giddens (1994: 18), who sees globalization as altering not just large-scale events but “the very tissue of our everyday lives.”

The growing commercialization of sex is seen as a product of the pervasive commodification associated with the ‘integrative’ economic activity that globalization transports across regions and borders. Seabrook (1996), for example, sees sex tourism as a symptom of the new sexuality of global cultural space that is at once a product of social disintegration (appearing in Altman 2001: 104):

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<sup>53</sup> Political-economic connections can be made to this form of ‘impersonal’ sexuality through what has been observed as the increasing subjection of human activity to the impersonal market forces of corporate and informational capitalism (Brod 1996).

It is a savage irony that sex tourism should be one symptom of globalization, the ‘integration’ of the whole world into a single economy, when both the workers in the industry and the clients from abroad are themselves the product of disintegration—of local communities, the dissolution of rootedness and belonging, the breaking of old patterns of labor and traditional livelihoods; and the psychic disintegration of so many people caught up in great epic changes, of which they have little understanding and over which they have less control.

In post-Soviet nations, globalization is understood to have hastened the demise of the Soviet system, casting thousands of women into situations of economic hardship, producing a marked growth in the visibility of prostitution, and rendering women increasingly vulnerable to trafficking (Hughes 2000). Evidence of this came from Katya during our interview:

I also heard stories about all these Internet businesses—they just involve women—take them, bring them, make them passports and force them into prostitution. I’ve heard these kinds of stories....they used to publish a lot of stories in Russian newspapers—good and bad stories....

The above directs our attention to how sexuality is linked with the postmodern imperatives of consumerism and consumption under conditions of advanced technocapitalism. It is important to note that these imperatives are greatly assisted by the technologies that global cultural space employs—creating spaces of their own accord and with the effect of making transnational commodity exchanges more pervasive and more rapid. The sexualities that write, and are written by, global cultural space experience increased pressures of social and cultural homogenization, yet are also subject to its ephemeral nature as it imposes the demands of risk-taking, opportunity assessment, and decision-making. These themes were expressed by Katya in response to a question pertaining to the characteristics of spousal immigrants:

For those who come here, it takes a lot of effort, money, courage, to make a commitment. In a different country, a faraway country, you never know—you have to take risk. We say in Russia “if you don’t risk you don’t drink champagne.” So, again, it doesn’t matter if you are in a different country—if you think there is a potential, go try it. At least later on in your life you will not say “oh, I should have and I didn’t even try.” Well, you try and it didn’t work, but that’s okay. Or, you succeeded, and that’s great.

Katya echoes these themes in her comments on the chances and choices presented to those engaging in online introductions and romantic correspondence:

Maybe there is one waiting for him, but how you know which one? And also I'm sure there are good women who are looking for good men but how do you know? It doesn't say here. It's risky business. And I don't want it to be business, but again people need opportunities.

The reflexive narrative of the self, characteristic of modern and postmodern cultural realities, is summoned to an even greater degree in global cultural space, where social homogenization corresponds with a structural reorganization of the social and where difference is reconstituted or absorbed by/in this space and the technologies it employs. This is also a condition where the paradigms of *seduction* and *simulation* reign. These concepts, essential to an understanding of postmodern consumer culture, are to be elaborated in a later section. First, we turn to an alternative view of human sexuality as understood through an imperial lens.

#### **2.3.4 Sexuality, orientalism, and the postcolonial**

Postcolonial theory is understood as a critical intellectual formation “concerned with the impact of colonialism and its contestation on the cultures of both colonizing and colonized peoples in the past, and the reproduction and transformation of colonial relations, representations and practices in the present” (Gregory 2000: 612). Although there have been many colonialisms, postcolonial studies focus on the imperatives of empire building, especially as understood through the consolidation of a capitalist world-economy in postmodernity. A crucial focus of inquiry within postcolonial theory is the way in which colonialism constructs its objects by incorporation, projection and erasure. Approaching colonial power in this way allows us ‘to see how power works through language, literature, culture and the institutions which regulate our daily lives’ (Loomba 1998: 47). This area of intellectual inquiry and investigation overlaps in many ways with the work of Edward Said and his exposition of the phenomenon of *orientalism*,<sup>54</sup> where the ‘Orient’ is itself a predominantly Euro-American construct produced within systems of power/knowledge in both geographical and metaphorical space and is both a discursive formation and a mechanism for the production and domination of imagined cultures

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<sup>54</sup> After Said (1978: 12), orientalism is a distribution of geopolitical awareness into various texts and an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (i.e., the world is made up of two unequal halves, Occident and Orient) but also of a whole series of ‘interests’ which, by various means, it not only creates but also maintains; it is a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate or incorporate what is a manifestly different world. Above all, it is a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power.

and spaces. In this study, the romanticized ‘imaginaries’ of post-Soviet and/or Russian culture became evident in the fieldwork, as in the example provided by ‘Katya,’ the Russian spouse of an American man who had initiated written correspondence with an initial fascination for Russian culture:

.....it was interesting, you know, to exchange information. He was interested in Russia. He took Russian and was thinking of spies and things like that. He was crazy about it a little. Even now I can say he knows Russian and speaks a little. He had souvenirs from Russia and stuff like that, it’s just interesting for them.

Yegenoglu (1998) provides a theoretical basis for the construction of the orientalized, exoticised ‘other’ with an analysis of the requirements of subject formation. She observes that the construction of the subject requires another term or condition from which the subject distinguishes itself. This ‘other’ term remains repressed, and its ‘forgotten’ or repressed presence is the very condition of the autonomy and universality of the subject. The subject is produced ultimately by a linguistic/discursive strategy in which the denial of dependence on the ‘other’ guarantees an illusion of autonomy and freedom. What is at stake then is not merely an unveiling of the subject’s abstract universal pretensions, but also a demonstration of the fact that its illusory self-production “is a denial of relationality, complexity, and dependence on the other” (Yegenoglu 1998:7). The frequent ‘othering’ of immigrant spouses, and the attempts at their subordination and control, was evidenced by Katya during our interview when asked if she observed a higher level of spousal abuse in these kinds of arrangements:

I heard stories and I get to Russian newspapers, and so yes very often. Men are controlling and in Russia men are different.....many (American men) here, they think “well I will just get a Russian woman and she will do whatever I want.” Well, I don’t think so. So, some women, maybe—but, you will not have a good relationship if you try to control or suppress—so that’s why I heard a lot of stories like that.

A metaphorical sexual aggression and/or rape is inherent to the globalized, mediated virtual space that is understood as an extension of a continuing colonial project of technological and sexual dominance spanning various nations. Considering the economic disparities inherent in many of these international relationships, a function of the same disparities bound to geopolitical inequities, it becomes clear that many men who participate are aware of the draws

they present and take interest in maintaining a patriarchal position in the relationships they seek; under such circumstances, the emphasis on control, coercion, and power runs parallel to a postcolonial construct of gendered hegemony. The rape metaphor emerges as something facilitated through electronic means and achieving a global reach. Since the postcolonial subject position of the ‘virtual bride’ is one marked by difference, this difference, in turn, is invoked in paradoxical fashion by the homogenizing view of global mass culture<sup>55</sup> which produces it, and out of which comes gender, sexuality and the pleasures of the transgressive,<sup>56</sup> exoticised ‘other.’ These notions will be discussed again later in the work. The next section considers another important aspect of sexuality that has direct significance to the industry being examined.

### 2.3.5 Sexual exchange theory

Sexual availability is clearly a significant motivator in this industry. *Sexual exchange theory* (Baumeister & Tice 2001; Guttentag & Secord 1983), very simply stated, holds that when there is a large surplus of men or women in a given place and time, the minority is in high demand and can exert more influence in their relations with the opposite sex. A central concept in this theory is that of *dyadic power*. This is derived from the resources one partner has for satisfying the needs of his/her partner; the more such resources an individual has and the stronger the needs of the partner for those resources, the greater the dyadic power wielded (Guttentag & Secord 1983). This is intimately related to social geography and the demographic conditions of a given place, as it essentially dictates that when either available men or women are in short supply, it becomes a greater challenge for the opposite sex to find a suitable partner. Dyadic power comes as a result of the condition where the sex in the minority is presented with a much larger range of choices and opportunities for the fulfillment of his/her psychological, emotional, and/or physical needs. Because the minority sex is much less dependent in a given relationship than the

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<sup>55</sup> Hall (1997) understands this as a concentrated, overintegrated and condensed form of economic power that lives culturally through difference and that is constantly teasing itself with the pleasures of the transgressive other, promising ‘endless’ pleasure and the proliferation of difference, gender and sexuality. This connects well with Yegenoglu (1998), who maintains that the process of ‘becoming-a-western-subject’ is not a process that simply homogenizes and makes uniform but that also *differentiates*.

<sup>56</sup> After Hyam (1990), colonial frontiers offered Europeans the possibility of transgressing their rigid sexual mores. Foreign lands and peoples delivered the possibility of new sexual experiences, becoming at once both exciting and monstrous for the European imagination. Non-Europeans, especially women, were repeatedly constructed as libidinally excessive and sexually uninhibited. Harkening now upon the regional socioeconomic disparities between post-Soviet states and the West, Loomba (1998) reminds us that colonial sexual encounters also exploited inequities of class, age, gender, race and power.



one in the numeric majority, the former can easily turn elsewhere for the satisfaction of his/her needs. This point was referenced by John in his comments on the relationship options available to Russian men:

....if we're talking about the good men over there, they are not wanting for companionship. If the man is a good doctor or scientist and he is a good husband, he will not be without a woman. She'll take good care of him and they will have a successful marriage. If something happens then he can find another woman very quickly.

Sexual exchange theory holds that the partner with fewer options must provide a level of satisfaction substantially above the other's alternative sources to keep the relationship going. This is so because the minority sex maintains higher expectations for outcomes and benefits in an existing relationship and demonstrates less willingness to commit to any particular individual. This cynical and reductive (but practical) theory also makes predictions of certain outcomes given the nature of the sex ratio and other factors. For example, it asserts that when unattached women are available in larger numbers, men become more reluctant to make long-term commitments. The needs of Russian women for marital stability was expressed by Katya, who understands these needs as a function of Russian family culture:

The most important thing and I think this is the truth is that women are looking for something stable to start relationship and start a family and raise children because most of the Russian women are family-oriented—the family institution is still very strong in Russia. And it's natural to find someone stable to raise children so that's the most important reason.

When the minority sex also wields *structural power* (the power of legal, political, or economic privilege), that power is augmented by dyadic power. Under these circumstances, exchanges favor the stronger party (Guttentag & Secord 1983: 165). Sexual exchange theory holds that when men are scarce, a woman will find less opportunity for economic mobility through marriage; more men and women would remain single or, among those who marry, higher divorce rates would ensue (but the rate of remarriage would be high for men only). These circumstances also predict greater numbers of single-parent families headed by women, who would also more frequently be willing to share a man with another woman. Accordingly, the institutions of marriage and family would be valued significantly less.

The supply-and-demand dynamics underscored in this theory speak to the difficulties of maintaining a balance of power in relationships when sex ratios themselves are far from balanced. Once again, the longevity of any given relationship becomes a function of one's ability to improve one's outcomes in alternative relationships. John expresses this point in his commentary on the options available to Russian women:

....there are women who are married who go through these services in hopes of what I call 'trading up'—or they are in a bad relationship now and they want something better but they will give up what they have until they actually have something better...She's comfortable--she's got the house and she's got everything stable at home for the moment—but now she has the ability to go out and look for something better....It means a lot to the services on the Internet...

In situations where women are in 'oversupply,' sexual exchange theory holds that many women would not reject men but would intensify efforts to change the balance of power between the sexes. The transcultural and transboundary implications of this were expressed by Katya during our interview as she commented on the difficulties she encountered in finding a suitable partner in Russia:

They said "well couldn't you find a guy here?". And I said no, I couldn't. And I looked around and I found that most of them drink a lot and everything was kind of ruined and there are not so many people who want to fight to build something because people think it doesn't make any sense—I mean business or house because either the government changes or the rules change and it's better not to try. Now we get more opportunities but people were punished so much, historically. Probably men don't even want to try to start all over again, and again—it's hard, yes. And that's why it was difficult for me to find someone just to build something.

In post-Soviet nations where certain social, cultural and demographic realities strongly favor men (including situations as referenced above where marriageable men are in short supply as a result of pandemics of drug abuse or alcoholism), opportunities presented by online international marriage agencies take on entirely new meaning. Alongside the more obvious application to the political and economic 'push factors' of post-Soviet nations, sexual exchange theory also applies to the balance of power among Western European or American men, where the increasing mobility and opportunity available to the greater numbers of educated women

have left many men dissatisfied with their own options for relationship fulfillment.<sup>57</sup>

Technological ‘solutions’ such as online dating networks and international marriage agencies are regarded as essential to gaining (or maintaining) a balance of power in relating to the opposite sex. Cyberspace becomes an extremely important variable in the opportunities presented to those seeking to maximize their choice of potential partners, especially when the available choices (or the circumstances under which those choices are presented) are perceived to be limited and/or undesirable.

## 2.4 On postmodern consumer culture

As the post-communist states of the former Soviet Union have presented yet another frontier for enterprising Westerners to venture toward and, eventually, close, the commodification that accompanies capitalist valuations of exchange, abetted by the powerful marketing potential of the Internet, takes on new meaning through the dialectical relationship that ‘real’ space shares with ‘virtual’ space. These cannot be regarded as separate, mutually-exclusive arrangements. Rather, they are better understood as influencing each other in powerful, unexpected ways. Commodification and consumption in ‘mythical’ (virtual) space indeed takes on ‘mythical’ proportions: the boundaries previously in existence are erased as desire is set free and physical space is transgressed, at least virtually, and encourages their transgression in the ‘real.’<sup>58</sup> This process can be viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, and connected with the existential paradox of *postmodern consumer culture*, where the circulation of impossible ideals (‘perfect’ bodies, ‘perfect’ consumption, e.g.)<sup>59</sup> creates anxieties which are then expressed through, and maintained by, consumer behavior. The subtlety of social organization, in this view,

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<sup>57</sup> One can also speak of individual life circumstances that may influence the ‘sexual options’ available to men or women. These may take a variety of forms ranging from economic, health, or personality factors, personal beliefs and expectations, etc.

<sup>58</sup> Supporting this is the observation that the ‘mail-order bride’ industry, pre-Internet, was not significantly associated with romance tourism. The contemporary Internet industry, however, has capitalized upon the desires that have been awakened in the experience of virtual space, such that many online companies are now offering tour packages inviting Western men to ‘transgress’ boundaries in real space in order to meet ‘mail-order’ women in person. This trend will be explored further in a later chapter.

<sup>59</sup> The seductive potential of the mythical notion of *perfection* is highlighted by what we observe time and again: the ones considered most ‘perfect’ in postmodern consumer culture are the ones upon which are bestowed the most power: ‘perfect’ bodies, ‘perfect’ minds, ‘perfect’ talents. Ironically, they are also the ones who are most vulnerable to seduction and the power that is promised it. After Baudrillard (1990), this attests to power’s seductive *reversibility*. *Seduction* will be discussed further in this section.

guarantees participation of an involuntary sort. From the perspective of Marcuse (1955), *Thanatos* (the death drive) is played continually against *Eros*, calling for the liberation of repressed desires and sublimated sexualities—a function which virtual space is understood to serve. However, the powerful re-awakening of such desire is illusory in the sense that it takes place in a symbolic (‘virtual’) space that is, by its very nature, *dereferentialized*—a magic lamp that never properly interprets the intended meaning of its bearer. As sexuality becomes expressed through this postmodern consumerist paradigm, the subservience of human needs to market desires forms the basis for an increasing multiplication of desires to be exploited and filled by marketable commodities (Brod 1996). This points to an increasing colonization of sexuality and the body by the technologies of market forces.

The preceding *thirdspace* understanding of the interacting and entwined nature of culture, spaces, technologies, and sexualities is a necessary approach to understanding the nature of global cultural space and how it elicits profound social and cultural change, giving rise to phenomena such as the industry examined in this work. However, this is not to underplay the importance of historical precedent, adherence to cultural traditions, and individual human agency such as that which pervades the historical and geographical particularities of post-Soviet life. *Thirdspace* challenges us to remain open to both/and scenarios, and with this we can accept that ‘physical’ space and cyberspace are spaces that are mutually constitutive and overlapping: ‘imagined’ space and ‘real’ space that co-exist even as global cultural space ushers in widespread change as a function of globalization, postmodern consumer culture, and the imperatives of sex and sexuality. This section now focuses more closely on postmodern consumer culture, with attention to its unique paradigms and the space it creates and exists in.

#### **2.4.1 Simulation and consumption**

For Jameson (1979: 139), culture is “the very element of consumer society itself.” The ubiquity of signs and messages that circulate in postmodern consumer culture is unprecedented in human history; the omnipresence of images in consumer capitalism have pre-empted the existence of the ‘real’—the priorities of the real are reversed, and all is mediated by culture.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The mediating nature of postmodern consumer culture is also expressed by the process of *mediation*—the pervasive incorporation of technology in human interaction—indicating that global consumer culture is also a ‘technoculture.’ Mediation will be discussed further in the context of globalization and global cultural space in a later section.

Baudrillard (1970; 1988) understands consumption as the active manipulation of signs, promoting the ascension of a system of objects where what is consumed is not the object in itself, but rather its sign system, where desire is created and ‘satisfied’ only as another’s consumption. In this paradigm, that which signifies prestige is the very sign of the object. Katya expresses this idea in her observations of American culture:

I feel it’s too much around money here, and competition also. When someone gets a better car and they work together, then you feel like you have to have a better car also because what will people think about it. Well, some people don’t care. My husband doesn’t care. I just observe it. I don’t care about cars, but—yes, I want a good car because I feel good about it but when people are asking what kind of car you’re driving—we have a neighbor here a couple weeks ago—she asked me “have you seen my new car?” but I don’t know much about cars, so big deal!

The fusion of commodity and sign that Katya refers to here has produced the ‘commodity-sign’ whose value gradually replaces both use value and exchange value in more traditional Marxist interpretations of modern political economy. The commodity-sign produces the autonomization of the signifier, a condition where there is no necessary fixed relationship to objects, and where signifiers establish their own chains of meaning.

The system of signs that operates in postmodern consumer culture is firmly entrenched within the production of consumerist ideology and the commodification of everyday life, working as it does through the hegemony of the generalizing and differentiating tendencies of systems of fashion and technological innovation. Here, Baudrillard (1988) recognizes *simulation* and *seduction* as two intertwined strategic moments deployed within the marketing world. *Simulation* is seen as a form of philosophical idealism in which the “reality” of everyday objects or events is denied (Butler 1999) and meaning passes from a system of deep-level signifieds and into the self-referencing, hyperreal system of appearances based on the play of signifiers alone<sup>61</sup> (Gottdeiner 1994). This orientation of “image over substance” becomes an expression of cultural hegemony characterized by the way use values and exchange values are exploited by the postmodern culture of consumption, becoming part and parcel of the political economy of commodity production and processes of capital accumulation under conditions of late capitalism. In this system, what is advanced as “real” is really “hyperreality” (see Baudrillard 1981; Agger

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<sup>61</sup> Expressed another way, after Baudrillard (1983), simulation is a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself—an operation to deter every real process by its operational double.

1998; Terashima & Tiffin 2001), which falls into the realm of total simulation (Butler 1999). For Baudrillard (1993), the perpetual cycle of overproduction and reduplication of simulations, signs, and images results in an ‘implosion’ of meaning—signs that refer only to themselves suggest nothing else (except perhaps other signs)—and an effacement of the distinction between the real and the imaginary (an ‘aesthetic hallucination’ of reality that awakens the imaginary). In the context of the ‘virtual bride’ industry, this paradigm is evidenced by the many cases of ‘scamming’ –the simulation of emotional care and love for personal gain—perpetrated by women of post-Soviet nations engaging in imaginary ‘romantic’ correspondence with naïve or unsuspecting Western men. An example of this was provided by Katya:

I knew of one American man who was a really nice person, smart but really big in weight so he couldn’t find anyone here, so I interpreted for him and he went to visit her twice. But he didn’t know that she had someone else. He sent her a lot of money and set up a business for her and a car. She just used him like that. He didn’t know that she had someone else. While I’m glad he realized that, he spent so much money and time, it’s just dreams. But again he showed me the picture. She was like a model and he’s really nice and kind but not many women, especially young women, care about that. They just need money... There are so many women around and some men are not smart enough to figure out what’s going on.

John, Katya’s husband, supported this in his comments regarding the websites employed by international marriage agencies:

.....they are also a mechanism for bad societal elements—prostitutes who want to make money and there are married women who are doing it to support their families—they will latch onto a guy and drain him of all his money and when the money disappears they will just move onto another one. And they can make it a business: they will just cycle and have three or four of them, just cycling through and getting payments to support their families. It’s a business and you see some of the same girls from site to site, just putting their face up their as much as they possibly can..... it’s very suspect how reliable the information is....there’s no screening of the individuals they are being connected with. It’s like a caveat emptor situation; and the people who are getting into this are basically really naïve individuals...

Another important perspective, building upon the simulation and simulacra of consumer culture, comes from Campbell (1987), who argues that the rise of consumption requires an organizing ethic. *Romanticism* provides the necessary focus on imagination, fantasy, mysticism and creativity that fuels desires to explore new realms, emotional or otherwise, and solicits “the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product image lends itself” (Campbell 1987: 89).

‘John,’ Katya’s American husband, offers evidence of this in his discussion of the ‘virtual bride’ industry and the ‘real or imagined’ opportunities it presents to American men:

I don’t know if he would have a better success rate getting married to a Russian woman than he would to an American woman, I mean you still have the same problems—I don’t know if it would save you any frustration or if it would be any different because you have the same problems. It’s very romanticized. If you think you can go there and avoid all the problems you know here and think you can go there to find what you want then it would be a different story, but it’s not.

Featherstone (1995: 67) associates this postmodern trend with a collapse of traditional boundaries that evokes Baudrillard’s ‘implosion’ and ‘aesthetic hallucination’ of reality, observing a “retreat from life into art” and the aestheticization of everyday life through advertising, imagery, and publicity. Bell (1980) characterizes the postmodern as a shift to paradigms of play, hedonism, and the adoption of a consumption ethic in place of a work ethic, seeing it as a continuance of the modernist program. Here, the instincts are either turned against or fused with art to usher in a triumph of the irrational, and a ‘double relativization’ of both tradition and the ‘tradition of the new’ (Featherstone 1995). In this way, we can understand the fundamental connections (and the disconnections of the fundamental) between/among postmodernism and consumerism (Bell 1976; Jameson 1984; Featherstone 1991), creating a disordered culture of fragmentary signs and images that lacks any meaningful narrative or symbolic meaning.

The relentless detraditionalism associated with these cultural paradigms calls for heightened individualism, secularization, and the quest for ‘the new.’ These trends appear to work hand-in-hand in the industry under examination, of which the men clients, in some ways, paradoxically abandon tradition in the attempted recuperation of its very loss through their romantic liaisons with those of other cultures perceived or understood to have preserved tradition to greater degrees, while also searching for ‘the new’ (i.e., the ‘non-Western,’ or the ‘non-American’) in the process. Evidence of this was found in John’s commentary:

The one difference I can see in America as opposed to Russia as far as dating relationships is that American women seem more willing to end relationships without devoting enough work into them—I mean divorces are a very easy option. You get tired, you get upset, you get stuck in a situation you don’t know how to fix, then just get a divorce and move on to the

next marriage—where that doesn't seem to be the case with most Russian women; they'll go through hell and they're willing to tolerate a little more and they're willing to forgive more and they're willing to work to find a solution....

....(Russian life) is like going back to the '40s or '50s in this country, like you know if a girl got pregnant (*snaps fingers*) you get married, if you even have sex with a boy, you get married—you know, shotgun weddings and all that sort of stuff..... just an old-fashioned way of life, that's all.

If the signifying practices in postmodern consumer culture are mediated through consumption, and the cultural logic of late consumer capitalism replaces ethics with aesthetics (Harvey 1989), then distinctions between the real and the imaginary are erased as the “oversaturation of culture...gives rise to a depthless hallucinatory simulational world” (Featherstone 1995: 78). Katya invoked some of these themes as she cited the industry as evidence for genuine concern for its clientele:

It will make people lazy and there is little hard work, spiritually, nothing—people are not learning anything—they don't suffer, they don't feel romantic—like you get up in the morning to buy flowers to surprise her...something will be missing and is missing already. It's OK to make money but...*morals*. I don't mind when good people meet, but all this Internet business...these are well-trained...how should I say—schooled—women. They know what they want where they go and it's scary—it's not like they want to love and have family and to make someone happy. It's just something different.

#### **2.4.2 Seduction, postmodern consumer culture, and sexuality**

For Agger (1998), the discourses dispersed in everyday sociotechnical life help ‘simulate’ reality and thus, in a sense, become more ‘real’ than reality ‘itself.’ That is, they have more social influence than traditional texts written to be read slowly and considered critically. In the postmodern consumer culture, textuality loses the character of considered argument, to be perused in a sense outside reality, and becomes simulation, representation, reproduction, photograph and figure, thus subtly presenting itself to readers as reality itself (Agger 1998). For Baudrillard (1983), it is this simulation which accounts for *seduction* and consumerism. Understood as a process, seduction is the creation of desire which operates as a stand-in or substitute for the impossibility of satisfying desire through the act of turning to the very processes of signification that created it. For Baudrillard (1970), consumption is not possible without a certain excess of desire over the object; or if desire is satisfied by the object, there is



always another or an extra desire produced by this (Butler 1999). In this sense, consumption is always incomplete, always involves or brings about a certain loss or absence, with no way to bring consumption and the objects available to satisfy it into balance. The collective anguish of this experience arises not because our desires are unsatisfied but because they are *fulfilled*, because we have nothing left to desire. This anguish is then systematically recuperated as another opportunity for consumption.

For Kalnicka (2001), what is at stake in the process of seduction is the reversibility of the mutual play of non-transparent signs, which can never be represented but only secretly shared by those who take part in the ‘game’ of seduction. Carotenuto (2002) understands seduction as preliminary to an operation in which the other, for the seducer, is not a human being with whom one relates but an instrument whose sole function is to assume the role conferred on him/her in a game of simulation. Understood in this way, seduction provides great explanatory power in the commodification of both men and women in this industry, the techniques employed in marketing them, and the nature of their interaction.

The notion of *limitless desire* in the context of postmodern discourses of sexual liberation invokes concepts of both sexual commodification and feminization of which the Internet has proven to be a primary purveyor. Baudrillard’s (1990) ironic observation about the situation of the feminine (its promotion as subject is accompanied by its return as object, or generalized pornography)<sup>62</sup> evokes his understanding that sexual liberation “can no more tolerate a scarcity of sexual goods than of material goods.” ‘Virtual brides’ are observed to be marketed in this vein, while emblematic of our displacement towards a libidinal economy concerned with only the naturalization of desire. After Baudrillard (1990), this is a desire dedicated to drives, to a machine-like functioning, and to the imaginary of repression and liberation rooted in the accelerated articulation of the sexual, psychic and physical body, which serves as an exact replica of the liquidity and flux which now regulates exchange value: capital must circulate, there must no longer be any fixed point, investments must be ceaselessly renewed,

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<sup>62</sup> Baudrillard (1981: 34) sees pornography itself as a simulacrum—a truth-effect that hides the truth’s non-existence. With this, he sees ours as a pornographic culture with its ideology of the concrete, of facticity and use, and its concern with the preeminence of use value, the material infrastructure of things, and the body as the material infrastructure of desire. It is a one-dimensional culture that exalts everything in the ‘concreteness of production’ or of pleasure—unlimited mechanical labor or copulation.

and value must radiate without respite.<sup>63</sup> Baudrillard's (1990) notion of a 'sexually affluent society'<sup>64</sup> is thus expressed in the vast, seductive universe of sexual services and products available on the Internet.

As sexuality itself in postmodern consumer culture is increasingly disconnected from referentiality and prescribed by simulation, the effect is to redefine human interaction in a way that is preceded and produced by simulation. Thus, as electronically-mediated communication *becomes* communication (Castells 1996), such relationships take on more of the same simulated qualities. 'Virtual bride' websites, as well as numerous other Internet dating services, present a seductive array of potentially limitless sexual opportunity of which those intent on the latest privileges of access would be hesitant to decline. Incidentally, these processes are intimately bound with the engines of globalization and the imperatives of postmodern global cultural space. The associated cultural de-differentiation accompanies the rapid, global diffusion of a mass technology of communications and informational services, producing an implosion of signs in a globalized, media-dominated world where the stable boundaries, fixed structures, and shared consensus upon which meaning is based dissolves (Kellner 1989; Turner 1990). The next section addresses these issues in greater detail.

## 2.5 On globalization

The preceding section supports what Friedman (1990: 311) has identified as two constitutive, yet oppositional, trends of global reality: cultural fragmentation and (post)modernist homogenization. The paradoxical nature of global cultural space marks the dissipating Western hegemonic 'center' even as the homogeneity of contemporary technocapitalism "remains as intact and systematic as ever." Thus, for Jameson & Miyoshi (1998: xii) globalization signifies an "untotalizable totality" that intensifies the binary relations between its components (i.e., nations, regions, or groups), each struggling to define itself against the binary other. Dicken

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<sup>63</sup> By way of contextualizing, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1975), Baudrillard demonstrates that political economy is organized by a certain logic of the sign and that semiotics and structuralism, the two dominant 'sciences of the sign,' rely upon a certain political economy. He then challenges this political economy and any putative science of the sign with what he calls 'symbolic exchange,' which is a reversible, cyclical relationship between things.

<sup>64</sup> In *The System of Objects* (1968), Baudrillard looks at how, if the individuality of different objects is produced by the system itself, then so too is their corresponding need or desire. Baudrillard (1979: 23) sees unlimited sexual demand and an unlimited claim to sexual gratification as the end point to which our culture is rushing, both concealing a form of sub-suicidal collective violence.

(1998) clarifies this by observing that the larger-scale, general processes of change associated with globalization interact with the particularities of nations, regions, or localities to produce unique outcomes, recognizing in the meantime that the world is not fully globalized despite the globalizing forces that promote the rapid diffusion and enlargement of world communication, world markets and neoliberal economic practice. Globalization can be conceived as a process by which decisions and actions in one locale can come to have significant consequences for ‘distant others’ (McGrew & Lewis 1992; Held & McGrew 2003). Viewed from this perspective, globalization takes on a distinctly spatial dimension. However, it also implies an intensification of interaction and interconnectedness between states and regions characterized by the dissolution of borders and barriers to socio-economic activity. An understanding of globalization is especially useful in this study, as it has been recognized as responsible for the collapse of Soviet communism. Giddens (2000: 32) details the debacle, where the emphasis on state-run enterprise and heavy industry could not compete in the global electronic economy, and nor could it maintain ideological and cultural control in an era of global media where Western radio and TV broadcasts were impossible to intercept.

The impetus for a ‘global society’ (Giddens 1994) is derived from the generalization of economic activities, where “culture follows the economy” (Featherstone 1995: 8) and a profusion of information and communications technologies is instigated. The global cultural space that creates, and is created by, these processes is assisted through the vastly improved tools of communication (e.g., cyberspace, ICTs) where the opportunities for different cultures to interact are enhanced. Once again, the tenets of *thirdspace* beckon and encourage us to abandon digestible, bounded categories and embrace the ‘both/and also’ possibilities that, in this case, permit us to view the mutually-constitutive relationship between culture, space, technology, and social process. This section considers *mediation* as an essential operative of globalization and a foundational aspect of global cultural space.

### **2.5.1 Mediation, cyberspace, and globalization**

Mediation refers to the widespread adoption of digital ICTs that has accelerated the spatial and temporal ‘compression’ of cultural life associated with globalization (Thompson 1990; Held & McGrew 2003). The new situational geographies it has introduced have simultaneously produced globalized ‘locals’ and localized ‘globals.’ As such, both the men and

women participants in the ‘virtual bride’ industry, formerly participating on an international level, are now at once globalized and localized subjects (see Crang, et al 1999). This trend has been greatly assisted by ICTs as the increasing unevenness in development throughout the globe has become the basis for the socioeconomic disparities influencing the dynamics of supply and demand in this industry (Lloyd 2000).

ICTs, borne of and conjoined with the processes of mediatization and the rise of informational capitalism, have produced a new ‘virtual ideology’ (or simply ‘virtuality’) of which the Internet is recognized as an inextricable aspect. A primary feature of this ideology is a mode of communication characterized by its seductiveness, its sensorial simulation of reality, and its easy communicability (Castells, 1996). The reification of this ideology is the development and application of ICTs to every sphere of postmodern social life, reinforcing the culturally-dominant social networks and effecting the increase of their cosmopolitanism and globalization (Hearn & Parkin 2001). The ‘digital universe’ of cyberspace is understood to present a new symbolic environment that catalogs all cultural expression into a giant, ahistorical supertext merging past, present and future manifestations of the communicative mind (Castells 1996). This symbolic environment is seen as the defining element of a system in which material/symbolic existence is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting in which on-screen appearances become incorporated as normalized, everyday experience (Turkle 1995; Terashima & Tiffin 2001; Castells 1996; Jones 1997). This is understood to weaken the symbolic power of traditional communicants external to the system (Castells 1996).

Mediatization, and the new virtual ideology that accompanies it, are seen to present a radical transformation of space and time, where localities become disembodied from their cultural, historical, and geographical contexts and reintegrated into functional networks, inducing a *space of flows* that gradually replaces the space of places. This advances our understanding of the social and cultural relations of mediatization,<sup>65</sup> where notions of the ‘real’ point to the difficulties in discerning between the seductive ‘virtual’ and the mundane ‘real’ (Doel & Clarke 1999; Baudrillard 1990).

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<sup>65</sup> Mediatization also validates and reinforces the western emphasis on romantic love, individual choice, and personal happiness as a basis for relationships—a value system that is finding increasing acceptance even in traditional cultures (Regan 2003). This ‘personalized’ route to sex and marriage is reflected first by the observation that moral norms are generally less rigid in cyberspace (Ben-Ze’ev 2004), and, second, by the privileging of visual tastes and visualized appearances served by the numerous ‘mail-order bride’ websites found online.

Cyberspace is also seen as a radical challenge to conventional social dynamics and geopolitics (Kitchin 1998; Castells 1996; Hall 1997; Giddens 2000), where such technology is observed as redefining the concept of territoriality and rendering porous the notions of nation-state and national economies. Cyberspace, with frontiers of its own, has facilitated the exploitation of markets in various regions of the globe, as observed by Luke (1995: 20) who elaborates upon the unprecedented opportunities cyberspace presents and the way it has increased the influence and authority of global business:

cyberspaces—with their panoptic surveillance capabilities...permit economic enterprises to operate as singularities for decision-making, value-adding, profit-taking. The level of complexity in global trade, the number of internationally-arrayed competent producers, the depth of mass world markets, and the degree of freedom afforded by these multiple flows all prompt rational economic actors to move toward virtualizing their operations by trading in these cyberspaces

The enthusiasm that corporate enterprises display for cyberspatial projects is simple to comprehend. These domains increasingly are generated of/for/by corporate business activities, and they provide an unprecedented opportunity for firms to exercise their commercially-mediated authoritarian power to determine who interacts with whom, when and how interactions occur, and which interactivity has what outcomes

On a smaller scale, and in a structurally parallel manner, the ‘liberating’ potential of cyberspace flows from its capacity to permit experimentation with virtual identities (Taraban 2002; Turkle 1995; Ben-Ze’ev 2004), presenting opportunities to transcend the physical space upon which borders are drawn and bodies may not as freely negotiate (Dodge & Kitchin 2001). The participants of the ‘virtual bride’ industry, marketed in virtual space, attempt to capitalize on this virtual ‘placelessness’ (Relph 1976), offering further evidence that mediatization, and the cyberspace it creates, radically transforms the social, cultural, political and economic landscape (Batty 1997; Kitchin 1998; Graham 1998; Taraban 2002; Castells 1996). The commodification that accompanies capitalist valuations of exchange (Baudrillard 1975, 1981; Gottdeiner 1994), aided by the powerful marketing potential of cyberspace, takes on new meaning through the dialectical relationship that ‘real’ space shares with virtual space (Graham 1998; Kitchin, 1998). The paradoxical nature of these spaces is further explored in the next subsection.

### 2.5.2 Globalization, cyberspace, and global cultural space

If cyberspace is a primary vehicle by which an expressly American, consumerist, and homogenizing view of global mass culture is maintained, Hall (1997) observes an implicit paradox to this phenomenon: it also advances the proliferation of *difference*, where *marginality* has developed a new, powerful space of its own on the web. In this space, new subjects, genders, ethnicities, communities and regions have emerged, once excluded from the major forms of cultural representation and unable to locate themselves except as decentered or subaltern. As ICTs and globalization represent a challenge to the notion of state power, new technologies like cyberspace also defy the character of power employed by modern governments (Dodge & Kitchin 2001: 37).

After Fukuyama (2000: 4) a dynamic, technologically innovative economy will by its very nature disrupt existing social relations. This is so despite the observation that the development and promotion of ICTs and cyberspace is bound to capitalist modes of production and that cyberspace is a commercial product to be economically exploited, used to open new markets of opportunity (Dodge & Kitchin 2001: 32). In fact, ICTs and cyberspace have opened up new opportunities across the board, while simultaneously instituting an homogenizing influence<sup>66</sup> predicated on the erasure of difference in global cultural space.

The subversive and seductive capacities of cyberspace abound. Eisenstein (1998: 30) observed that as the ‘real’ world becomes harder to live in, white flight to cyberspace accelerates; indeed, cyberspace had become for the 1990s what the suburbs were to the 1950s. Cyberspace emulates the way space is used, experienced, deployed in reality—only with more profound and far-reaching effects. Dodge & Kitchin (2001) observe that cyberspace is one particular medium through which cities are seeking to seduce consumption and refashion themselves, with authorities increasingly creating an online presence aimed at marketing the city. It is not likely that all would agree that these examples represent the *hegemonic* capacities of cyberspace. Nevertheless, considering its observed and documented capacity to enact an homogenizing influence on the cultural landscape, one that transforms cityscapes as generically ‘Western,’ for example, or that transforms the experience of a place into a relatively mundane and run-of-the-

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<sup>66</sup> After Dodge & Kitchin (2001), information and communications technologies (ICTs) are accelerating and deepening the processes of global culturalization, with a move towards social homogenization based on Western values and cultures of consumption.

mill experience, its pervasive (but paradoxical) influence on the production of global cultural space has become undeniable.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Locating 'Virtual Brides' in a Globalized Milieu

The post-Soviet 'virtual bride' industry, as illustrated thus far, is a relatively concrete phenomenon with a much more complex, less conspicuous set of social/behavioral explanations, where a 'both/and also' understanding of sexuality, postmodern consumer culture, and globalization assists in the analysis. As the relevance of geography never goes away, this chapter gives greater attention to the place-based aspects of globalization and the intricacies of location/place that merit further attention in this project. The goal of this chapter is to provide a better context for understanding the 'virtual bride' phenomenon by expanding upon these factors. In addition, a brief case study will illustrate salient points, and a narration of the circumstances influencing the nature and process of the fieldwork experience will be offered. Last, in an effort to elude the fiction of a purely detached, 'scientific' objectivity, the final section of this chapter will serve as a sociological self-analysis of my own family and cultural background in order to assess the subjective motivations for pursuing this area of inquiry, and how this positionality bears upon the study itself.

#### 3.1 Globalization and 'virtual bride' markets

As globalization is primarily concerned with economic liberalization and the unfettered mobility of capital, it has become clear that nation-states are fast becoming vestigial in the new 'technocapitalist' corporate universe of free trade, deregulation, and privatization. In this new globalized milieu, the U.S. government has become subservient to the corporate model of social organization and wealth distribution. The disconcerting social and economic polarization that is a product of this trend becomes painfully clear with evidence of the overwhelmingly unbalanced distribution of wealth in the United States, and in other Western nations. As this imbalance comes as both cause and result of a veritable abandonment of values of social justice and the rule of law among American progenitors of authoritarian power and influence, an increasingly Christianized, corporatist structure of government is currently gaining ascendance in the United States, accompanied by the gradual erosion of the benefits of citizenship and notions of



American 'privilege.' Evidence of this transformation abounds with an even cursory examination of the neoconservative policies and practices of the second Bush administration, including continued wartime tax cuts for the wealthy (an historical precedent), the campaign to privatize social security, failure to institute a national health care program, blatant circumvention of the U.S. Constitution and the provisions of the Geneva Convention, the administration's open and deliberate embrace of methods of torture for prisoners 'renditioned' and held without due process, warrantless wiretapping of American citizens for the Orwellian aims of expanding government powers of surveillance, and the promotion of perpetual war on both domestic and foreign territories against fabricated or trumped-up threats of organized terrorist activity.

This disturbing, revolutionary moment in American history, set within the larger context of economic globalization and the proliferation of global technocapitalism, imposes profound impacts upon the individual lives of Americans, the most significant of which being a function of the reorganization of social life that globalization has introduced. Again, as the American nation-state becomes increasingly (and visibly) vestigial, as American civil liberties are gradually eroded, and as citizenship and national belonging become more of a liability for those not among the privileged, wealthy elite (especially considering the alarming levels of foreign debt accumulated by the current administration to support its imperialist war campaign in the Middle East and its Machiavellian fantasies of a 'New American Century'), then the benefits of marriage traditionally conferred by one's (patriarchal) relation to the nation-state consequently shift toward a globalized, detraditionalized, corporate model of regressive, postmodern 'technofeudalism.' In the context of this transformation, the pursuit of intimate partnerships undergoes profound changes parallel in nature to the extent that they emulate the globalized, detraditionalized, potentially exploitive, technologically-assisted and opportunistic behavior normalized in corporate policies and practices. This also carries with it a profound change in the quality of relationships to the extent that similar interests in power, control, and dominance take precedence over mutually-supportive relationality in attempts at forming intimate partnerships, as discussed in the project introduction.

These assertions are supported not only with evidence of the burgeoning online dating industry, now quite mainstream in its popularity and acceptance in the West, but more directly by the online 'virtual bride' industry itself, which can be understood as a form of marriage market globalization. By definition, this introduces competition on a global level for both men and

women seeking life partners. Especially as the struggling middle and working classes in the United States are confronted with uncertain futures as a result of structural economic changes, job outsourcing, liberalized and deregulated hiring practices, and the growth of low-paying jobs offering few or no benefits, then those seeking greater security through channels of marriage are more likely to look beyond national borders for prospective partners and toward the recipients of globalization's benefits. Thus, the increasing popularity of the 'virtual bride' industry among Western men can be understood not only as a function of their response to Western feminism and advances in gender equality, but also in terms of the choices that Western *women* are making in the face of globalization and cultural change. Thus, if American women, for example, are discovering greater opportunities to meet and marry foreign men as a result of globalization, and perhaps even have more incentive to do so, then American men may respond with attempts to recuperate their opportunities by also extending their search for suitable partners beyond national borders, possibly turning to citizenship and national belonging as a potential tool for attracting foreign women, however vestigial their benefits may be. There is poignant irony in the image of a woman from a struggling region of a post-Soviet state lured by popular images and myths of the ideal American life, only to marry and discover that she has taken residence in a depressed neighborhood of a declining city in a corporatist police state where hopes for middle class prosperity are increasingly untenable, and civil liberties are gradually dissolved.

But the increased popularity of online 'virtual bride' services can also be understood in terms of the sheer volume of 'supply,' which in turn has affected 'demand.' It is difficult to estimate the number of women of post-Soviet states currently with their profiles online, but the number is indisputably large (remember that just one such online agency features a database of more than 20,000 profiles). These numbers are indeed favorable for Western men seeking to maximize their options, and the industry has correctly anticipated that the presentation of such abundant opportunity can be converted into profit—and especially if men come to believe that by increasing the number of women 'available' to them that they will gain competitive advantage, or simply eliminate the competition of other men altogether. The numbers work in favor of the women as well, as one can reasonably expect to increase exponentially the number of prospective men to which she gains exposure. Especially if this translates into actual correspondence and expressions of interest, a woman may find herself with more choice and

more opportunity than before; in love, maximizing one's options is often the key to favorable outcomes.

### **3.2 Case in point: a chat with ‘Helen’**

I first met Helen in July 2004, when I had traveled to Belarus initially for a three-week English language immersion camp for Belarusian youth. Helen is a Belarusian English teacher in her early forties who had been recruited to participate in the English camp. The event itself offered an excellent opportunity to get acquainted with her on a more personal level, as all of the volunteer teachers were obligated to work, share dormitory-style accommodation, and take meals together for three weeks. The relatively constant, daily contact I had with Helen permitted a degree of trust to develop that otherwise would not have been possible had I simply approached her as a researcher seeking information from volunteer respondents on a rather personal and sensitive topic. In this regard, the context of our meeting greatly assisted the purposes of the project.

A resident of the Belarusian capitol city, Helen is an attractive and vibrant woman, and was much admired by students and teachers alike for her creativity, amicability, and positive outlook. She could be fairly described as progressive, well-educated, highly intelligent, youthful in spirit, and open-minded. After having been informed of my ‘other’ reason for my visit to her country during a casual conversation one afternoon, Helen kindly offered to volunteer her time for a pre-arranged interview, to take place shortly before my scheduled departure.

Before our interview meeting at the café in central Minsk, I had already gained some background on Helen, and had become acquainted as well with her 17-year-old daughter, who had made occasional appearances at the camp facility to be with her mother and socialize with students and staff. Helen’s first husband had passed away about five years prior, and during her stay at the camp had started a dating relationship with the school custodian, a Belarusian man also from Minsk. It had been quite some time since Helen had placed a profile with “LoveMe.com,” which initially failed to garner any correspondence or expressions of interest from foreign men. Helen describes her experience:

I sent a letter just to the agency.... and then on the Internet they placed my information my profile... and then I forgot! And in a year and a half only, I started receiving letters. I had forgotten about it and I thought that everything was in vain, I was very disappointed and I

forgot. But then I received letters. We had a correspondence through mail. Letters, photos.... some of the correspondence just stopped. I didn't like anything, maybe he didn't like anything. It just stopped. But I didn't like that all the men I wrote, I was 36-- my husband died when I was 35-- and after a year I decided to try. All men who wrote were 52, 53, 54. I was shocked! I don't want to have such a man.

Eventually, Helen found herself exchanging letters on a fairly regular basis with an older English bachelor. Eventually, he would invite Helen and her daughter to visit him in the United Kingdom:

He bought the tickets and he arranged everything.... to the embassy he wrote that everything will be at my disposal.... food, house, everything. He will pay for everything... for *everything*. I only asked one question: how much money should I take with me (laughs). Because I understood that I must have money. He told me maybe \$200 would be enough. He met me at the airport, he took me to his house, he introduced me to his parents, we lived in that house. Everything was perfect.

Thus, Helen traveled to England for the first time after a long period of invested correspondence, including numerous, long telephone conversations. An affluent man in his late forties, his comforts were paid for by a successful family business. During her two-week stay, Helen was able to know him on a more intimate level. Despite his poor health, she described him as a thoroughly good man, kind and compassionate, generous, and quite serious about Helen and her daughter. Her visit was followed later by his own in Minsk, although it was quite clear that a commitment to him would mean a permanent move to England. In consideration of the fact that there would clearly be no possible application for Helen's profession in England, she was promised secure employment in the family business.

Helen eventually found herself up against a very difficult decision. Certainly a comfortable life was promised, as well as outstanding opportunities and promising life changes for her daughter. Helen's excellent command of English, her characteristic resilience, and her personable nature ensured little difficulty with acculturation. However, she would be obligated to detach herself rather permanently from Minsk, from family and friends, and settle with him in the pleasant, albeit sleepy, English town where he resided. Toward the top of Helen's list of reservations at the time was the realization that she would have to relinquish the profession she loved, inclusive of the children she adored teaching. The obvious advantages notwithstanding, Helen ultimately declined his marriage proposal:

My task was to be honest, to be honest. I did all my best for him; he did all his best for me. I value to this very much. But I could not dare to get married. I did not want to. I did not want to be his wife, unfortunately... because I understand he lived in a small town, I am used to living in a big city. I have here a lot of friends, there I did not have friends. Small town, quiet life. Mainly elderly people in the town. If it would be London, it would be much better for me. Quiet life, elderly people. Everywhere, elderly people. I decided that it's not for me.

Among other justifications for her decision, Helen cited his lack of experience with marriage and relationships, his poor health, and not enough love on her part to justify the change. She had consulted with her heart, finally, to make the decision. At the time of the interview, Helen seemed content and confident with herself, in no particular hurry to enter another significant relationship, and enjoying her occasional outings with the school custodian. A more admirable person was difficult to find in Belarus.

### **3.3 Marriage markets and 'placeless' place**

Place-based demographic realities and life circumstances play very significant roles in the choices and chances experienced by post-Soviet women such as Helen. Social/cultural attributes interact with these realities to form unique scenarios that shape the decisions of many women marketing themselves online as 'virtual brides.'

First, as the Republic of Belarus features one of the highest divorce rates in the world (second only to USA and Russia), it is important to note that divorced Belarusian women find it exceedingly difficult to remarry, and especially so if they are mothers. It is an unfortunate reality in this country that most Belarusian men simply do not desire to form new relationships with women who are raising children. Couple this with the point that women who enter (or re-enter) the marriage market after their mid-to-late twenties are widely regarded as 'too old,' and the rationale for cooperating with an online international marriage agency in Belarus becomes readily apparent. This is underscored by the observation that a very large percentage of the women featured on these websites are past middle age; men very rarely seek out relationships with older women.

Clearly, Belarusian mothers actively seeking to remarry will find their options severely limited. Again, this point serves to explain the relatively high level of acceptance and popularity

of the ‘virtual bride’ industry in Belarus, and is supported by comments made by ‘Helen’ during our interview in 2004 (see appendix, p. 136):

I tried to find someone special for me in Belarus. But the problem is that from age 30 to 40 it's very difficult to find someone. It is not easy because we are serious people... we don't want just to entertain, just to have a good time... we look for someone serious for life. Maybe at the age of 35 a woman has more opportunities, but at the age of 40 it's very difficult because most of the men are married or they suffer from different problems. For example they are addicted to alcohol... problems with alcohol, problems with drugs.... maybe problems with health, and so on. It's very difficult to find at the age of 40 or 45.

Their participation also evidently serves to ‘even the playing field’ in terms of their relationships with Belarusian men: remember that *sexual exchange theory* postulates that, in a given locale, the gender with more options generally carries more influence in their dealings with the opposite sex. As Belarusian men carry the numeric advantage in this country, especially in the more senior age groups, then it would certainly be in a woman’s best interest to do whatever possible, given restrictions of time and resources, to increase the number of (desirable) men with whom she can potentially relate. Thus, we see that the ‘virtual bride’ industry renders an important service to Belarusian women, even if they never actually develop serious relationships through online introduction and correspondence.

In one sense, the post-communist transformation of the Belarusian economy has worked to the advantage of women to the extent that it has permitted the free market to provide services to meet given demands, through both the development of the necessary infrastructure and the (partial) liberalization of government economic policy. As has been observed, ICTs have presented an array of new and unique opportunities for contact with a global audience, even for a relatively isolated authoritarian state as Belarus, yielding new opportunities for both business and social interactions.

With a more comprehensive view of this industry, including the unique cultural, political, demographic, and economic attributes casting it, the reasons for its initiation and expansion, as well as its unique supply/demand dynamic, become evident. Here, a place-based, location-specific, cumulative causation also lends explanatory power to Belarus’ significant representation in this global industry: as word spreads about the existence and availability of a service, demand expands in the locale where it is made available. As demand expands beyond

the fledgling industry's capacity to meet it, new businesses arise to meet the demand. This process persists in cyclical fashion, eventually resulting in transformations in the cultural and economic landscape, until demand is ultimately satisfied and market expansion tapers off.

But this is not to oversimplify the scenario unique to the Belarusian example, because this model thus far has not accounted for the expansion of demand for these services on the part of Belarusian women as a function of the level of interest and participation on the part of Western *men*. In this sense, expanding numbers of women available online result in a corresponding increase in interested men from other parts of the globe, by virtue of the basic tenets of sexual exchange theory. One again, this process is cyclical, and speaks to the heightened level of interconnectedness between markets that is the hallmark of online commerce. This amplified interconnectedness becomes a significant catalyst for profound transformation in the global cultural space.

### **3.4 Emigration and considerations of place**

The role of place plays a powerful hand in the process of emigration, and the dilemma faced by most potential 'virtual brides,' such as Helen, is inherently locational/geographical: there are profound difficulties to be faced in removing oneself to what may well be a completely foreign land and culture, where the more immediate, place-based support derived from one's personal network of family and friends is no longer readily accessible, and one literally becomes a stranger in her new surroundings. This very likely becoming the recipe for an intense brand of dependency upon one's new spouse, especially if she does not have a basic command of the local language, it is no surprise that this arrangement may appeal to men who explicitly desire dependent and subservient partners, although this was not substantiated in Helen's case.

However, a woman who proceeds with wisdom and caution may turn to existing networks of support already in place in the country of destination. In the vein of what geographers term *migration chains*, a woman with a sister, cousin, or close friend with permanent residence in Austin, Texas, for example, may (quite wisely) decide that Austin would be her best choice to resettle among all possible destinations. The pre-existing network of support, albeit perhaps small, can make a significant difference in terms of one's quality of life, and especially during the difficult initial period of transition and acculturation. Furthermore, even one distant friend can quickly evolve into a valuable network of friends forming a crucial

support system after emigration takes place; and one's move to a particular foreign city, in turn, may very well draw other friends or relatives from one's place of origin. This point gained support from Mrs. Oksana Boychenko-Gaertner (OksanaLove.com) who described the means by which many women find her agency:

...in most parts here we have girlfriends bringing their girlfriends, daughters bringing mothers or mothers bringing daughters.... friends who got married in the United States, who moved already to the United States, they are talking to people here.... and these people talk to someone in Kazakhstan or Russia and then send them to my agency or something like that.... we do hundreds of marriages and there are many many of these girls who are already here.... of course I will give her the phone numbers of the girls who already live in her state, maybe a city. So we have a little community between our girls here. We do help each other and it really does work.

What this means is that if a woman is serious about emigration through channels of marriage with a foreign spouse, and has the good fortune to afford selectivity regarding where she relocates, then she can opt to confine her search for a foreign husband based on the location of her pre-existing/potential system of female support. This becomes a very important point, as female friendships, and the bonds that emerge from them, are among the most important relationships in the lives of women.

### **3.5 Working in Belarus**

An opportunity to conduct fieldwork in Belarus and speak personally with some of the participants of this industry came with a decision to re-connect with an NGO with which I had cooperated in the past. I had traveled to Belarus for the first time in 1999 with Bridges For Education, Inc., a non-profit group that organizes three-week English language camps for youth in cooperation with local partner affiliates and national ministries of education. Volunteers teach students for three weeks in a full-immersion, summer camp environment, and are then treated to one week of guided educational travel by their local hosts.

I was nearing the completion of a one-year teaching contract at a public high school in the Polish capitol when the NGO, with which I had twice volunteered for participation in summer English camps in Poland, contacted me to beseech my participation for a similar camp near Minsk, Belarus. Considering that they were severely short-handed of volunteers, I somewhat hesitantly obliged, not knowing exactly what to expect of this experience as I knew



virtually nothing at the time of this republic (shameful for a geographer, to be sure). From there, it was not difficult for the NGO to notify the Belarusian consulate in Warsaw to prepare my visa papers, and I needed only to hop on a bus and appear at the embassy with my passport. Getting to Minsk required only an overnight train from the Polish capitol.

My first experience of Belarus was positive. I had found the local camp staff, administrators, and students welcoming and enthusiastic. During the four-week experience, I had learned of the significant level of outmigration Belarus was experiencing, especially among younger people disillusioned with their prospects or opportunities in this country. It was during this time that I also came to appreciate how my own citizenship/national origin potentially plays into interpersonal relationships—a function of place and my relationship to that place. I left Belarus in 1999 with a heightened awareness of the interrelationships between inequality, desire, place, and power.

When I joined the doctoral program in geography at the University of Kentucky the following year, I had no intention of broaching this subject matter, but a compelling seminar delivered by Dr. Stan Brunn on Electronic Human Geographies, as well as my past experiences in Central and Eastern Europe, inspired a paper on the online ‘mail-order bride’ industry, which I discovered to be greater in popularity than I had initially surmised. The topic seemed to fit quite well the research interests of the department.

Thus, the return trip to Belarus in 2004 was to be for the same purpose, with the added opportunity for dissertation fieldwork. The trip was funded by the NGO by virtue of my role as group leader, responsible for the recruitment of volunteers willing to sacrifice a part of their summer to help improve the English skills of adolescents in a relatively obscure, post-Soviet country, as well as make a sizeable monetary contribution to the organization to help pay for its administrative overhead and operational costs. This was no easy task, but my efforts were rewarded with a small contingent of UK student volunteers, including one representing the Patterson School, who were stalwart, generous, and adventurous enough to give the experience a try.

I was assured by the organization’s executive director, who had by this time established a favorable reputation in Belarus, that the Belarusian government would be compliant with a request for a one-month visa extension beyond the typical one-month allowance for such volunteer efforts. Keeping in mind that Belarus is a relatively closed, authoritarian state

maintaining a comparatively strict vigilance over its transboundary migration, I came to accept that it would have been rather difficult to win a visa for research purposes in this country absent some kind of organizational affiliation. BFE certainly provided this, as did its local partners and co-organizers, the Belarusian Association of UNESCO Clubs, or “BelaU.”

BelaU is a non-profit, largely volunteer-driven group operating under the auspices and dedicated to the advancement of UNESCO goals and principles, including youth education and mentoring, public health, AIDS/HIV awareness, and artistic and cultural programs. BFE had petitioned on my behalf its current acting president, Ms. Liudmila Blizniuk, to assist my research effort in any way possible for the month following the completion of the camp. With her subsequent agreement, I was given access to the organization’s human and material resources, including access to e-mail, Internet, and phone service, office space, translation assistance, and the like. BelaU also offered to assist with developing networking contacts whenever possible.

It was quite necessary to proceed very carefully with the justification provided to the Belarusian government for the one-month visa extension. They were informed that the study was an investigation of the social impacts of ICTs and required a series of interviews with Belarusian Internet-based businesses. Certainly this was altogether true and accurate, but intentionally nebulous enough to preempt any concerns on the part of the government about research that could potentially cast Belarus in a negative or disparaging light.

None of this was to become a problem, fortunately, as the Belarusian consular officer in charge of visa issuance was in full recognition of the fact that his office had been shamefully negligent the year before in issuing the required visas for the organization’s volunteers in a timely manner, causing unimaginable grief and hassle. This time, the consulate was vigilant, and had openly vowed to issue the visas promptly and without complication this time around. These unique circumstances worked in my favor, and there were no problems in securing the one-month extension. Thus, the plan was set to devote the second month in Belarus for research purposes after the conclusion of my volunteer obligations.

Although I certainly could not have accomplished much without the cooperation of BelaU, there were some problems with this cooperative arrangement. First, I had become rather dependent on them for advancing the study during the second month. They had clearly made every possible effort to assist, and I was convinced of their seriousness and sincerity.

Immediately after the conclusion of the BFE camp event, BelaU began assisting with contacting

local online introduction agencies in Minsk, requesting appointments on my behalf. BelaU had also succeeded in setting up an interview with Ms. Elena Nesteruk, a project manager for the Belarusian chapter of La Strada, an international organization for the prevention of human trafficking and the provision of support services for its victims. BelaU provided translation assistance for this interview, to which we will return in chapter four.

Another problem in working with BelaU was that they had another significant project on schedule for the month of August: another three-week UNESCO youth camp event that required their presence at the camp site location about 40 kilometers outside the capitol, keeping them rather preoccupied with its administration. BelaU requested my presence for at least a portion of this camp event, on the rationale that there would be additional networking opportunities among camp participants. Indeed, BelaU honored their commitment to the best of their abilities, and duly invited their international team of visiting educators to participate in the study in their free time were they able to make a meaningful contribution. This yielded another valuable contact, “Svetlana”, another Belarusian English teacher who had a profile online with the “Russian Queen” agency. Svetlana agreed to an interview, and to contact a close friend from the same agency to arrange what would become an interview opportunity with the agency’s owner/founder in Vitebsk, Belarus.

Although my cooperation with BelaU yielded some valuable networking opportunities, I found that my research efforts were simultaneously restricted by the same system of support upon which I depended. During the second UNESCO youth camp, BelaU had most of its staff committed to the camp operations, and the organization kept me on a relatively short leash, as they were clearly in full recognition of their responsibility for my safety and conduct while in Belarus. In short, their intention was to assist the study as much as possible while keeping me out of trouble and maintaining the organization’s good graces with BFE and with the Belarusian government.

Regardless of the setbacks inherent to my cooperation with BFE and with BelaU, it is worth reiterating that the arrangement tendered one major advantage: I was in Belarus not under the pretense of service, but actually rendering it. The first BFE camp was attended by more than 90 students representing a handful of nations including Russia, Romania, Belarus, and Chechnya; students had the rare opportunity to apply their English skills to satisfy their curiosity about students from other nations, as well as the BFE team. The UNESCO camp was similar,

but was not focused on English amelioration. Still, I was asked to participate in some of the camp activities as a ‘special guest,’ which also furthered a goodwill relationship with the students and staff.

Again, the camp environments benefited the study in the sense that they offered an excellent opportunity to know native Belarusians on a more personal level, and served as an immediate basis for a cooperative relationship from which trust was developed and volunteers solicited. Especially in the absence of research funding for the remuneration of study volunteers, this proved an outstanding asset, and perhaps more effective than a random solicitation of volunteers considering the very sensitive and personal nature of the subject matter, let alone that the investigator is a man.

### **3.6 On positionality**

It is essential to consider positionality especially in studies where human subjects constitute the source of the data to be collected. I am part of a demographic very closely approximating that of most Western ‘bride-seekers’---white, Euro-American males in their thirties, divorced, with above average education and professional career trajectories—a fact that may be somewhat off-putting to potential women respondents. Consider also that it likely would have been much easier for women respondents to confide in a woman researcher, and the argument for an existing context from which a relationship of trust could be developed becomes quite persuasive. Nevertheless, the exact ‘cooperation rate’ among those who were both informed of the study and qualified to participate simply cannot be determined.<sup>67</sup>

This section will explore in more detail how I came to be positioned for such an undertaking. The ‘data’ that constitutes the basis for this is more personal, by no means purely objective, and part of a larger context framed within familial, cultural, and historical moments that I can never hope to fully and completely know despite my most sincere efforts. Although such self-explorations tend to be inchoate and replete with self-perpetuating myths, disavowals, and blank pages that may better be filled by others, a more holistic assessment of positionality is nonetheless essential to a more fully contextualized understanding of the investigation itself.

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<sup>67</sup> Conversely, there were a few instances where study volunteers who desired to help were not fully qualified: they were prepared to discuss the experiences of an aunt or friend, for example, or to describe the situation in their home countries as they understood it, or to share their experiences with online dating. These testimonies were only tangentially useful in themselves, but nevertheless could not be refused.

My family history is characterized by numerous parallel themes. First, I am the product of at least three generations of ‘border crossers’ in themselves—forebears traversing back and forth across the international and intercultural boundary between New England and French Canada. The family’s unique bilingualism underscores this cross-cultural theme: my maternal grandmother maintained vestiges of her Anglophone identity from her childhood years in Biddeford, Maine despite having raised fifteen children as Francophones in southern Quebec. My mother was one of four who emigrated to the U.S. permanently, assuming a secondary national and cultural identity, and passing her native language to her own children.

Among the myriad possible rationales for immigration, a pervasive one in my family was clearly economic: generations of rural French Canadians did not enjoy the privileges of access afforded by higher education, and thus engaged themselves in livelihoods such as farming, resource extraction (lumbering, mining, e.g.), manufacturing, and building and construction trades. Thus, it was quite common for them to avail themselves of economic opportunity stateside, especially during wartime periods of high labor demand. Evidence of this migratory trend is in abundance in places such as Lewiston, ME, Plattsburgh, NY, and Worcester, MA, where scores of French surnames are found in area telephone directories.

Moreover, I am a product of an international marriage, with a bilingual, American father and French Canadian immigrant mother, both raised in decidedly rigid Catholic families that were also rather fertile by virtue of fin-de-siecle Catholic teachings and doctrine, the most influential of which imposing rigid role prescriptions for Quebecois women. *Children ennoble the mother* was a doctrine promoting the belief that the more children a woman bore, the more blessed she was, and working hand-in-hand with the church’s moral prohibition of methods of birth control. My mother explicitly remembers the village priest’s periodic visits to her childhood home, in part to verify that her own mother was fulfilling her womanly duties with consecutive pregnancies and the nurturance of more human souls to fulfill God’s plan for humanity and to bestow the wondrous gifts of His creation. My mother came to reject this, and eventually the Catholic church altogether.

The net effect of Catholic religious ideology in French Canada was the concerted maintenance of dramatically large families, of which my own maternal grandparents were shamefully negligent in comparison to many others dedicated to raising more than twenty children. To accomplish this, a *Quebecoise* had to marry young, eschewing higher education,

and remain with child for the better part of her childbearing years. An interesting family sociology necessarily emerged from this trend, where both women and men remained relatively poor by Canadian standards and preoccupied with subsistence, incessantly taxed by the demands of family size and assailed with responsibilities associated with the provision of basic needs. As a result, some families found themselves ill-equipped to guide the emotional and/or intellectual development of their children, as was the case in my mother's family, where attention and nurturance were meted out in unbalanced and ephemeral gradients—products of a somewhat narcissistic emotional landscape characterized by intense idealization and subsequent abandonment when the next child was born. This 'baby du jour' syndrome also became a source of jealousy and rivalry among the siblings, which in some cases extended well into adulthood. This was exacerbated by my maternal grandparents' tendency to relegate authority to the eldest siblings in the effort to fulfill the prodigious task of meeting the basic needs of children who enjoyed little more than subaltern status in a household dominated by an emotionally distant and harshly disciplinarian patriarch.

Predictably, my mother found her family and cultural environment perpetually dissatisfying and unacceptable and, like many contemporary 'virtual brides' of post-Soviet nations separating themselves from territories once marked by obsolete ideologies and oppressive systems of control, yearned for a better life in another place. Engaging in the process of leaving behind one's nation and culture and adopting a new one invariably and essentially courts radical change, fueled by proclivities for risk-taking and the willingness to sever existing relationships to fulfill personal aspirations/dreams—traits uniquely American in attitude and outlook. My subjective interest in the subject matter is, in part, a function of my origins and personal identification with the courageous—and sometimes radical—women who make such dramatic life choices.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Risk, Reward, and the ‘Virtual’ Relation: Random Takes

#### 4.1 A hypothetical scenario (in two takes)

TAKE ONE: Olga, a young Russian woman in her early twenties, steps off the train in Moscow’s main subway terminal. She is a clothing designer by training, and is returning from a job interview that she feels went rather poorly. The firm had informed her that they had received literally hundreds of applications from qualified designers—many of them more experienced than she. This was her fifth interview in a month and she had received nearly the same rotten news from the other firms to which she applied—and the market shows no signs of loosening up, at least not in Moscow.

Then she notices a few men passing out some bright-pink handbills to commuters. She notices that they are targeting young women. One man sees her and quickly gives her a handbill. She accepts it begrudgingly and, proceeding toward the escalators, takes a brief glance at the solicitation. It is an invitation to a photo shoot at a nearby hotel. The company sponsoring the shoot apparently is a Moscow-based Internet business that is dealing in Russian mail-order brides. She had heard about these companies from a friend of hers who had been contemplating this. Apparently this kind of thing has been gaining somewhat in popularity here in Moscow and in some other Russian cities.

She could understand why. Her friend had told her that her own mother had recommended that she get out of Russia as soon as she can—perhaps by marrying an American or an Englishman or something of the kind. She told her daughter that there is no future in Russia for a young person with hopes and dreams. Unemployment is tragically high, opportunities scarce, and the economy has been in a shambles for over ten years. Olga has been feeling the effects of these hardships, and her prospects do not seem to be getting any better these days. She finds herself barely able to hold on to her small, one-room flat with the wages that she earns at the boutique. Sales have been slow and she hasn’t received one ruble in commission for over two months. She did extremely well at the design school she attended and feels that she has a lot of creative ideas to offer. A break is really all she needs to get herself started.

Looking back down at the handbill, she notices that the photo shoot is taking place in less than an hour. The men must have been trying to recruit some last-minute candidates for the occasion. Apparently there would be no cost to her and they are even offering free makeovers for the shoot. Olga stops just before the escalators and pauses for a moment. She tells herself that this probably wouldn't take very long; it wouldn't cost her anything. She is single, unattached, and able to move on a whim if need be. And while she still has her own place and doesn't have to move back in with her parents (just yet), she can enjoy some privacy without her mother watching over her every move, as she had become accustomed to. Olga then turns back toward the platform and waits for the next train that will take her to the address listed in bold face at the bottom of the bright pink handbill she still holds in her hand.

TAKE TWO: Olga steps off the train and begrudgingly accepts a handbill that a man thrusts toward her. Proceeding toward the escalators, she takes a brief glance at the solicitation. It's an invitation to a photo shoot at a nearby hotel. The company sponsoring the shoot apparently is a Moscow-based Internet business that is dealing in Russian mail-order brides. She had heard about these companies from a friend of hers who had been contemplating this. Apparently this has been gaining somewhat in popularity here in Moscow and in some other Russian cities. Olga pauses for a moment, crumples up the handbill and throws it into a trash barrel at the base of the escalators. She is going home to relax and then she will meet her friends at the pub to commiserate a little, but mostly to laugh and be silly as they usually do on their Thursday evening outings.

These two scenarios each describe a situation where a young Russian woman must make a decision based on an opportunity. The two versions show distinctly different outcomes, each displaying an element of hope and possibility. The first presents the chance of an eventual correspondence with a Western man who has found Olga's profile online and is interested in marrying a Russian woman. The second illustrates the importance of social support in the face of trying times, as well as the strength and possibility that this support lends. The unfortunate reality is that many thousands of women of post-Soviet nations are confronted with circumstances which may compel them to take risks they might not otherwise take. These are most certainly choices made through conscious deliberation, a weighing of options, perhaps



discussion with friends and family, etc. To simply refer to them as ‘victims’ of difficult circumstances would be a gross oversimplification, and an unfair denial of the agency they possess.<sup>68</sup> This chapter explores in greater detail such issues, and the choices and chances presented to women of post-Soviet nations in global cultural space.

The potential victimization of women intent on improving life conditions for themselves through temporary or permanent expatriation is a genuine and ever-present concern, especially in consideration of the dramatic and disconcerting increase in the trafficking and sexual enslavement of literally hundreds of thousands of women of post-Soviet Europe since the early 1990s, orchestrated by the international criminal cartels that have amassed considerable power since the collapse of the Soviet system and the dissolution of the Soviet rule of law. Thus, a portion of my fieldwork experience was given to discovering whether Belarusian women marketing themselves online for international romantic correspondence were exposing themselves to such risks in their cooperation with online marriage agencies. The next section details the results of my findings.

#### **4.2 Criminal connections? Talking to an insider**

My inquiries brought me in contact with Ms. Elena Nesteruk, Program Manager of the Belarusian Chapter of La Strada, an international organization for the prevention of abuse and human trafficking. In addition to their ongoing educational programs, La Strada offers counseling and support services for women victims, and to the families of the missing. Arranged through my local BelaU contacts, Ms. Nesteruk agreed to an interview to take place in their program office in the Belarusian capitol. My thinking at the time was that the local human service professionals devoted to trafficking prevention would be the best positioned to answer my questions about the online ‘virtual bride’ industry and possible connections to criminal

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<sup>68</sup> Martin (1994; 638) asserts that “the *a priori* assumption that things that go by the same name share all or even some properties is mistaken. Yet it is equally a mistake to ban categories *a priori*...” Certainly, writing and/or speaking about ‘virtual brides’ (and the men who seek them) can be a prickly undertaking. Avoiding essentialist references to post-Soviet women can be difficult. It is more accurate to state that women in adverse conditions can choose from an array of possible routes, depending on their own unique circumstances. Also accurate is that women who post their profiles online are not ‘desperate’ and ‘helpless,’ as many women participants view this as an empowering move for themselves.

networks in Belarus. The net result was a very informative interview conducted with the translation assistance of a BelaU administrator.<sup>69</sup>

Ms. Nesteruk initiated discussion with a description of La Strada's primary activities, offering evidence of her strong positioning for addressing the questions I brought to the conversation:

.....one of the special directions of La Strada is that it serves as a special informational line for women who want to go abroad. They also give help to the relatives of those who went abroad... and they want to find them sometimes, so they come here for help. And sometimes trafficked women, when they come back, they also come here. They've worked for almost 4 years and they've already received almost 5000 calls. Calls from women who go abroad for work are the majority, about 60%... or sometimes women call about their rights within marriages with people from other countries. Sometimes the women will see announcements from firms or agencies and they will receive calls

Especially in view of the high volume of 'business' La Strada does, this statement makes clear that, although the agency is occasionally consulted for problems and issues related to international marriage, such calls comprise a smaller percentage of the consultation and support the organization provides. This offers initial indication that trafficking, at least in Belarus, is not significantly associated with international marriage, or aspirations thereof. This point gains some support with Ms. Nesteruk's description of a covert survey of area marriage and work agencies conducted by their local chapter to evaluate the level of risk posed to women clients:

It's easy to trace which agencies appear to have good conditions....They have 14 consultants and they teach them to raise their level of knowledge and to raise their qualification. Last year they had interesting training. The consultants were young girls. They visited the agencies. They pretended to be clients. They visited two agencies who provide work abroad and the marriage agencies. There is an agency who provides training to girls who want to go to other agencies... how to do it the right way. What should you know when going to such kind of agencies. So they are interested very much in that. So they went for such training, eight of them. And you know they had such impression that if they wanted to marry a man from abroad that they would go to such an agency... but... they don't know what to say about others.

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<sup>69</sup> For a complete transcript of this interview, please consult the appendix, p. 152.

The evidence presented in her description of this coordinated study sheds some doubt upon suggestions that online international marriage agencies operating in Belarus are associated with criminal networks, or engage in nefarious or unethical practices. This doubt was amplified when she noted that, in the four years since their inception, the agency had not been approached by anyone seeking assistance with problems arising from their cooperation with local online marriage agencies. Still, she added that many such agencies are not licensed.<sup>70</sup>

The issue of licensing notwithstanding, another more fundamental issue pertaining to online introduction agencies was raised: that of qualifications:

Anybody can go and register his own marriage agency. So nobody knows if someone has any experience in this area or not, and nobody asks.... nobody knows if there is some problem with trafficking because nobody asks. And nobody checks what he had in previous years or if he has education.

The implications of this problem are significant, since such work clearly requires a level of sensitivity and insight that only experience and training can provide. A former computer programmer or accountant looking for greener pastures in such ventures may not consider running background checks on foreign men interested in romantic liaisons with local women, or confirm the actual age of a young woman client who claims to be 18. Ms. Nesteruk elaborates these concerns with their possible ramifications:

...in these cases the women often don't have enough information about the possible husband. They know only the information that he wrote in the e-mails. Sometimes they know only his Internet address. No confirming, no documents and even sometimes they are not sure that he is even from that country. Sometimes a girl is invited to go to that country and she is not sure that it is really serious situation and... nothing will help this girl. Usually they give advice how to behave in such situation... how to be safe.

Such circumstances point to the frequent 'information gradients' characterized by such mediated interactions. As the informational advantage typically goes to those who finance the industry (i.e., the men who pay for electronic access to information about the women), the industry tends

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<sup>70</sup> This problem has since been addressed to some degree by the Belarusian government with the introduction of new legislation in 2005 requiring the licensing of international introduction agencies. Although some companies, such as the "AngelikaMinsk" agency, have demonstrated full compliance, the overall rate of compliance to this regulation (certainly a function of enforcement) is yet to be determined.

to promote an imbalance in the depth and type of information available to men and women clients. This creates a situation where the women involved must operate on a greater level of trust than the men considering their disadvantage in terms of available information about their correspondents (or, in some cases, suitors). Asked if she believes these women to be too trusting, Ms. Nesteruk replies:

sometimes yes... especially when women have no financial resources to be independent... or when she is staying in a hotel in another country and she agrees to go home with a person. So it relies on the situation. But they don't know whether she was acquainted through marriage agency or some other way. It is not serious in our country that we can see connection between Internet acquaintance and some human trafficking. So it's difficult to say if there is any connection.

My interview with La Strada's Belarusian program manager invoked a host of themes relevant to this study: mediatization, advertising and consumerism, simulation, sexual advantage, sexual opportunism, and inequality. Many of the questions posed to her attempted to explore possibilities associated with potential connections between online introduction agencies and trafficking, yet her responses were tempered and cautious as she expressed a general unwillingness to decisively conclude that there was indeed an identifiable relationship there. Queried about the extensive advertising of such agencies and the potential risks associated with the ostensible popularity of the industry, Ms. Nesteruk offered a response based on her own observations that spoke to the broader issues of mediatization, simulation, virtuality, and globalized communication, particularly as they relate to sexual behavior and ICT access:

...perhaps the situation in our country is different from the United States but...there are a lot of advertisements and announcements from individual women about meeting someone. So sometimes it's advertising for prostitution... female sex workers. Of course in this announcements you can't read it but it's evident that it's just advertising for sex work. And many people know it. And sometimes militia man can phone from these advertisements and they understand that they are calling to a sex worker. It's not a real advertisements about meeting somebody for marriage or serious relations.... but even sometimes if it's written for serious relations, it's still just sex work. There are many announcements on the newspapers but also on the Internet sites. You can get acquainted with somebody not only from Belarus but the Independent states. They know some girls who are looking for a husband only from abroad. The situation is changing because the newspapers are read by local people but the Internet is available for everybody. So sometimes on the Internet it's difficult to find the advertisement for sex work and sometimes on the Internet there are real advertisements for

marriage. So many young girls who can work with Internet and computer... they understand that sometimes they shouldn't go to marriage agency but they can find the information themselves. It's not necessary to go to the agency, they can do it themselves using the Internet.

Ms. Nesteruk makes some important observations here, offering a perspective that broadens our understandings of the significance of ICTs to social, sexual and relationship behavior in post-Soviet Europe. What is gathered here, foremost, is that ICTs present a much greater array of options to women, with or without online introduction agencies, especially if the women themselves have access to ICTs and are also technically literate (as the great majority Belarusian women are). ICTs intensify the frequency of exchange and broaden the range of possible communicants, introducing formerly unlikely possibilities in a new and unpredictable world, while simultaneously amplifying simulation and virtuality in interpersonal contact. The mediated nature of this interaction invites social transformation to various degrees, freeing communication from traditional referentiality and inviting a postmodern sense of 'play' in the seductive form of innuendo, subtext, and floating signifiers. Notions of play also emerge in considerations of the activities of men clients of the online 'virtual bride' industry, especially in its associations with sex tourism. Ms. Nesteruk elaborates:

....they know that it's possible for people from other countries to get information about women here and if they can come here to meet someone, why not? Even sometimes they understand that they will meet this woman only for one night. Such situation is possible, because there are women here who believe that it's a way for them to raise their financial resources... to be married with a foreigner. And when they meet foreigners they try everything to make him be interested in her. So we can understand that the foreigner can also use the girl. Such situation may even be not so seldom...sometimes the agency doesn't quite know which man is prepared for a relationship. So sometimes a man will use the agency only to find a woman from Belarus or Ukraine for sexual relations.

In addition to this form of 'play' where sexual and/or relationship activity is conducted across cultures and national boundaries, the quintessentially postmodern condition of detachment from traditional place-based contexts and the characteristic sociocultural 'dereferralization' fueled by global cultural space become evident in Ms. Nesteruk's commentary regarding the struggles of Belarusian women who turn to marriage as a form of migration and repatriation:

...the women should understand that if they are looking for a foreigner it can be a problem if they don't know the foreign language... sometimes they don't know the laws of that country, sometimes they don't know which language they will use in communication, and even can't get acquainted as real persons (laughs)... because what can they do together having no language? Such woman should understand that she can't count on serious relations. And even when they really have marriage to a foreigner they might have serious problems later... So a woman, if she doesn't know the language and the laws, she might come under total control. She could even become as slavery.... but even not thinking about it. So she would be controlled in all aspects: financial, friends, and so on. She says that the same situation can happen here (laughs)... but here, at least she knows the language.

These observations found direct support from 'Helen,' in my conversation with her, as we broached the subject of unhappy outcomes resulting from marriage with foreign partners:

I know one woman who is not happy. She moved to Germany not so long ago. She left her husband and her children behind and she went to Germany but she is not happy because she does not know the language and she can't find a job. She lives in a house with a man who has children and she looks after the boys... she is a housewife and she can't work because without language it's impossible. And now, she is in despair because it is her fault. She was very easy going from my point of view. She didn't think before making a decision. As for me....I knew all the details, and only then did I make a decision to go or not to go. But she decided very quickly. Not a serious woman at all.

The 'playful' nature of social interaction and the transfer of textual and visual signs and messages in cyberspace, such as that which characterizes the exchanges between men and women clients of online introduction agencies, offers evidence of the advancement of seduction and simulation as communicative paradigms in virtual space—a playfulness that parallels the fluidity and multiplicity of the globalizing socioeconomic forces that give rise to global cultural space. This is supported by Ms. Nesteruk's comments regarding the reliability of textual and visual information in this industry:

Nobody can check it, and nobody even can check whose picture has been sent to the agency. It could be a picture from not the present time but 10 years ago. Nobody can check.... so people should think seriously about all the possibilities when they see a picture on the Internet. If you receive a response you should understand that sometimes it's not true.... for women, it's safer to meet a man here..... Maybe some people are really involved in that process and they like their job and they are honest in their job... and the information about men and women is true. But sometimes as somebody gives other information because people are different... so you can use the information in any way because nobody can control it.

My conversation with Ms. Nesteruk was fruitful in that it served to exonerate the online marriage agencies in Belarus, at least until affirmative evidence of exploitation presents itself. Since most of the associates, managers, and owners/directors of such firms are themselves Belarusian and derive their livelihood from the services they provide women from their own locales, it stands to reason that they would work to the benefit of these women, not their detriment, if their interests were invested in maintaining favorable reputations for themselves and their businesses. Nevertheless, these agencies require continual monitoring from both government ministries and human rights groups to ensure the protection of participants. What the agencies clearly specialize in is the presentation of greater levels of *opportunity*, but cannot guarantee that their clients will make the best choices. No degree of community vigilance will protect an individual from making foolhardy decisions if she steadfastly insists on it, but conditions of hardship, dearth of opportunity, and significant socioeconomic inequalities between participants nevertheless continue to structure the opportunities available to women of post-Soviet nations. This correlates with the imperatives of sexual exchange theory, as elaborated in the second chapter, where women (especially in higher age brackets) are presented with fewer relationship choices, making online agencies and the use of ICTs more attractive as they introduce greater opportunity for interaction with others on a global scale. The next section offers some examples of how some individuals respond to hardship and the injustice of international socioeconomic inequality. Considered also are the challenges that arise as a result of expatriation.

### **4.3 Contending with hardships in ‘old’ worlds, mitigating them in ‘new’ spaces**

I was catching an early dinner at a crowded McDonald’s restaurant in the Belarusian capitol when a young woman sat down at an adjacent table. She was using her cell phone, ostensibly, to find out when her husband would be joining her. I opened up to make some small talk and, once convinced that I was not an eccentric Belarusian man randomly practicing his English, she assented to some petit conversation. I learned that they had been married for about a year, and were expecting a baby. Her husband worked for a small electrical components company, and they were considering starting their own business in a similar area. Her outlook, however, was not especially optimistic, and she eventually complained about the Belarusian economy, about the dearth of economic opportunity, and expressed concern about their ability to

keep their family afloat. “It’s getting harder and harder to make an honest living in this country” was the statement that struck me the most during our short conversation.

A case in point is the father of a student participant in the English camp in which I participated that summer—a highly accomplished industrial chemist who had befriended one of the American volunteers and beseeched her assistance in distributing his resume among American firms once she returned to the USA. The man was poised and ready to leave his native Belarus permanently for a more stable and secure future for himself and his family. “Our freedom is worth more than anything” he was quoted as saying.

Were he to succeed in finding gainful employment in the U.S. or elsewhere, he may be obliged to accept a position for which he is vastly overqualified. This was the case with “Karina,” a Russian woman who had married “James,” an American college instructor from central Kentucky who had assented to an interview in the spring of 2005. In Russia, Karina was trained as a medical doctor and certified radiologist, but had discovered opportunities to practice in her locale rather scarce. James had found her profile online and had initiated correspondence. After an extended period of exchange via e-mail and telephone, as well as a two-week rendezvous in her native Moscow, Karina moved to central Kentucky to live with her new husband, but was resigned to accept work as an assistant in the radiology department of a local hospital because her Russian credentials did not satisfy the requirements of area hospitals, clinics, and medical centers.

Thus, as women of post-Soviet nations continue to struggle against difficult circumstances, those who do make the decision to expatriate to places of brighter promise and opportunity frequently find themselves in new worlds where opportunity itself takes on different forms and imposes new restrictions. The ability to cope with new problems is, in part, a function of one’s capacity to withstand more familiar ones. Success with cultural assimilation also frequently requires the adaptation to new and unfamiliar values and norms while steadfastly maintaining one’s native cultural identity. For many post-Soviet spousal immigrants, this comes as a result of engaging themselves in an online marketing system that presents new and often unanticipated opportunities that can either improve the odds, or even beat them. The characteristic randomness and unpredictability of social interaction in global cultural space became evident in the case of one woman client of the “Russian Queen” marriage agency. In a personal interview (conducted with the assistance of an interpreter), Mr. Vladimir Zaplitny, the



agency's co-owner/director, recounted the story of 'Larisa,' whom he believed had no chance of finding a new husband:

.... five years ago a lady came to the agency, she had two children, she had financial problems... she was 43 years old and she had two children and two ex-husbands. She was pretty and good-looking but her life was finished because of her age and problems with these men..... she didn't work, she didn't have money, no flat, she had two kids... she had no chance.....

Regardless, Larisa's online presence caught the attention of not one, but two potential foreign suitors, both successful British men who had traveled to Belarus to meet her. Nick, a divorced man with children, invited Larisa to visit his home and the two eventually married. In the spirit of fairy-tale 'happily ever after' scenarios, Larisa now lives "as a princess in London." To Mr. Zaplitny's great disbelief, Larisa found her new spouse not *despite* the fact that she had children, but *because* of this:

His reasons became very simple.... Nick wanted to find a woman who has a daughter because he was concerned for his own daughter. So Nick went to the Internet and he chose a woman.... any woman who had a daughter of the same age so that the two daughters could become friends.

Thus, Larisa succeeded in finding a new mate, beating very difficult odds, based on criteria no one expected would work to her advantage. According to the Internet agency's owner/director, this unpredictability and randomness has become commonplace in his business:

....we have many such unusual cases. We never thought at the age of 43 that she would change her life. So they all had different problems but through these problems they found mutual solutions. So you see that there are different situations and there are strong and not very strong positions.... and it's difficult to command the situation

The theme of unpredictability in virtual space also emerges with the examination of images that circulate in this space, and more specifically in the online photo catalogs of international marriage agencies such as "Russian Queen." The 'hyperreality' of many of these images suggests that the industry appropriates the postmodern cultural paradigms such as those discussed in chapter two. An example of this is seen with 'Svetlana,' a client of the "Russian

Queen” marriage agency, who admitted during our interview that her online photographic representation does not exactly agree with her everyday appearance:

I understand that when I look in the mirror I find that I'm not so pretty like in the photos. I find that the beauty is natural.... no computer work. What's on the web site is the work of a good photographer, nothing more. But it's me, I am very pretty, but I am not gorgeous like (a fashion model)...

In working with ‘Svetlana’ and interacting with her on a daily basis for a period of three weeks, I came to know her as an intelligent and caring person interested in teaching and the arts, with a professed pride and self-esteem that, according to her, exempts her from playing feminized ‘roles’ in order to win the admiration of men. Yet, her representation online revealed a paradox about her behavior reminiscent of the paradoxical nature of the mediated spaces of postmodern consumer culture: the honesty with which she presents herself in ‘real’ space does not accompany the same honesty in cyberspace. Indeed, the everyday accessibility and personability of this individual is short-circuited somewhat by the observation that her online photographic representation communicates signs of elegant sophistication that suggests the transcendence of limitations of age, class, and ethnicity (a ‘placeless’ online representation). Supporting this point is that her primary intent to establish an online profile with this marriage agency was not to find a foreign marriage partner:

....nowadays I don't have a match, and a lot of friends of mine have been abroad, and a lot of my friends have married abroad. And that's why I thought ‘why not,’ but to tell you the truth, I don't think I really want to marry and live abroad..... it's just an interest. Perhaps the main reason is that I just wanted to get acquainted new people and have friends abroad.

In this case, Svetlana’s language suggests that she is not quite certain why she decided to establish an online profile, but that to ‘play the game’ of online opportunity supersedes conscious rationale. This resonates with the characteristic fluidity and contingency of the postmodern cultural paradigms and the nature of the spaces and the sexualities they influence. “When the information is on the Internet, everything depends on God” according to Mr. Zaplitny.

#### 4.4 From *secondspace* to *thirdspace*: connections to romance tourism

As the online commodification of human desires is expressed by and through this industry, private enterprise continues to anticipate market demand and potential business opportunities in related areas. Especially as cyborgian sexualities embrace the limitless desire of limitless opportunity as set in motion by the vast storehouse of digital information accessible online, peripheral products and services are made available as demand requires. As referenced in previous chapters, some agencies, such as the Atlanta-based *European Connections*, offer tour packages whereupon men clients travel to post-Soviet Europe and personally meet women at organized socials. This section offers a spatial translation of this phenomenon.

##### 4.4.1 In the space between the imagined and the ‘real’

As the men clients of this industry, enticed by the prospect of romantic liaisons with women from post-Soviet nations, typically begin the process in the mediated space of online information, they initially enter a *secondspace* predominantly characterized by abstraction and representation. This is so because the online profiles they survey are discursive constructions of the women that communicate very limited information—i.e., short, digestible pieces of biographical information filtered by the practices and policies of the online marriage agencies and the dictates of marketing strategy, as well as (in most cases) small sets of still photographs that refuse to/cannot present the woman as she is ‘in motion:’ timeless visual abstractions/representations that trigger imaginative process in an attempt to ‘fill in the gaps’ of the unknown with the imagined. The seductive pleasure embedded in this activity is an important feature of *secondspace*, where one can find traces of *firstspace* (the ‘real’ and the actual),<sup>71</sup> presenting a ‘free gift’ in the form of this pleasure and inviting participation. Those who accept the invitation begin by communicating interest in those participating in the abstraction and representation (perhaps those profiles that succeeded the most in triggering fantasy and imagination, or those who met defined criteria). The correspondence that ensues (be

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<sup>71</sup> The *firstspace* nature of these online profiles is based on the observation that they also convey ‘real’ information such as marital status, number of children, physical features, etc. Because of this, we can also assert that there are traces of *thirdspace* there as well, since this is a ‘both/and also’ space of unity, of the ‘real and imagined’ and the deflation of binary opposition. This attests to the mutually-constitutive nature of these spaces, co-operating and co-existing in shifting and variable proportions as a function of time and social process (invoking Lefebvre’s ‘trialectics’ of space).

it via letters, phone, or e-mail) may or may not increase the temperature of *firstspace* (and thus, that of *thirdspace* as well) in this relation, depending on the truthfulness and accuracy of the information conveyed (by all parties). The ability to convey truthful and accurate information, of course, depends on the level of reification of one's character and personality as well as one's maturity, honesty, and ability to convey that which is 'known.'

Assuming the temperature of *thirdspace* is slightly increased as a result of this new exchange, and that both parties are comfortable with this different space, this may invite a furtherance of this process in the form of materializing the exchange in *firstspace* (e.g., romance tourism, rendezvous, etc.). This does not entail a complete abandonment of *secondspace*, since the imagined is never purely abolished, its eventual dissolution a function of time and subjectivity. This is so also because of misrecognition and illusion: one may believe (or is made to believe) to be inhabiting *firstspace* in the relation, yet fully occupying *secondspace* by virtue of this false consciousness.

The sexuality of these spaces is defined in part by the attention given to the process of disclosure and the dynamics of power/knowledge written into this process: the paradox of disclosure is that it amplifies intimacy and vulnerability at the same moment. Because *Eros* is summoned by the experience of human limitation, as discussed in chapter two, then the erotic can be understood as a function of *difference* as recognized and experienced in *thirdspace*. Thus, what is lived and perceived as difference in gender, culture, socioeconomic status, language, corporeality, personality, etc. becomes sexualized, eroticized in the context of individuals voluntarily occupying a *thirdspace* relation. In the context where mediated interaction in the *secondspace* 'virtuality' of cyberspace courts the transgression of borders and boundaries in *firstspace*, the temperature of *thirdspace* is increased as the imagined progressively gives way to the 'real,' even though there is no ontological basis for 'pure' reality. Because the 'real' can never be wholly achieved (the real and the imagined constitute each other), such relations are seen to exist on a continuum somewhere between the real and the imagined.

The hazards endemic to initiating such relations in *secondspace* is that it is more likely to attract the participation of those who *prefer* the imaginary attributes of this space, and tend to remain fixed on the romanticism and the associated pleasure or ecstasy experienced with the initial exchange. The fetishism associated with the inherent narcissism of this type of simulated relation lives off the ecstasy of value and the value of ecstasy, unable or unwilling to interact in a

warmer *thirdspace*, where the ‘reality’ of the other surfaces in greater degrees. The *secondspace* relationship loses value when pleasure and ecstasy dissipate as a result of the intrusion of the ‘real’ and the ‘hyperreal’ is short-circuited. The often significant socioeconomic disparities, functions of the same inter-regional disparities produced by the global cultural space of technocapitalism, are characteristic of many such relations initiated in a mediated *secondspace* where opportunities for relationality and intimacy are preempted by prescribed imbalances in dyadic and/or structural power. The eroticism of these imbalances often fuels the sexual adventurism of overseas travel (see Altman 2001).

#### **4.4.2 Case in Point**

The four-star hotel in Minsk was comfortable enough to accommodate those of my volunteer teaching team, who had worked hard during the previous three weeks and were ready for some much-deserved rest and relaxation by the grace of our Belarusian hosts. During the afternoon of our second day at the hotel, I walked by the entrance to the same dining/reception hall where we had breakfasted that morning and witnessed what appeared to be a dance party taking place. Peering inside for a brief moment, I observed that the facility had been fitted to accommodate a social gathering complete with a bar, hors d’oeuvres table, sound system, live DJ and dance floor. The men and women within were handsomely dressed and appeared to be enjoying themselves. The men seemed to be having the better time of it as they were the primary focus of attention from the women who outnumbered them by perhaps a factor of three.

Outside the reception hall entrance, a welcoming table had been set up, behind which sat two Belarusian women employees charged with overseeing admission to the event. Irina, an interpreter, explained that the festivities were part of introduction proceedings organized by European Connections, and that the men inside were primarily American and had paid to be there. The women on the guest list were Belarusians from greater Minsk. During a personal interview shortly thereafter, Irina described the nature of the interactions taking place at such ‘meet and greet’ social events, where company interpreters assist with communication between those who do not share a common language:

Clients can stipulate that they don't want to meet women with children. As, for example, the person I worked with told them he doesn't want to see woman with three things, like having

children; and being a smoker; and she had to know at least a little English. So, they say what they want to see in a woman.

Thus, as organized socials are often mediated by the interpretation associates, men clients have greater power to choose with whom they wish to interact. This is not to say that the women present have no choices, merely that they do not have the same *amount* of choice as the men who, in such instances, enjoy greater dyadic power. They also do not enjoy the same mobility as the men.<sup>72</sup>

Later that evening, I entered the hotel lobby to await the return of my team members who had left earlier that day to go shopping. I seated myself at one of the comfortable leather sofa arrangements where a well-dressed man, apparently in his late forties, was engaged in conversation with a younger woman in her mid-to-late twenties. My proximity to these two made it impossible not to realize that I had become privy to the advances of one of the clients of European Connections upon a Belarusian he had met that afternoon. He had been sharing his experiences in St. Petersburg and wanted to show her his souvenir photo book which, he explained, was upstairs in his room. Responding with timid trepidation, she was persuaded in a reassuring tone that there was nothing to worry about and that he was willing to bring the book down to the lobby if she preferred. The woman clearly had a decision to make, and after a few moments of hesitation, followed him to the elevators.

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<sup>72</sup> Irina was able to introduce me to their harried American tour director, Mr. Kyle Steckel, who confirmed that these men were indeed ‘on tour’ and were bound for Kiev, Ukraine the next day. The tour had already taken them to St. Petersburg, Russia, allowing 2-3 days in each location.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Reading ‘Virtual Brides’**

It has been noted that the interactions among participants in the global ‘virtual bride’ industry are, as described in the previous chapter, abstracted to a significant degree, but also subject to the social and demographic realities of (once) remote lands, the complexities of global cultural space, and the postmodern cultural paradigms characteristic of media(za)ted communication. This chapter elaborates these points by first examining in greater detail selected websites marketing women of post-Soviet nations for international correspondence courtship. It then returns to an examination of the information and commentary gathered from ‘John’ and ‘Katya,’ the Russian/American couple who initiated their relationship via correspondence. The final portion of this chapter offers an analysis of selected visual texts from website profiles using the techniques of semiotics and discourse analysis.

#### **5.1 Mordinson.com**

This website featuring profiles of Ukrainian women has been selected for examination as it provides an excellent example of the importance of visual information in this industry. The main page of the site (see Figure 5.1, p. 88) typically advertises “single, marriage-minded Ukrainian ladies” and features an alluring photograph of a featured woman. The website notes that every woman in the gallery can be met in person by means of the company’s introduction service in Kharkov, Ukraine. Two phone numbers are also listed: one international number and a U.S.-based direct number. Clicking on the “new girls” link allows one to examine the pictorial representations of the women featured among the agency’s newest profile additions. The visitor will note that the women are glamorously modeled and professionally photographed using a variety of backdrops, outfits, and presentation styles, evidently with the purpose of appealing the broadest possible base of potential correspondents. The “Mordinson” logo appears at the top of every photo (see Figure 5.2, p. 88) in a style reminiscent of the front covers of

Figure 5.1: The special holiday edition of Mordinson's main page.



Figure 5.2: The Mordinson visual marketing technique





fashion magazines. Ostensibly to prevent information privacy, each photograph is also labeled with the name of the company in a relatively innocuous area of the pictorial representation. The main gallery of profiles is accessible from the web site's main page, and the visitor will note that profiles are categorized by age group. At the time of this writing (October 2006), the agency features a total of 178 profiles of women ranging in age from 18 to 37. In addition to the selection of photos included in each profile, the visitor is offered a very brief, standardized description of the client based on a limited set of criteria including physical dimensions, marital status, and language ability. The description of the woman's "best match" is kept very brief and somewhat (perhaps intentionally) vague. Browsing through the catalog of profiles, the reader will notice that the women are culturally and geographically dereferentialized—there is little, if any, reference to their unique, place-based origins in the backdrops, attire, etc. Rather, women are presented using cultural references to European and American themes (e.g., clients draped across motorcycles, wearing cheerleading outfits, or presented against backdrops of European or American landscapes). These seductive strategies of representation are spoken by the metaphorical deterritorialization of the 'virtual bride' while also affirming her 'exotic' qualities: mysterious, alluring, imbued with sexuality and femininity. Indeed, this strategy is expressed by virtue of the company's concerted emphasis on visual representation as opposed to other possible forms.

Manifestations of the sex/power dialectic, where access to knowledge facilitated by ICTs is associated with access to sexual resources worldwide (including the globalization of romance, of sex, and where marriage itself opens up new spaces of access), are expressed by and through cyberspace as it opens up new markets of access and demand. Mordinson's "three step program" (detailed under the "service" sub-link) includes face-to-face meetings in Ukraine—the culmination of an experience where communicative exchange becomes 'embodied' and place-based. Achieving this phase of the courtship is also costly: the seven-day introduction tour package, which includes initial introduction arrangement services and apartment, is priced at \$2,250.

## **5.2 Oksanalove.com**

The online pictorial representations of women clients of international marriage agencies frequently combine images of sensuality and domesticity, or stereotyped sexuality with the

attainable, every-day element of a woman (Johnson 1999). This website is a particularly good example of such representational style. The reader is now invited to view the web site of the “OksanaLove” marriage agency (see Figure 5.3 below). A cursory view of the profiles in this catalog reveals that women are made to appear much more “real” and attainable, as Western male participants are typically attracted to an image that looks a bit less like a professional fashion model and more like a pretty (and somewhat sensuous) wife. Indeed, many of these women are photographed in a way that portrays them as very human. However, even though they most commonly present themselves as respectable and groomed as a proper potential wife, their poses contain elements of promised sexuality (Johnson 1999).

Figure 5.3: The “OksanaLove” online marriage agency



The “OksanaLove” agency offers a host of related services to assist their clients in the matchmaking process. For a view of these services, visitors can click on the “prices” link from the main page. The visitor will perhaps first note that the agency operates on a credit system, whereupon men clients must purchase credits in bundles in order to pay for various services. In addition to e-mail letters and translated conference call services, the agency also offers a “Deep Psychology Personality Test” that the Western client can use to learn more intimate details of the women who interest him. The premise behind this, according to the website, is to expedite the

introduction process and “give you so much idea about a woman you are interested in, that you feel like you knew her for months or years before you even initiate a first contact.” The service is described in greater detail:

Deep personality tests are prepared by our main managers who know the ladies very well, our managers spent hours to interview a lady to get each individual test done. The tests were prepared by leading psychologists, plus we created unique questionnaires from our clients letters, these clients went through months or years of correspondence to get to know as much about their future partner as you would know from one deep personality test of your Russian lady.

Each test costs 6 credits, or \$36.00, and includes information about the woman’s education, background, current job, lifestyle, character, dreams of future, sexuality, and religion. It is not evident that these tests are administered to men for the benefit of the women clients, pointing to a certain commodification of not only the privilege of access to personal information, but also of the inequality of that access.

Inequality of access is also expressed in terms of the restrictions imposed by the “OksanaLove” agency on the range of possible women clients deemed acceptable for presentation on its web site. In a personal interview with Mrs. Oksana Boychenko-Gaertner, the agency’s director/founder, it was discovered that indeed not all women are welcome to place profiles with the agency:

We usually serve women up to 45 years old. If a woman looks great and she's in great shape then we can still place her profile no matter how old she is. Other than that, we do not accept women who are overweight. Other than that, everybody is welcome.

The reason for this restriction, of course, is obvious: as the relative popularity and success of such an agency is, in part, a function of the quality of the database of profiles it makes available, the agency will not invest in women who are less likely to attract the interest of potential men clients, from whom the agency draws a great portion of its revenue.

Inequality of access is also a function of strategies of representation, referring more specifically to the ‘truth in advertising’ problem frequently confronting such agencies and their clients. Asked for some examples of this, Ms. Gaertner was able to elaborate on the experiences in her own agency:

....some of the guys have tried to hide their age. When the truth comes out, it's usually before the wedding (laughs)... in some parts it does become a problem but it doesn't affect the relationships in a bad way.... some of the guys are using pictures that are like 20 years old. Then, when he shows up in real life... it's just a little bit different. With women, misrepresentation doesn't happen very often. We check their IDs before we place their profile, we run a report on her... so we get an idea before we place her profile on the web site... we get an idea of what kind of person we are dealing with.

Thus, it becomes evident that inequality of access is an issue written also by the policies and practices of marriage agencies such as “OksanaLove,” where more vigilance is directed toward securing correct and verifiable information about the women clients, who are not guaranteed the accuracy or truthfulness of representational decisions made by the men with whom they engage.

### **5.3 Chanceforlove.com**

We return briefly to this website, which goes into great detail in describing post-Soviet women in a manner intended to appeal to Western men who are perhaps a bit more serious in their pursuits. The reader is invited to access this website. A view of the agency’s main page (see Figure 5.4, p. 93) and catalog presents a portrayal of women from post-Soviet nations as strong, educated, capable and durable, yet they are also described on the main page as the “weaker” sex—sweet and tender, and even mystifying. These opposing portrayals seem to attempt to reconcile the personality and dispositional features of both post-Soviet and Western women. After all, they are targeting a specific market: Western men “going east” for love and marriage. Thus, the women are portrayed in a larger-than-life manner, including both the ‘Western’ attributes that Western men would find desirable (free thinking, individualistic, independent) and the ‘Eastern’ traits that they are also hoping to secure (family-oriented, demure, traditional).

The contradiction in this portrayal is further evidenced by their representation as actively seeking foreign mates, while the pictures themselves are static, unchanging elements on a computer monitor that can be studied, analyzed, recalled, and compared with others—a relatively ‘passive’ portrayal of women. It is unlikely, however, that many Western men seriously considering a correspondence with them will see the contradictions as they are constructed by the rhetoric of this and similar sites. Rather, they are more likely to see a reconciliation of opposing

personality factors and dispositions that contribute to an unrealistic, unfair, and imaginary construction of these women. Part of this is based on a changing Western imaginary of Eastern European

Figure 5.4: Another chance for 'love'



(particularly Russian) women. Ridenhour-Levitt (1999) observes that Russian women during the Cold War era were frequently represented as rugged, often elderly, and by Western standards, decidedly unfeminine. During our interview (further detailed in the next section), Katya discussed her own experience with such popular imaginaries:

He took me to his work one time and people looked at me as if I was a museum exhibit. One guy told me “I thought Russian women were all short and wear a handkerchief—you don’t look like a Russian woman.” I said “well sorry I am a Russian woman.” It’s like at school—students sometimes look at me and whisper to each other—they say “she looks like an American!”

On marriage agency websites, such stereotypical images have been replaced by frequent representations of post-Soviet women as tall, blond, young and beautiful.

As just about every aspect of courtship and exchange becomes commodity in this industry, so too goes chance, opportunity, and the circumvention of competition. The “Chance for Love” web site, in addition to its main catalog and its special “ladies without kids” listings, offers a “forgotten women” catalog featuring women clients who, according to the agency, “do not get much letters.” Men are promised a 90% reply rate from those featured in this section. Clearly, the theme of heroic rescue is also being played here, where men are summoned to provide humanitarian aid to ‘forlorn’ and ‘lonely’ women with little chance of realizing their dreams. This humanitarian ideology plays an important function in this industry as it implicitly insists that not only does this process present an ideal means for a Western man to pursue a marriage partner, but it behooves him to take this route for altruistic reasons.

To deconstruct this ideology further is to explore the motivations and expectations of Western men who participate in this technologically-media(z)ated, globalized marriage market. These are, in part, shaped by discursive constructions of post-Soviet men. By way of illustration, the following depiction of Russian masculinity appeared in a “European Connections” advertisement:

...because of health factors—pollution, stress, poor diet, alcoholism, etc.—American men have a ten-year cosmetic advantage over Russian men...the ladies consider it quite an honor to have a Western boyfriend... You are everything the Russian man is not: sophisticated, energetic, financially secure, considerate and sober

This advertisement capitalizes on Western notions of Russian cultural and economic inferiority to construct a disparaged version of Russian masculinity (Ridenhour-Levitt 1999). Again, Western men seem like veritable saviors in comparison, ready and able to fulfill their rightful chivalrous roles. Ridenhour-Levitt (1999) sees these indirect juxtapositions as having a concrete purpose:

...to legitimize white rule by saving womankind in general...from the aspects of sexuality associated in the racist imagination with the nonwhite antagonist...Chivalry... has always acted as a way of assuring Western moral righteousness by pointing to its own enlightened treatment of the “weaker sex.” The white knight’s gender and racial superiority and concomitant moral imperative to rule are thus simultaneously affirmed

Regardless of the ‘white vs. non-white’ model, these sorts of representations can be viewed as extensions of orientalist and colonial narratives (as discussed in chapter two), where the portrayal of Russian men can arguably be tied to Cold War discourse in which the ‘evil empire’ of the former Soviet Union is juxtaposed with the ‘liberated and liberating’ West.

#### **5.4 The struggle to correspond: ‘John’ and ‘Katya’**

Can women of post-Soviet nations enjoy fulfilling relationships with foreign men through such avenues? The terms of engagement require openness to difference and a willingness to engage the other on a level playing field. This can be more difficult to achieve with the inequalities and imbalances written into such relationships. As most of these relationship attempts begin with mail or e-mail correspondence, first impressions are limited to scripted words, photo exchanges, and cursory introductions. As such, the temporal and place-based limitations of correspondence courtship can make for some degree of difficulty in overcoming personal, cultural, and linguistic barriers to the achievement of more profound intimacies.

This is, of course, unless operational definitions change over the course of the relationship. ‘John’ is an American postal worker whose enthusiasm for Russian language and culture prompted him to join a Russian pen pal club where he became acquainted with ‘Katya,’ a Russian language instructor and interpreter. Katya had been acquainted with other foreign men through this club, but was impressed with John’s copious and romantic outpourings of penmanship. After a period of invested correspondence, the two met in Russia and were married. They now live in the U.S. midwest with their daughter.

John and Katya invited me to their home for a conversation about the post-Soviet ‘virtual bride’ industry. Katya justifiably believed herself qualified for the task because, after her arrival in the U.S. in 1995, she had been approached numerous times to provide translation services for Americans in romantic correspondence with Russian women, continuing on a freelance basis until the point where she became morally conflicted about her role in these exchanges, as many of the men she assisted were introduced to their correspondents online. John, too, also felt that he had quite a bit to offer, having been acquainted with some of the men his wife assisted.

Together, they covered a broad range of topics and issues pertinent to this industry, and also shared some more personal details about their own experiences.<sup>73</sup>

An elaboration of the context in which their relationship was initiated can help identify the reasons why Katya married John and took permanent residence in the U.S. Her first husband, a DJ at the nightclub where she was employed part-time while she studied, struggled with alcoholism. She was nineteen when they married—a common age for Russian women to marry at that time, according to her—but decided not to remain in the marriage because of her husband’s problem. After their divorce, Katya developed an interest in meeting foreign men because of the priority she placed on raising children in a stable home environment. The collapse of the Russian economy had affected her family significantly and diminished her hopes of finding a stable existence in Russia. Her fierce intelligence, petite build, youthful beauty, and her education served as valuable assets for meeting a foreign man. Katya describes the circumstances that preceded their initial contact:

Since Americans were introduced, (Russia) was a faraway country and people just wanted to know more about them and a lot of newspapers and magazines published addresses like friends and pen pal clubs. But that was ten years ago. To start with, I would say people wanted to travel and visit each other, or at least that was my idea. So I met some people in Russia and men and women exchanged addresses and stayed in touch and then my husband somehow found my address here for a kind of friendship/love something like that and then he sent me a letter.

John and Katya had a very short period of courtship before marrying, which John considers a blessing because they did not have a chance to evade relationship problems before making a commitment. Rather, they were compelled to work out their problems in the context of the marriage. The cultural differences, according to John, were formidable, and the marriage had a rough start:

Russian women believe in romance but their idea of romance is not the way we’ve romanticized things as an American culture. Romance for the two cultures is two entirely different things. For us, love is endearing, never dying—it’s eternal. For a Russian woman

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<sup>73</sup> The first hour was spent in conversation with Katya only, with John joining in at a later time. A full transcript of this conversation is included in the appendix section.



(snaps fingers) it might be five minutes. We got married and an hour later she was telling me “I hate you! I hate you!” and then five minutes later “I love you”...

The mixed emotions that Katya felt toward her husband after the wedding was a function of the paradoxical nature of the new relationship: John became both her ‘champion’ and her ‘tyrant’ at the same moment. She was given an opportunity for a comfortable, stable home life in America, yet she simultaneously resented the man who seized upon the transnational socioeconomic disparities between them. John had indeed worked this arrangement to his advantage, as did Katya, but attributes his wife’s initial ambivalence toward him to cultural differences regarding love and romance. In doing so, he portrays her (and Russian culture, generally) as somewhat alien, psychotic.

John offered a pragmatic interpretation of how American men can capitalize on the advantages of citizenship:

With an American man, his citizenship enables him to get the sort of wife he normally would not be able to procure in America—you know for each man he has a level or status of which he could obtain a particular type of woman of beauty or whatever. He can upgrade above what he would normally be able to mate with or match with in this country by going to another country and the only thing you are doing is trading your citizenship because you have something to offer to that woman if she were to come here—at least in her eyes— (but) she may not be well-informed...

Here, John discusses a strategy that offers a kind of transnational reading of sexual exchange theory: *men can increase their dyadic power by looking outside their national borders for a partner*. The foundational element of this strategy is the prescribed inter-regional or international socioeconomic inequality such as that produced and/or exacerbated by globalization. The potential for tension in such relationships is a function of the extent that this resembles, or becomes, a kind of (real or metaphorical) coercion. The disquiet in their relationship was made manifest in his account of their ideological differences, which in some ways are quite dramatic. John described an example of a debate that broke into intense argumentation:

...we went to a birthday party with another Russian/American couple and somebody flipped out the subject of the atomic bomb. You know both of us Americans said it’s a good thing

we did that—we saved a lot of lives. You and I, we assume that’s true. Well, you wouldn’t believe the argument that started...

With this, John and Katya began to re-open the same argument (which, incidentally, required a bit of intervention on my part to diffuse). Along with comments about how Katya “held her beliefs so differently,” as well as the intensity of her convictions, John attempted to expose during the conversation Katya’s irrationality regarding certain issues such as child-rearing. Under the rubric of defending rationality and reason, John lightly mocked and parodied his wife about what he regarded as silly and irrational folk beliefs on her part. This seemed to exacerbate the division and disagreement between them that emblemized a persistent barrier to communication even after six years of marriage.

In my conversation with this couple, it became apparent that power had been a perpetual issue in their relationship—something that, through much friction and conflict, they eventually learned to share. This corroborates observations that correspondence-type marriages are often beset with a range of problems as functions of cultural difference and conflicting role expectations (Villapando 1989), and that many Western men marrying foreign women thought to dutifully respect family patriarchy may be in for some surprises. For instance, John did not expect a wife who identifies Russian women as “matriarchal,” and nor was he prepared to ‘take orders’ at home. Katya describes:

We had some rough times to start with—I brought some traditions from Russia, family traditions that I think were hard for him to understand. I would say I want this and I wanted that and he didn’t like it because it sounded like orders to him and I said well no I’m just trying to build a family so everyone can come here and we have a nice house—well, again, if people are smart enough they are willing to talk about it, but if they are not then it can create problems. Because many here, they think well I will just get a Russian woman and she will do whatever I want. Well, I don’t think so....

That there were some important facets of Katya that John did not know or understand before they married lends further evidence to the observation that men who choose to enter into relationships with women of post-Soviet nations often do so without full understanding of the content of his partner’s character, disposition, and ideological stance (and likewise, this is an issue for the women as well). Still, an important question remains: how do these difficulties relate to the processes (including processes of representation and myth-making) that fuel the desire for

relationships with women from post-Soviet nations in the first place? A semiotic analysis of the visual representations of the women on these websites is useful in addressing this question.

### **5.5 Analysis of representation through sign**

For Danesi (1999: 23), semiotics is the science of representation, the primary objective of which is to develop notions and ideas that can be applied to deciphering the meanings of even seemingly trivial things. For the question at hand, it is useful to consider a semiotics of gender, where ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are not only signified by markers of power and solidarity, but also signify kinds of power and solidarity themselves, where gender meanings are constructed through specific styles of speech, dress, behavior, etc. (Hodge & Kress 1988: 102). Men and women are understood to distinguish themselves through differences in particular styles of dress, for example. These construct complex meanings which go beyond gender to include meanings about status, class, etc. This gets substantiated through the analysis of types of dress, hairstyles, make-up usage and posturing in the representation of women on ‘virtual bride’ websites. Some of these representations send clear messages as to the class preferences of the women and the types of men they are seeking to attract. This will be explored in further detail shortly. First, it is helpful to summarize some of the main propositions about gender and its signifiers (Hodge & Kress 1988: 107):

- 1) Gender systems in society are sustained and mediated by gender components of logonomic systems and by sets of gender metasigns.
- 2) Gender metasigns are drawn from the basic semiotic resources of a given community, using transparent signifiers of power and solidarity to construct gender identities, gender prescriptions and gender ideologies. Since these signifiers concern general relations of power and solidarity, gender systems will not be immune from determinations by other dominant social structures, such as social class.
- 3) There will not be a single specification of gender (a single women’s or men’s image, language, or style) in a given society. The meanings of gender metasigns can refer to either the semiotic or the mimetic plane. They express both the interests of the dominant and their semiotic perspective, both power and solidarity. They can be inflected to produce the alternative meanings and interests of different groups.

We begin with an examination of the use of gender metasigns on this website. A *metasign* is a class of signs by which messages are organized in relation to the conditions of semiosis. They are pervasive in the construction of messages, and are usually composed of transparent signs as

markers (Hodge & Kress 1988: 262). In the domain of advertising, Rose (2001: 96) understands the metasign as a type of sign used by advertisers of products, aimed at very specific audiences with the intention of appealing to them through the advertising and encouraging them to buy. With this understanding, if the women advertised are being marketed to men intent on preserving patriarchal status, e.g., then the visual markers to be used will be those supporting the construction of the metasign of femininity.

I refer now to the “AngelikaMinsk” website, where ‘Oksana’ (#gy6982) can be found (see Figure 5.5 below and Figure 5.6, p. 101). Here, she is represented in a variety of ways, as are most of the women on this website. In the first and last featured photos, she is shown in close-up fashion, allowing the visitor to gain immediate, more intimate ‘access.’ The signs of femininity are played quite well here: Oksana is shown to be invitingly warm and receptive, unguarded and open to view. This representation also gives her appearance of amenability and accessibility: that her gaze is fixed directly toward the camera lens gives the visitor the impression that he is making eye contact—a (simulated) sign that otherwise communicates desire and interest. The color of her outfit in the second photo suggests a certain mystery and impenetrability

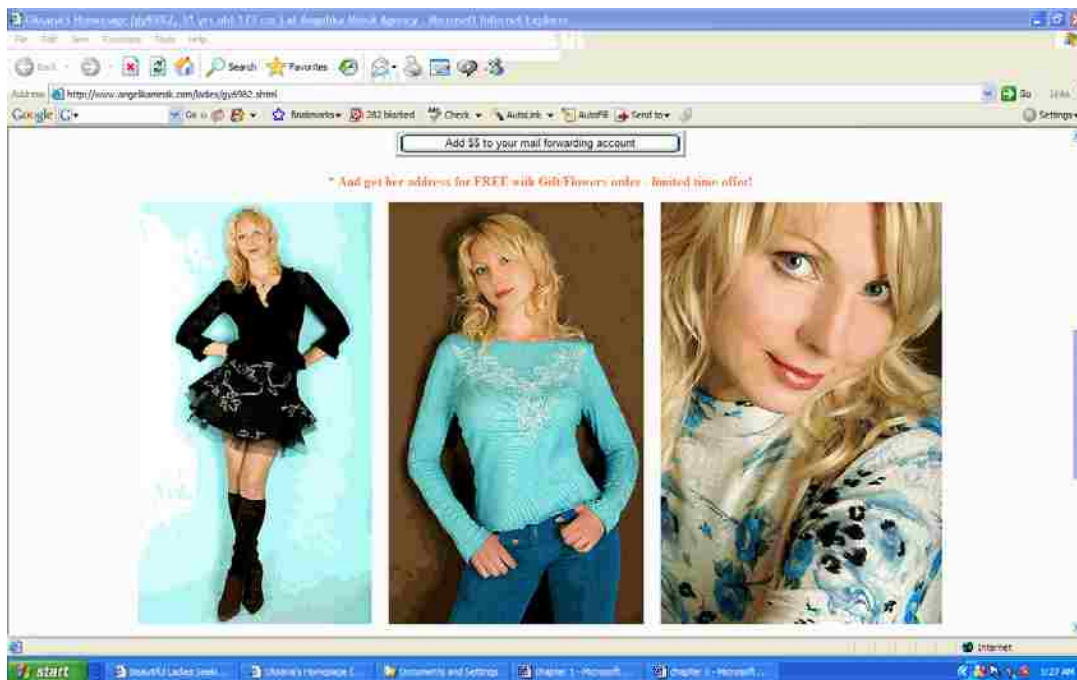
Figure 5.5: Getting acquainted with ‘Oksana’



that also carries an erotic phallic transfer, as black is more commonly associated with masculinity (Hodge & Kress 1988). The see-through frill at the hem of her flowered mini, at the same moment, belies this impenetrability while beckoning the man's gaze lower. This contributes to the fetishistic<sup>74</sup> theme in her outfit, adding to her allure while freely inviting fantasy and imagination to take hold.

The variety of representational styles changes Oksana's image quite dramatically through variations in the way she is represented. There is a twofold reason for this strategy. First, Hodge & Kress (1988) observe that plurality in representation is a transparent signifier of power, imbuing yet another erotic phallic transfer while implying her versatility and amenability. Second, the diversity of images and representations is likely to appeal to a broader base of men, with the possibility of rendering her marketing more profitable.

Figure 5.6: The many virtual incarnations of 'Oksana'



<sup>74</sup> After Danesi (1999:13), the fetish is a sign that evokes devotion to itself. Kaite (1995: 93) observes that the semiotic contiguity based on “part objects” and substitutions assigns fetish objects a compensatory, and erotic, quality that serves to disavow knowledge of feminine “lack” (i.e., castration) and allay the perceived threat this knowledge brings. In this sense, the fetish object is associated with a partial phallic endowment of women.

I now refer the reader to a different “AngelikaMinsk” client, ‘Irina’ (client number ky2862). Visitors to her profile page will notice a similar variety of representational styles here as well, including two that are particularly unique and employ quite sophisticated strategies of representation that seem to directly appellate the particular cultural demographic drawn to this market. I bring the reader’s attention to the second photo in the series, also shown in Figure 5.7 (p. 103). Here, Irina is portrayed as something of a waif or vagabond, anticipating the advancing darkness, inadequately defended against the cold, hands together as if in attempt to keep them warm using the heat of friction. Theatrical snow covers her hair and shoulders, communicating vulnerability and exposure, and the detached sleeves on the man’s sweater may be expressing the inadequacy of Belarusian male protection or care (i.e., the attempts of local men to provide for her failed miserably). This exceedingly clever representational strategy taps into the industry’s humanitarian ontology: an appellation of the Western ‘hero’ perhaps the American victors of the Cold War) to rescue Irina from another type of ‘cold’ and from the emasculated Belarusian men who allowed the former Soviet empire to crumble and their livelihoods to disintegrate. The last photographic representation of Irina (see Figure 5.8, p. 103) once again plays into familiar themes of rescue, dominance, and simulation, where she is shown as if a little girl about to tumble off the swing she is playing on. This invokes images of a playful and childlike negotiability that stands in stark contrast to the more mature representations of Irina on the website.<sup>75</sup> The action of tying back her hair in pigtails simultaneously signifies the transgression of gender as well as age—another semiotic transparency alluding to power and the seductive promise of its transfer. This alternative and atypical representation hints at a sexual perversity, a taboo-violating, polymorphous desire that refers directly to her own commodification and self-objectification.

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<sup>75</sup> As most ‘virtual bride’ websites feature search engines, one can simply type in Irina’s client number in the AngelikaMinsk search box to easily access the profile information. At the time of this writing, ‘Irina’ was featured on this site, but this cannot be taken for granted as the status of these clients frequently change.

Figure 5.7: The seductiveness of simulated vulnerability

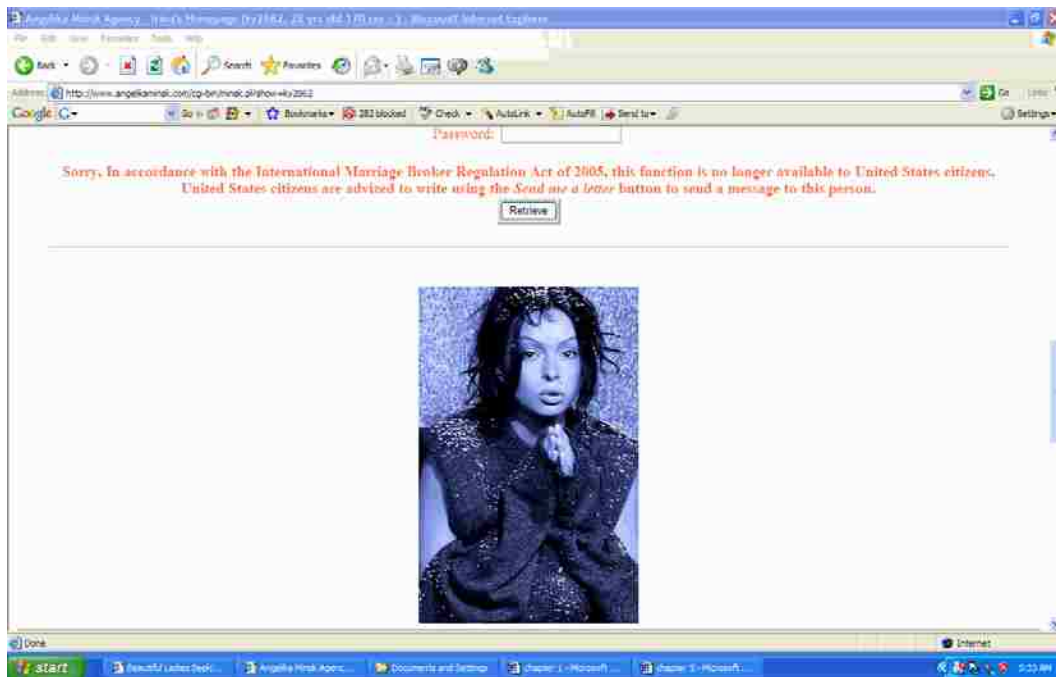
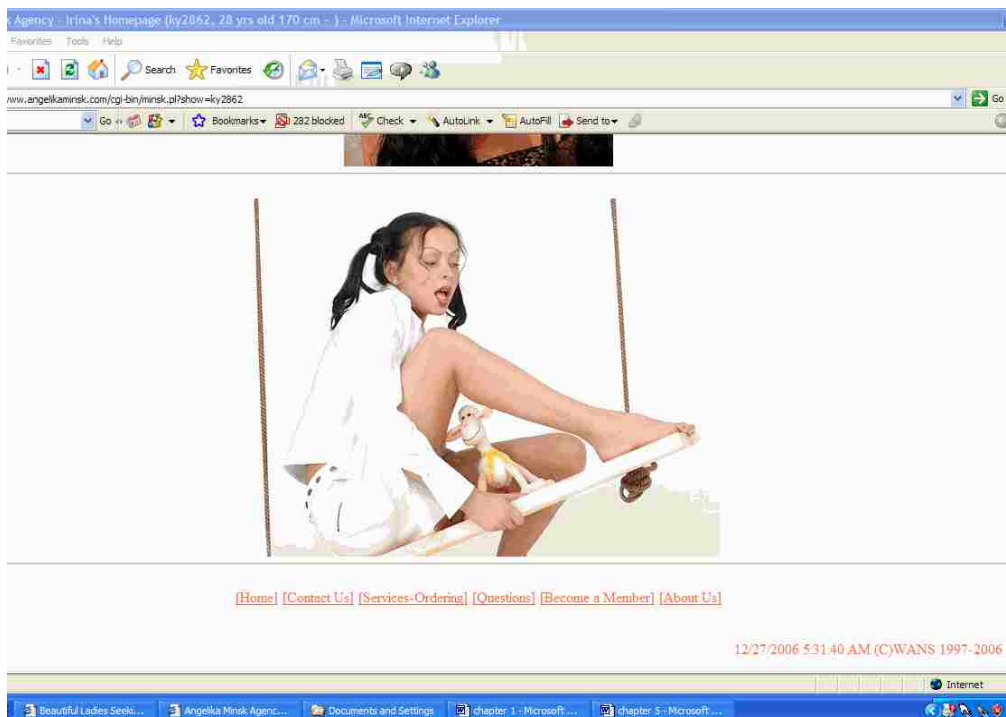


Figure 5.8: The seductiveness of strategic self-objectification



## 5.6 Analysis of utterance

The preceding semiotic reading of the signs embedded in the ways Oksana and Irina are represented on this website overlaps with other techniques for analyzing visual texts. For Eagleton (1983: 115), ‘discourse’ means language grasped as *utterance*, as involving speaking and writing subjects and therefore also, at least potentially, readers or listeners. Alternative to reading visual texts as a system of signs, they can also be analyzed as utterances—that is, what is being communicated through text. This analysis of discourse<sup>76</sup> carries considerable overlap with the method of analyzing sign systems, as signs can also be understood as utterances.

What is *communicated* through the visual texts in these representational processes? First, in view of the diversified photographic portrayals, that Belarusian women are multi-faceted—to the extent that they ‘fit’ in a range of social situations and circumstances, implying that they can be whomever you wish them to be at any given moment. Belarusian women possess the seemingly ‘magical’ properties of transcending certain dualisms of personality: they are both fun *and* serious, dominant *and* submissive, masculine *and* feminine, mature *and* childlike. This ‘magical’ portrayal of Belarusian women contributes to their ‘hyperreal’ representation: they are *more than* human. They can do more than ‘ordinary’ women can. Such perfection is normally the domain of gods, mythical creatures, or machines. Through this representation, Belarusian women take on the qualities of all of these.

This representational style presents a radical departure from the ways Soviet women were portrayed to Westerners only half a century ago. For Seager (1997: 1521), such portrayals have “brought Russia in from the cold and transformed the imagery of Russian womanhood from babushka to babe.” This comes naturally, of course, since the disintegration of Soviet communism and the embrace of free-market systems valorize and legitimize the Western, Euro-American, capitalist values and way of life. Suddenly, Russian women are every bit as desirable as Western women are—and more so if they are seen as submissive neophytes to American-style capitalism and in need of ‘a good man’ to help see them through in the transition. Western men can still be heroes despite the decline of family patriarchy and the increasing independence of women in the West.

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<sup>76</sup> Gregory (2000: 180) offers an alternative definition of discourse that has some currency in human geography and overlaps considerably with semiotic means of analysis: discourse is a specific series of representations, practices and performances through which meanings are produced, connected into networks and legitimized.



*Femininity* is another discourse transmitted in the representation of post-Soviet women on such websites. But it is a femininity that is bounded by patriarchal conceptions of the feminine: nurturance, weakness, dependence, (and, sometimes, provinciality—but this grapples at times with contradictory messages of sophistication and elegance). Irina is portrayed, especially in the last photo, as ‘uncontained’ and in need of a strong guiding hand. This amounts to a very orientalized representation that underwrites notions of Western male superiority, control and strength: Belarusian women cannot regulate their unbridled sexuality;<sup>77</sup> therefore, they need Western men to harness it. This portrayal is less seductive perhaps in the actual portrayal itself and more so in the power it purports to transfer to Western men. Simultaneously, this representation of Belarusian femininity also plays on Western male fantasy. As the increasing popularity of romance tourism suggests, men are willing to pay in order to have this fantasy realized.

Femininity is also conveyed in their portrayal through the plurality of representation, as referenced earlier. This feeds into the larger discourse of femininity as receptivity, vulnerability and adaptability and is expressed through the various photographic representations that, collectively, communicate to the reader of the visual text that they are still largely undefined and shapeable. The photos suggest as well that they would welcome the opportunity to be shaped, defined by a man with a more solid identity rooted in strength, tradition and masculine self-definition. This points to the feminization of the post-communist subject as one who has lost his/her identity after the collapse of the Soviet political and economic system and, as such, can only be ‘re-shaped’ and redefined by someone who possesses the wherewithal to do so: namely, an experienced, older, Euro-American man. The ‘masculine, Western superior’/’feminine, Eastern inferior’ binary that is set up through these orientalized renderings work largely through the unconscious and present a powerfully seductive means by which such women are marketed.

Furthermore, the femininity in their portrayal is conveyed through the stillness of the images themselves. The photos do not move; they take no action; they communicate no visible agency. We are not certain if the women played any significant roles in the representational decisions made here (e.g., choice of outfits, hairstyle, etc.). Their malleability is also conveyed, most convincingly, by the observation that these photos have been professionally produced; they

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<sup>77</sup> This ‘deficiency’ highlights yet another contradiction in the representation of post-Soviet women in this industry: their ‘perfection’ subsists in their imperfection. In other words, they are perfect in the imperfect way that Western male fantasy would have them.

are not amateur photos. Rather, a professional photographer produced them in a studio where they were 'shaped' by him/her during the shooting process. Indeed, the very process of being photographed in such a manner is to take on a receptive, 'feminine' positionality: one is moulded and shaped by the individual doing the 'shooting' (an active, 'masculine' positionality).

Although video clips are used by some web companies in this industry, most still represent the women visually through still photographs. There is an important reason for this: the stillness of the photos permits the imagination of the viewer to take hold. A 'virtual bride' discovered on a website offers the narcissist a 'blank screen' upon which he can write his needs and mandates through the *secondspace* process of imaginative projection. The visual portrayal of 'virtual brides' via still photography facilitates this process. This is an important aspect of the feminization of the industry's women clientele. This feminization draws from and contributes to unique discourses on the nature of 'woman,' 'man,' masculinity, and femininity, and partly constitutes the technique by which 'virtual brides' are commodified and marketed in global cultural space.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Project Conclusions

The ‘placeless’ representation of post-Soviet women in cyberspace is closely associated with the intensified abstraction that characterizes communication in global cultural space. Abstraction of intentions, of ideas, and of information in the online marketing of ‘virtual brides’ parallels a similar abstraction of identity, culture, and place for industry participants, where aestheticized visual representations formulate the initial exchange of signifiers, setting precedent for a higher likelihood of simulated communication, simulated identities, simulated relationships. As art itself can be understood as stylized and abstracted communication, it is appropriate to think of the ‘virtual bride’ as a postmodern expression of aestheticized representation, where online profiles emblemize the ‘artistic’ techniques employed in visual renderings of post-Soviet women. In this way, methods of representational practice parallel the means by which information about the ‘virtual bride’ is disseminated: spaces of abstraction (i.e., cyberspace, imagined space, *secondspace*) are in themselves technologies (or tools) communicating abstracted ideas, information, and identities. The contemporary ‘virtual bride’ is not only a metaphor of these processes, but also *constitutes* the metaphor.

With this, we can understand the representations and romantic interactions of industry participants as taking place in metaphorical or mythical spaces. Romanticism, recognized as a central organizing ethic in postmodern consumer culture, promotes myths of romance, of heroic rescue and ‘white knights,’ of ‘perfect’ loves, of myths or fantasies of ‘ideal’ women, men, or places, of the nuclear family idyllic, of ‘exotic,’ mysterious, or orientalized cultures, etc. The organizing ethic of consumer culture, thus, is recognized as the same ethic that guides the marketing of and colors the romantic interactions among participants in this industry. These spaces of myth or fantasy are seen to overlap considerably with simulated spaces, where ‘hyperreality’ reigns and boundaries between the ‘real’ and the imaginary are erased. Baudrillard’s ‘implosion’ thesis works quite well here, but not only for this reason.

We can conclude that the ‘virtual bride’ industry produces simulated spaces to the extent that interactions therein are, themselves, simulated: men feigning genuine emotional investment

for their foreign partners for narcissistic sexual gratification, women feigning care and concern only to avail themselves of better opportunities in more stable economies. Evidence of such simulation has been presented in this study, and is understood to be more problematic than ‘offline’ relationships by virtue of the higher incidence and degree of disparity written into them. Although this does not assume that all Western men are ‘rich’ or in any way particularly advantaged, the higher potential for coercion in these interactions nevertheless presents itself as disparity of opportunity, such as that observed at organized socials for ‘romance tourists’ from Western nations. Moreover, the intensified performativity of identity in virtual space invites those who welcome the enhanced opportunity to participate in simulation, performance, and strategic representation, as evidenced by the frequent ‘scamming’ that has taken place in correspondence relationships. This can be understood not only as a function of personal preference, but also of desire and need. As performativity is also a form of ‘play,’ then the simulated nature of interaction, including simulated relationships, adopt the characteristics of game-playing, invoking the postmodern imperatives of ‘fun,’ imaginative pleasure-seeking, hedonism, consumption, and newness. As interaction is defined by these postmodern paradigms in simulated space, then fewer relationships therein adopt qualities of permanence or deeper commitment excepting only their appearance, suggesting the ascension of narcissism and self-service as foundational elements of relationship behavior in the simulated spaces of postmodern consumer culture and global cultural space.

The *secondspace* abstraction of post-Soviet women in this industry also calls for their reification in *thirdspace*. As their marketing in cyberspace has been shown to effectively erase their social, cultural and historical contexts, representations become, in essence, distortions not only of culture and identity but also of place. The strategic benefit of this abstraction and symbolic dereferentialization is that it beckons their demystification—a point which resonates with the seductive qualities of cyberspace and the global imperatives to scrutinize and access everything. The online profusion of sexual access is a characteristic of the sexualization of cultural knowledge, in itself a globalized process of abstraction and oversimplification which simultaneously assigns commodity-value to culture, sex, and the spiritual benefits of relationality and intimacy. This mediated, globalized colonization of culture, sexuality, and the human body operates from the simultaneous production of localized globals and globalized locals, especially as the postmodern conception of ‘success’ in global cultural space calls for access to everything

the world has to offer. From this perspective, access to people of other cultures and places, as well as our relationships to them, also become commodified, evidence of which the ‘virtual bride’ industry itself furnishes in abundance. Once again, this resonates well with Baudrillard, where global and globalized communication (i.e., *mediation*) produces an ‘implosion’ of cultures, processes, and sign systems as the traditional boundaries between them are erased. Accepting that culture *is* communication brings us necessarily to this conclusion.

New social configurations of global cultural space call for new approaches to thinking about and responding to changing social structures. The *network* becomes more salient in this regard, where ‘society’ becomes a set of networks (as opposed to place-based ‘collectives’) of heterogeneous ‘actors.’ The ‘placelessness’ of these new configurations does not suggest an erasure of the ontology of *firstspace*, nor does it render place irredeemably irrelevant (as discussed in chapter three), but rather suggests a ‘betweenness’ of place where lived experience takes place *across* boundaries or frontiers rather than within them. The contemporary ‘virtual bride,’ once again, becomes an important metaphor of social reorganization and reconstitution where time and space are produced by interconnections of networks and new ‘assemblages’ of human subjects and technical objects. *Thirdspace* embraces the ‘both/and also’ approach of recognizing the importance of assemblages of clients ‘and’ computer terminals, mobile phone services ‘and’ relationships, information-sharing networks ‘and’ government policy, marketing methods ‘and’ online access, etc. What emerges then is the realization that the geographies produced by these interconnected assemblages are shifting and changeable, and frequently produce spaces of ‘flow’ that simultaneously interact and overlap with more sedentary spaces and places.

An emphasis on new assemblages, flowing spaces, and interconnecting processes signifies a postmodern turn in geographical analysis that runs parallel with the postmodern reconfigurations and reconstitutions of the social. This approach becomes especially useful in addressing the call for reification which, in a sense, becomes a point of resistance to the pervasive abstraction in global cultural space. Understood as both a space and technique of resistance, *thirdspace* permits the re-introduction and incorporation of cultural, historical, and geographical particularity, defusing essentialist and reductive epistemologies in social and cultural analysis. This ‘splitting open’ of abstracted categories opens an opportunity for ‘both’ discursive and non-discursive readings of phenomena. Thus, a post-Soviet ‘virtual bride’ loses

much of her ‘virtuality’ as she becomes contextualized and situated within, for example, Soviet prescriptions of gendered behavior and role expectations and the subsequent cultural adaptations to an uncertain free-market system where reconstituted patriarchies assert themselves in new ways.

*Thirdspace* offers the ‘both/and also’ possibility of recognizing the interrelationship between ‘knowledge’ or awareness of the ‘virtual bride’ as she is discursively constructed (such as on Internet websites, in conversations, in media representation, etc.) and the ‘virtual bride’ as she would describe herself, or appear to her closest friends or family. The more ‘imagined’ qualities of the former and the more ‘real’ aspects of the latter are partially contained within each other; they are mutually constitutive, suggesting that there are qualities of the ‘real’ in representation ‘and’ qualities of the ‘imagined’ in any attempt at resistance to purely *secondspace* approaches. This point gains support in the ‘East vs. West’ tensions observed in this industry and emblematic of those of global cultural space writ large. Ironically, the very process of writing about this phenomenon requires the same kind of abstraction that impedes analysis of it. For example, to speak of ‘Western’ (i.e., the European or North American men that comprise a very large percentage of the industry’s men clientele) is to (perhaps inadvertently) imply that there is nothing ‘Western’ about the post-Soviet world. The ‘Easternized,’ orientalized imaginings of post-Soviet women among industry clientele are also implicated here, where discursive productions of difference are, in some cases, ‘hyperreal’ representations that contain elements of the actual. For example, that many post-Soviet women hold the traditional family in high regard is an accurate claim, yet to contend that they conform as well to patriarchal fantasies of domesticity and femininity is to conflate the ‘real’ or actual with the imagined. The *secondspace* pleasures of correspondence courtship require interactions with the ‘exotic’ and the ‘mysterious’ in spatial or ideological abstractions such as ‘Eastern Europe’ or ‘the old Soviet world,’ entailing the eventual demystification of these former unknowns where abstractions were previously (and sometimes intentionally) written in; the artificial production of difference is no less a concern than the denial of actual difference.

Just as global cultural space has clearly not abolished fantasy, exoticism, and the simultaneous erasure and ‘hyperreal’ production of difference (and never will), this study confirms that it does proliferate uncertainty, instability, hybridity, randomness, and surprise, as evidenced by the stories documented here. These unforeseeable and unknowable outcomes

comprise defining elements of postmodern culture that are also aspects of the ‘spaces of flow’ ushered along by the processes of globalization (including mediatization). This points to the new fluidities of social process that integrate the technologies of communication and information transfer, implying that rapid advancements of ICTs will introduce new instabilities, uncertainties, and changes that continually call upon the reflexive narrative of the self, meanwhile calling for perpetual redefinition and recombination of social networks. The ‘virtual bride’ industry presents extensive evidence of this, where the resultant intercultural marriages can be seen as microcosms of these larger-scale recombinations. This calls upon the themes of uncertainty and surprise, especially in spaces of simulation where hybridity, abstracted communication, linguistic and cultural difference, and conflicting expectations are seen to present unique challenges to these relationships, just as these differences frequently constitute the initial erotic charge in these relations. The prevailing randomness of the interactions and flows within global cultural space also fuels irrationality and contradiction as the paradoxical nature of cyberspace offers random reconciliation between the needs/desires of industry participants and that which will satisfy them. This is because in simulation, the very tools created to satisfy needs preempt their satisfaction. The mythical nature of these tools, and the myths they proliferate, are elemental facets of the paradigm of *seduction* where the coercive (hegemonic) element of consumerism produces the very tools that guarantee the return of the user. In a truly ironic fashion, the benefits derived from the use of the tool become simulated as the tool requires its continual and perpetual use: the tool is the hallucination of empowerment.

An understanding of the position of women after the collapse of Soviet rule draws out some interesting parallels with this paradigm. As Soviet ideology, in the interest of concentrating power through economic development, mobilized a massive workforce of ‘worker-mothers,’ promoting ‘equality’ of the sexes and higher education, women found themselves vastly overburdened in this double role. The ‘equality’ derived from this positioning came from the premise that men ‘said’ that they were equal, with sex in itself already comprising the artificial basis for inequality in the discursive production of gendered difference. This ‘equality’ dissipated very rapidly after the collapse of the Soviet system in the early 1990s, with women encouraged to return to their traditional domestic positions in a new, reconstituted patriarchy. Those women who continued working in the professional sphere became the first to lose their jobs, or suffer severe pay cuts, or accept substantially lower wages or salaries for the same kind

of work. Indeed, the only promotion women seem to enjoy in the post-Soviet world is as ‘object:’ as fetishized images on the covers of fashion magazines (or ‘virtual bride’ websites), as sex workers, as the honorary bearers of sexuality in a new free-market system where nothing escapes commodification. Women of post-Soviet nations were once promised ‘equality’ as long as they worked twice as hard as men, but found this promise to be as durable as Soviet communism itself. Their ‘empowerment’ was a mere hallucination. The post-Soviet ‘virtual bride’ is a metaphor of the false promise and the false consciousness it accompanied, prompting thousands of women to turn to virtual tools to improve their situation. Ironically, they now share some commonalities with American men, who were once ‘made useful’ in the workforce to greater degrees before mechanization, downsizing, outsourcing, and privatization absconded with thousands upon thousands of well-paying livelihoods, rendering them more feminized than they ever thought possible (also).

Among the most useful objects in the virtual toolbox for ‘virtual brides’ are the images of Russian (or Ukrainian or Belarusian, etc.) femininity and domesticity appealing to patriarchal fantasies of male dominance or heroic rescue. The seductive power of self-objectification, mythical signification, and erotic transference, however, suggests strategies that may express the imperatives of marketing and profit-taking more than the individual representational preferences of women clients. If there is only one online marriage agency in Novogorod, for example, a Russian woman who desires to expand her romantic options online may be obligated to comply with the representational practices of the agencies. The fieldwork indicates, however, that in this industry the women who are allowed to participate are generally free to make these representational choices themselves, within reasonable parameters. Nevertheless, their participation indicates a ‘voluntary’ self-commodification to the extent that they are aware that their images, their communications, their desires and opportunities become commodities in themselves. The understanding of sex as the exchange of signifiers—the exchange of information—resonates with the primacy of information as global and globalized commodity under conditions of advanced informational capitalism and postmodern consumer culture. The value accorded to information leads to its profusion, including the information communicated by/through visual texts. The postmodern emphasis on ‘image over substance’ finds expression here, as ‘information about’ commodities (people, opportunities, events, etc.) by necessity advances abstraction and representation, and creates spaces where images of the ‘real’ substitute



the 'real' in 'hyperreality.' Sexuality becomes expressed by this paradigm as it becomes fetishism, or abstracted sexuality—information about the 'real' substitutes the 'real' and generates ecstasy in a profusion of sex that pervades everything. Thus, when abstraction *becomes* ecstasy in these spaces of hallucination, simulation reigns. Seen from this perspective, the 'virtual bride' industry finds relevance in and supports Baudrillard's 'implosion' thesis quite well.

This study's primary contribution to geography in the analysis of this industry is a more comprehensive understanding of the sexuality of space and the spaces of sexuality in the postmodern cultural configuration. The amplified 'flows' of global cultural space summon the reflexive narrative of the self and produce destabilization of identity, reconstituted social organization, and seductive substitutions of the 'real' for its operational 'stunt double.' If ICTs produce cyberspaces where abstraction is sexually manifested as perpetually recycled fetishism, then the attendant 'de-eroticization' of life (and the awakened *Thanatos*) produces 'cybersexual' spaces where relationality is substituted with simulation, opportunism, and narcissism. The mutually-constitutive nature of technology, space, and sexuality is better understood when both discursive and non-discursive elements of human sexuality are recognized. Sexuality understood as being socially and culturally produced calls for the 'sociosexual' considerations of space and the spatiality of sexuality, especially as 'the social' comes to organizationally resemble the very networks of ICTs it incorporates. The spatiality of sexuality is expressed as well by the exchanges of power/knowledge within those spaces, whereupon globalization and mediaization have produced technologies and ideologies that reconstitute sexuality in its very profusion and proliferation. To accept Baudrillard's 'implosion' thesis is to recognize the aestheticization of sex and sexuality in these spaces, where sex becomes 'more sexual than sex' in the postmodern paradigms of simulation and hyperreality. This 'overproduction' of sexuality parallels the overproduction of knowledge and information in its fetishization (just as post-Soviet women are frequently 'overproduced' in their online visual representations). The constant re-working of desire in these spaces comes as a function of the perpetual 'newness' of consumer products, services, and technical configurations, producing limitless opportunity and, therefore, limitless desire. The game that ensues is seductive in the sense that it is one that cannot be won, since consumption is the process of gaining 'satisfaction' in a way that continually presupposes its lack. The implications of this encourage geographers to lend more consideration to the 'flowing'

nature of postmodern spaces and how sexuality, identity, and the social are perpetually renewed and recreated. Especially as global cultural space erases the boundaries between traditional distinctions, sexuality, space, culture, and technology are better understood in the postmodern context using a *thirdspace* approach where the ‘implosion’ of these formerly autonomous elements begs their mutual and simultaneous analysis. The spatial is sexual; the sexual is technical; the technical is social.

This project also bridges the gap in the geographical literature in its consideration of the non-discursive elements of sexuality and its relationship to place and geography. Sexual exchange theory, drawn from the literature in social psychology and applied in this study, offers a useful behavioral lens to analyze such phenomena as migration, relationship behavior, and mate selection. It is able to both inform geographical research as well as benefit from it, as relationship behavior and mate selection are intimately bound with the geographical attributes of place, such as a nation’s demographic realities (e.g., the ‘oversupply’ of Belarusian women in higher age groups), cultural characteristics (e.g., Belarusian women are expected to marry before their late twenties), and historical geography (e.g., the political and economic ‘regime change’ introducing greater uncertainty in post-Soviet life). In this regard, sexual exchange theory is understood as a device that synthesizes sexuality, place, and geography and encourages the analysis of their interrelationships.

There is also an opportunity here to expand understandings of the relationships between sexuality, migration, mate selection, and relationship behavior. Especially in the context of globalization, where mediatization presents exponentially greater opportunity for contact with ‘distant’ others, the implications for personal choice and the nature and quality of existing relationships are profound. This study offers evidence that the industry itself affords post-Soviet women an interesting, perhaps unintended benefit: it provides them with greater leverage for negotiation and compromise in their relations with post-Soviet men, the more desirable of whom are understood to exist in short supply due to less-than-favorable demographic and cultural realities. Certainly, as many post-Soviet women would never consider moving beyond their place-based systems of social and familial support, especially under more favorable life conditions, the interest they attract from their Western correspondents serves to improve their position in existing relations with local men as confidence is enhanced and/or options expanded. The same can be said of Western men attempting to preserve patriarchal influence and/or

bargaining power in their relations with Western women who increasingly refuse to recognize ‘traditional’ roles as prescribed by gendered systems of social behavior and family organization.

In reference to the discussion above, the inequalities created and exacerbated by globalization present opportunities for a geographical analysis of sexual behavior, where inequality is understood to constitute the basis for differential and changing gradients of opportunity as a function of place and the flows of people, ideas, and information occurring between and among places. The post-Soviet ‘virtual bride,’ and the industry upon which she is based, are metaphors of these shifting gradients of opportunity in the inequalities of global cultural space. The demonstrated inequalities of access in this industry parallel the inter-regional inequalities of access characteristic of the technologies and ideologies of globalization in general. This speaks to the policy implications for this research, as inequality of access tends to work to the advantage of those who are positioned to pay for it. Although the industry has been subject to very little regulation in past years, this appears to be changing as Belarus has more recently required the licensing and registration of international marriage agencies operating within its borders, and the United States has adopted the 2005 Marriage Broker Regulation Act, which imposes more rigorous standards of informational disclosure to protect clients against marriage fraud and/or abusive situations. The effectiveness of these developments is yet to be assessed.

As the ideologies of globalization are characterized by active risk-taking, opportunism, and the reflexive narrative of the self, the mediatization of post-Soviet society brings the associated spaces and ideologies to these places in greater degrees, encouraging women to seize upon opportunities, as perhaps their friends have done (and presumably to their benefit). As the risk-taking imposes an element of danger in emigration decisions, this study has ventured to determine its extent: namely, the industry’s possible connections with criminal networks of human trafficking and sexual enslavement. This study brings to bear the conclusion that, at the time of this writing, the risks to Belarusian women in their involvement with online marriage agencies are minimal. This is not to say, however, that there are no risks in correspondence and romantic involvement with foreign men: as discussed in chapter four, the industry prefigures the involvement of clients predisposed to control, narcissism, and patriarchal dominance (although certainly not in every case). As documented cases of the abuse of spousal immigrants attest, the stories do not typically end as ‘happily ever after’ scenarios. Although spousal immigration frequently carries with it the problem of isolation, loneliness and alienation, the randomness of

interaction in global cultural space has also produced success stories, as this study presents. The random, unpredictable, ‘anything goes’ nature of this space encourages the gamble, where a venture may or may not produce a payoff. Especially as simulation produces uncertainty in the postmodern world, the outcomes can be great, small, or none at all.

Global cultural space can also be subversive. The post-Soviet ‘virtual bride’ is also a metaphor for ‘subversion’—women resisting local patriarchies and taking the initiative to create opportunities for themselves as a means of improving their lives. In Western nations, processes contributing to the subversion of patriarchy have been in place for a much longer period, much to the dismay of men who lament the disappearance of ‘traditional’ women interested far less in self-advancement than in being nurturing wives and mothers. Interestingly, the ‘virtual bride’ industry presents to Western men an opportunity for a similar ‘subversion’—the circumvention of relations with women sufficiently empowered so as to challenge traditional notions of male dominance and patriarchal power.

The cultural differences inherent to the relationships that do materialize from international correspondence courtship can present substantial difficulty to the individuals involved. That these difficulties are amplified by the aforementioned prefigured predispositions of the men clients writ large is an important conclusion made from the evidence presented in this study. Again, cases vary, but it is important to note that the industry also presents women who bring their own prefigured predispositions to these relationships. Especially as marriage frequently brings with it the power to reconstitute certain realities such as identity and social belonging, welcome changes may be in store for women who, for a variety of possible reasons ranging from personality failings to lack of personal identification with their cultural contexts, fail (or refuse) to integrate socially within their respective places. In such cases, marriage to a foreign spouse would present an opportunity to detach from prevailing cultural expectations, norms, and/or restrictions, and create a life characterized by greater self-definition and freedom from censure, criticism, and prejudice while also ‘importing’ to the relationship the same issues that inspired the emigration. This scenario, where personal choice overrides the requirements for cultural belonging, may be a relationship’s bugbear or its saving grace.

This study becomes an exercise in resistance to essentialist and/or stereotypical references to larger populations that, in themselves, are often best represented in terms of a diversity of motivations, desires, and intentions. Especially in consideration of the power and

influence wielded by the American mainstream media to mold and shape public opinion about certain groups or phenomena through biased representation or downright propaganda, it is best to acknowledge that certainly not all ‘virtual brides’ are unfortunate victims of domineering or abusive men, and certainly not all men engaged in correspondence with post-Soviet women are interested only in control or serial monogamy. Rather, we can speak in terms of *tendencies* as a function of larger, more structuring processes and phenomena (both historically and geographically situated) that influence, but do not determine, the attributes and decisions of industry participants. To do otherwise would be to unfairly remove the unique agency of individual actors. With this, we can accept that some men participate in these exchanges with the best of intentions, finding marriage to a foreign spouse as not simply an opportunity to share oneself with an intimate life partner, but also to expand one’s cultural sensibilities and worldview. However noble this may sound, the place-based inequities written into many of these relationships are cause to keep naivete in check: relationships founded upon significant imbalances of power, choice, or opportunity are likely to experience significant problems.

Although it is difficult to assess the percentage of ‘success stories’ that have resulted from the correspondence courtship methods purveyed by online international introduction agencies, it can be understood that certainly some women of post-Soviet nations (and their ‘Western’ counterparts) have been able to make their new relationships work, with a corresponding improvement in life conditions, level of happiness, and personal fulfillment. However, the ideologies embedded in this industry render these methods somewhat problematic to the extent that it attracts individuals who seek to fulfill self-serving and/or narcissistic needs via their interactions with their correspondents or partners. As this industry is offered up as a unique product of the profound social, sexual, cultural, and geographical changes inspired by globalization, technocapitalism, and the ascension of postmodern cultural sensibilities, the associated dissolution of previously place-based cultural traditions gives rise to a ‘networked’ cultural landscape of reconstituted social actors. As notions of sexual subjugation, pervasive feminization, and cultural conquest are given new expression in the technologically-driven transformations of cybersexuality, the ‘virtual bride’ industry clearly derives vitality from these, as well as the historical and geographical significance of the collapse of a former empire and the apotheosis of a monolithic, global superpower. Since the fluid, capillary nature of power itself demands its own seduction, cyberspace becomes a fascinating arena whereupon these processes

are not only made possible, but also made visible, as evidenced by the 'silent' (or self-silencing) techniques of seduction employed in the sophisticated marketing of post-Soviet women as 'virtual brides.'

**APPENDIX**

*Interview Transcripts*

**INTERVIEWEE:** Manager, “AngelikaMinsk” marriage agency (Minsk, Belarus)  
**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** agency office, Minsk, Belarus  
**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August 2004

Mike: my first question is how long has this business been in operation?

Manager: since 1989

Mike: what is the company's mission?

Manager: to help people find a mate to make a family...

Mike: so you're helping people build families....

Manager: yes

Mike: what kind of information do you have to have from women and from men?

Manager: we need all the information... the photos, addresses, age, date of birth, we check their passport and see if they are not married. We have a special questionnaire. The women come here to this office and fill in this form. They answer all the questions about hobbies and if they have children and languages....

Mike: can the man fill out this information online?

Manager: actually we get this information from the women and we put it on the web site. We ask this information from the man also so that we can send to the women an introduction letter. This helps a woman if she has questions because we don't have this information about men on the web site.

Mike: how do you find the women? Do they come to you or do you do advertising?

Manager: we do some advertising and because we have a good reputation, the women give advice to other...

Mike: so there's also a system of reference....

Manager: if one of our ladies gets married she sometimes tells her friends and maybe two or three her friends will come to us

Mike: are the women paid?

Manager: the women are not paid



Mike: are they charged a fee?

Manager: no. They don't pay at all. The only thing they pay is if they make pictures... photographs. Sometimes we make the pictures but we don't take money.

Mike: so the women can bring their own pictures or the company can make the photographs for them, correct?

Manager: yes

Mike: does the company encourage the women to have the photographs professionally done?

Manager: yes. Usually we will ask them to bring both professional and amateur photos because it can give more introduction... how can I explain... that men can see them in normal life and also in professional pictures.... because it's very different. It's big contrast. On the Internet there are many marriage agencies and she has to attract the man's attention by her photo.

Mike: what kind of success has your company seen in actual matchmaking? Have you been very successful?

Manager: we are successful because we have created many families already and many of these families have children already. But they do not all want to tell when they meet someone online and we don't always hear about the marriage

Mike: so you would say that only a very small percentage of your clients actually stay in contact with you?

Manager: yes. Sometimes we hear from their mothers or from their friends... a girl from our catalog got married... some of them bring us pictures of the wedding and their new husband....

Mike: what countries do most of your men clients come from?

Manager: from Europe. Germany, France, also UK, USA...

Mike: so there are some men who travel to Belarus and your company helps arrange meetings, is that correct?

Manager: yes

Mike: but the American clients, that's mostly by correspondence, is this correct?

Manager: yes

Mike: and the Americans... do they travel to Belarus eventually?

Manager: yes of course.... and we make all the arrangements for hotel, for transportation...

Mike: and are all your women clients Belarusian?

Manager: yes... usually we check to see if they are still available, if they are still in our country. So we can give all this right information to the clients

Mike: how would you describe your men clients? What kind of men are they?

Manager: they are very different... even if they come from the same country... they have different wishes, different goals. In Belarus the men are different too. Different age, different intelligence, different social position. We can say that most of men are age between 35 and 55.

Mike: so there's a real diversity among the men. Is there such thing as an ideal client?

Manager: probably open minded person.... a man who can explain what they are looking for...who is open and communicative, because if a client can't tell us what he wants exactly it can be very difficult for us to help him. Plus, all men are different and all women are different. It is necessary to be a psychologist to have success in this. Also some men come with very negative thoughts about marriage so in this case also very difficult to help them because he can be very sarcastic from the beginning.... so women feel it and they become more closed... and they can't communicate...

Mike: so really the ideal men clients are the ones who are ideal for marriage.

Manager: no. ideal man for marriage for every woman is different... if someone is very open minded and very intelligent and then of course he needs to find the same woman; for a simple woman we can say it would be bad match. So we need to talk with them...

Mike: so if I asked you who would be the ideal woman clients then you would say the same thing, right?

Manager: yes

Mike: you are a manager, correct?

Manager: yes

Mike: did you start with this company?

Manager: yes

Mike: what inspired you to start with the company?

Manager: actually we worked with the owner before with another company, a travel agency and we talked a lot and we were friends.... and we saw that so many nice women came to the agency to travel and most of them are single and divorced and they can't find their second partner... so

we tried this company. So we started with the questionnaire and we changed it many times. We don't charge the women any money because even \$20 for the agency is not big money but \$20 for a woman with a child and she makes only \$120 or \$130 every month... that's a big money. They don't have such a high salary.

Mike: so the owner had his own ideas about what a good company would be like... how to do it right

Manager: of course from the beginning it was only one computer... some pieces of paper, and... step by step, slowly, slowly...

Mike: what kind of problems have you faced in starting a company like this?

Manager: it's getting the information this is necessary for the company... we need at least 300 or 400 women to get started.

Mike: it's the database then

Manager: it's the database but also it's to find the partners... to get a good reputation.

Mike: do you run any other businesses?

Manager: the owner has another business but I only work here... except we have many many interpreters who come if it's necessary.... they can work many many hours for Spanish or German interpretation...

Mike: so the interpreters are mostly Belarusian? Are they both men and women?

Manager: yes

Mike: and you also offer related services for the men and the women? visa support? Guidance for the men when they come...

Manager: yes, we arrange visits to the theater and ballet... it depends what they want... and the historical places in Belarus...

Mike: so really you are travel agents at the same time, is that correct?

Manager: not travel agents because we do not arrange tours for big groups of people... only individual persons

Mike: so it's very personalized

Manager: yes

Mike: how do language differences affect your business?

Manager: not the business but it can be a problem for the men and women. We have interpreters and when men and women meet each other here, if they want to communicate if they like physical each other... if they want to communicate they will find the same language. We've seen many who started with not the same language... and they lived together for years and the woman learned of this or that language.

Mike: what kind of investments did this company initially require? You mentioned the database was a challenge...

Manager: also advertising takes a lot of money

Mike: would you say that advertising is perhaps your biggest expense?

Manager: I think yes

Mike: what would you say makes the difference between a good introduction service and a bad one?

Manager: I think the difference is some agencies work on trust... we try to be honest with people from the beginning... we know our ladies and when a man comes to our agency we try to look him in the eyes and say that this woman would not be good match... why? (slapping hand to palm) because of this, this, this and this. Our goal is not to get little money and then to lose big money... we tried for people to be glad with our services... so that they will come to us again and bring their friends. We have many clients who returned every year... sometimes with friends, they get married here after they bring their friends here... we try to make a good reputation for our agency.... the same when working with woman. We try to advise her and...

Mike: so would you say that most of your success comes from these positive referrals... the recommendations from clients?

Manager: yes, because we try to work on trust. Even if for example our work time is until six or until eight o'clock in the evening... if a client needs our services later we might be here until nine or 10 or 11 o'clock. If he wants to go to the restaurant later we will accompany him, we will not leave him alone. Sometimes they pay for this, sometimes not, but anyway we will smile, we will try to help him. Bring him to his apartment so that nothing happens to him (laughs). If he comes to our agency on Saturday or Sunday then we will work. If he tells us that he want to find serious woman and not just entertainment then we will advise him which woman to meet because of course all girls tell that they came here to get married.... in reality, it's not always so but if we know a person who is serious and the man is serious and we know what they're looking for....

Mike: so it sounds like a lot of late nights and long hours for you

manager: yes

Mike: I know that there are some men in the US for example who feel that the women in the United States are no longer fit for marriage... that they're too interested in career and things like that. Do your American men clients fit this description.... do they operate on a belief that perhaps Belarusian women are better for them than American women are?

Manager: definitely but not only American men.... also Western European men

Mike: the men who learn about your service.... do they learn mostly from the Internet? Do they find you mostly on the Internet?

Manager: yes mostly on Internet... but we also advertise here in the newspaper

Mike: do you have web sites in other languages? Do you have any web sites in French, or Italian, or German?

Manager: just in English. We have local program where is all our database and information can be translated into other languages, but the web site is only in English. But we have ideas to change the web site into other languages.

Mike: have you had the opportunity for other companies to advertise on your web site? Have you had any offers?

Manager: we got many such offers yes. Almost every day we get such offers. Unfortunately on this question we can't ask how often we can change such banners...

Mike: so sometimes other companies will advertise on your web site. That's good for your company right?

Manager: yes of course

Mike: and does your company advertise on other web sites?

Manager: I think so but sometimes they change banners...

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** "Liudmila" (marriage agency client)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** e-mail interview

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** September, 2004

How did you learn about "Gimenez". Did you find them, or did they find you?

*I found this agency by myself in catalogue of dating sites.*

How long have you been on this website? Are you cooperating with any other companies?

*I've been on this website since May 2004. Yes. At the same time I registered on several other websites.*

Are you dealing directly with "Gimenez" or are you working through an agent? If agent, how was this arrangement set up?

*I'm dealing with website directly without help of agents.*

Did "Gimenez" (or agent) offer you any assistance or advice in the preparation of your website photograph and/or biographical sketch? If so, please explain.

*Yes. All websites of similar agencies give you detail advices how to arrange your meeting through the Internet and what kind of pictures you should send.*

What are some of the main reasons that you decided to cooperate with this company?

*I decided to choose this company, because it's free for women, this site is convenient, because it's formed in suitable view ( for example, quite clear for person, who doesn't know Internet program well ) and it's arranged in Russian language as well.*

Do have any family or friends that cooperated with this company, or a similar one? What kind of experience did they have?

*No, I don't have.*

What are your expectations/hopes for this experience?

*I do hope to meet my destiny. ( Although as I understand it's not so easy )*

What kind of person are you hoping to meet? What influences your decision about choosing someone? What is your "ideal" mate? What particular aspects of men do you value most?

*I hope to meet family oriented and loving children man, who would be good friend for me and my son.*

*First impression you receive looking at man picture, of course, but it's necessity for me to read description of men. It's very important what kind expectations they have and what they need. Often men are looking for partners for entertaining and mutual travel spending or they need in women with defined physical qualities. I reject it completely.*

*It's very difficult to say about ideal, because everybody dreams about "ideal". Unfortunately, there is no it in nature, so I'd say, that first of all I value in man big desire to have real family, where all relations found on mutual regard, understanding, kind feels, love to children and care about them and each other.*

*I'd appreciate such aspects as reliability, faithfulness, honest, kindness and understanding.*

Did you have to pay for the services offered by "Gimenev"? Were you required to sign a contract? If so, what were the terms of the agreement?

*I didn't have to pay for services. I didn't sign any contracts. I had to agree through the Internet to follow accepted rules of this agency.*

If you are successful, where do you hope to live in the future? What do you know, or what have you heard, about the men there? In your opinion, how might they compare with the men of your country as potential mates?

*It doesn't matter, because the important thing is man, but not country. Certainly, I wouldn't agree to live in Muslim countries and I prefer white race man.*

*I've heard many stories about women who got married with men from Europe, USA and Australia. They differ from our completely regarding family. They love and care about children and they love Russian women, because they are not so emancipated and they are very sympathetic in comparison with local ones. I'd rather not say bad things about Russian man, because they are just sacrifices of our history and conditions, but unfortunately they don't think about our future generations at all and it's very sad.*

Why have you chosen this particular method of meeting someone?

*If I understood after some time of writing, that I could trust this man and his relation to me was worthy of my attention, I'd agree to meet him somewhere in Europe in time of my vacation, because it's difficult materiality to go often abroad or easier way is to invite him to visit Russia as tourist.*

What do you think are the advantages to making such a decision? What do you think are the disadvantages?

*The advantages of first way are that I can combine nice thing with useful one. I'll spend my holiday in wonderful country and at the same time I can meet my correspondent. It'll depend on me in this case if I want to go on relations with him. The advantages of second way are that I don't spend a lot of money to meet him, because in any case to get cities in Russia is cheaper,*

*than journey abroad. The disadvantages of any method of meeting are lack of time. I can't take more than 2 weeks of holiday, but 2 weeks are too little time to know each other, although, who knows... Sometimes people live together for ages and finally, they understand, that they are different..*

How does your "destination place" compare with the place where you currently live, in your view?

*It doesn't matter.*

Do you anticipate any problems from this experience? Have you had any negative experiences or difficulties thus far?

*The bad experiences were that there were some misunderstandings in language and I were spending a lot of time for writing and finally we lost interesting each other.*

Do you receive encouragement from friends/family to look for a foreign mate? How do the people in your community generally feel about it?

*There are many opinions concerning this position. My family doesn't mind. Some of friends suppose, that main thing is to find job abroad at the same time, because it would be good alternative to learn language, customs, people and partner. And some of friend just make me find anybody, because if I find the man who wish to have Russian wife indeed I won't have problems with adaptation.*

How do you feel about the possibility of moving to another country? What kinds of hopes do you have for the future? Would you have any regrets?

*I don't mind to move to another country, because all my minds are busy with dream about full family and I've already been ready morally to this action. Hopes....I have a lot of hopes. They are arranging family cosiness with loving man, providing future for children, learning language excellently, work ( perhaps in other area) and many happy minutes in spending time together. I'd have regrets only about feel of collectivism, about my friends and parents, I think. Now it's difficult to say, because I have to feel it myself.*

Are you currently in correspondence with any potential candidates? If so, how long have you been in contact?

*No.*

Your nation: Russian

Your age: 39

Your profession/occupation: An accountant



**INTERVIEWEE:** "Natalia" (marriage agency client)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** e-mail interview

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** September, 2004

How are you dear Michael. I'm sorry my late answer, suddenly I had to go to business trip for more than two weeks.

**How did you learn about "Gimenez". Did you find them, or did they find you?**

I do not remember how I learn about "Gimenez." I was frustrated after divorce and found websites of acquaintances.

**Did "Gimenez" (or agent) offer you any assistance or advice in the preparation of your website photograph and/or biographical sketch? If so, please explain.**

"Gimenez" did not take part in preparation of my profile. I did it my self.

**What are some of the main reasons that you decided to cooperate with this company?**

I decided to cooperate with this company, because "Gimenez" has profiles of men after 45 years old. Same of many websites cooperate with women from 18 to 35, and not older than 40.

**Do have any family of friends that cooperated with this company, or a similar one? What kind of experience did they have?**

I know many women, who cooperate with company similar to "Gimenez." Same of them married and left Russia for America, Austria, Germany, Holland and others.

**What are your expectations/hopes for this experience?**

I hope to meet a man, who can understand me, who likes to laugh, who has a good sense of humor, who a giver and not only a taker, and who will be a good friend as well as a partner. I'd like to see a man near me who has many varied interests.

**What kind of person are you hoping to meet? What influences your decision about choosing someone? What is your "ideal" mate? What particular aspects of men do you value most?**

I think that there are no ideal men, as no ideal women. An ideal man by me is a person with whom I shall comfortably. There is no a difference between men, who live in Russia and in other countries. I'm a journalist and I communicate with many people, including Americans. These are nice people who are open for communication and are sociable. I managed to find common language with them and I think we have much uncommon.

**How do you feel about the possibility of moving to another country? What kinds of hopes do you have for the future? Would you have any regrets?**

I have a lot of friends, who married men from abroad and live happily. I don't think I'll suffer if I leave Russia. I'll be possible come back to Russia for holiday or vacations. My familiar and my friend's respect my decision and are not against it.

No woman will regret if there's a loving man near her. I wouldn't regret. I am journalist and I like everything new and its interest and exciting.

**If you are successful, where do you hope to live in the future? What do you know, or what have you heard, about the men there? In your opinion, how might they compare with the men of your country as potential mates?**

Some time ago I lived in Europe for nine weeks and I felt pretty comfortable. Now I cannot tell where I would like to live. Internet acquaintance is not so unusually nowadays. I'm journalist and it's very hard to get meet a right known person in my city. They don't see a woman in me but a good journalist. It make's our communication difficult. Besides our men live not so long that is why it isn't easy for me to find a man of my age. I am an active person, go in for sports; I look younger then my age, that's why I had to search for coevals in Internet.

I hope I answer your questions. Good luck.

**INTERVIEWEE:** "Scott" (former marriage agency client)  
**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** telephone interview  
**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** October 2004

Mike: Thank you for volunteering your time this evening. You worked with oksanalove.com?

Scott: yes

Mike: how did you learn about that company?

Scott: I actually was using a bigger company....there was a girl that was on that one, and I ended up switching, and that's where I found my wife.

Mike: by the way are you in Florida?

Scott: Jacksonville, yes

Mike: were you affected by the hurricanes by the way?

Scott: we got a couple trees knocked down but it just kind of glanced us

Mike: so then you weren't really hard hit yourself then

Scott: no

Mike: I'm glad to hear that....how long had you been actively seeking a partner in this way?

Scott: well, I didn't actually start that way. I started looking here...through my searches, I found this other agency, and that's how it started...just kind of casual to see what was there. And so forth

Mike: and so you extended your search on an international basis then

Scott: yes. well my first wife came from the same city and the same high school as I did. So, I thought, why does my second wife have to come from the same city?

Mike: understood. do you have any friends or anyone that you know who did business with a similar company?

Scott: actually, we associate with about three other couples now, who were there at the same time that we were, and had ended up getting married

Mike: can you remind me where your wife is from?

Scott: Kazakhstan, but she's actually Russian

Mike: so she's of Russian ethnicity, but she is a Kazakhstan national

Scott: yes

Mike: my next question is were you generally satisfied with the services you received from oksanalove?

Scott: yes

Mike: do you feel that the Internet presents the best way to meet a foreign bride?

Scott: well, I don't know any other way so I guess I would have to say yes (laughs)

Mike: when you were working with oksanalove.com, were you optimistic about your chances?

Scott: I just looked at it as kind of dating via phone or e-mail...and actually when I went over there, I looked at it as a vacation....it was some place that I had never been and I love to go to new places. I had high hopes, but I wasn't pinning my entire life on what happened there.

Mike: did you have any previous knowledge about the women from Kazakhstan?

Scott: no, not at all...I learned as I went along. the majority of them, a lot of them are Russian

Mike: what did you find most appealing about the women there?

Scott: their values

Mike: could you explain for me?

Scott: they are a lot more family oriented...they tend to be a little more old-fashioned the way we would look at it.

Mike: old-fashioned?

Scott: you know, as home and family being number one

Mike: in your opinion, how do foreign women compare with American women in terms of their "marriageability?"

Scott: I would say they outweigh them by far right now...I am very very happy

Mike: fantastic... I'm happy to hear that...if you don't mind me asking, what particular characteristics were you looking for in a marriage partner, understanding that you were going on your second marriage

Scott: I was looking for someone who had the same character as I did....looking for the same things out of life; one of the problems we had in our first marriage was that we had different views about everything....and she went her way and I went mine. my wife and I now, in fact, she talked me into going back to school. so now I'm back in school

Mike: that's great, congratulations. What are you studying?

Scott: I haven't quite decided yet, but I think it's going to be in computers

Mike: excellent....did you anticipate any potential problems from this experience?

Scott: well, the biggest concern I had was that she is 22, and I am 35...that was my largest concern. beyond that there was a small language barrier at first, but we overcame that pretty easily

Mike: did you encounter any difficulties in the process of finding someone when you were out there?

Scott: as in with people? I dated a few people around here, and I tended to get the same thing, and they were all looking for what I had to offer and they didn't seem to care about my feelings.

Mike: before you left for Kazakhstan, did you tell your friends what you were going to do?

Scott: I told them I was going on vacation

Mike: how do the people in your community react to your having married a foreign woman....?

Scott: there are Russian women here....we have met women who are from Kazakhstan and Russia

Mike: so it sounds like you are creating a new community for yourself through your marriage with your wife

Scott: sure....I have two children and my family has always been real important. I mean, that's the majority of where I spend my time, so...

Mike: what kind of assistance did you get from oksanalove.com? Did they have like a tour package or something?

Scott: they had a tour package, and they had a few different ways to introduce you to ladies.... in fact, when I was going there, I invited a couple of girls to meet me in the city, and she said that it's really important that you and Milla spend a lot of time together...that's my wife...and the whole time I was there, she kept winking at me and saying "Milla" and she was right! we were right for each other

Mike: so there was someone there to help you make a match

Scott: yes

Mike: I see.... because I interviewed also with the owner of oksanalove.com, and she told me that she has offices in, I think, eight different countries, Kazakhstan being one of them, but I wasn't aware that they have people at those offices working to help make matches...

Scott: she's from Kazakhstan, she was actually there when we met

Mike: so you did have some face-to-face contact with your present wife, before you both decided to marry?

Scott: oh yes, I spent almost 2 weeks there....and when I asked her if this was something she was interested in, I saw her face lit up, and I knew that this was meant to be. and then it took about eight months to get her here...it wasn't something that happened overnight.

Mike: certainly there is a lot of bureaucratic red tape to go through

Scott: I was there in February, and she came here in November...and we had contact before that via e-mail and telephone...and once she got here, we got married in January of this year.

Mike: so you actually married this year in the states

Scott: yes

Mike: what kind of knowledge did your wife have of America and Americans?

Scott: she had a pretty fair amount, because she has a law degree. she had studied some of our laws and our history when she was there, and she has been like a sponge since she has gotten here. she reads all the time, and she has been learning more English so she can go back to college.

Mike: did you find any major differences between cultures?

Scott: at first there was a big difference. it took a lot for her to get used to the way that things are here...there, the cities are tighter and smaller and not everybody has a car and it's fine, because they can get on a bus... in Jacksonville, Jacksonville is one of the largest cities in the whole world....she calls it a giant village (laughs)

Mike: (laughs)

Scott: if you don't have a car here, you're pretty much out of luck

Mike: sure. That's common for American cities, isn't it?

Scott: yes. That's not something that she was used to.

Mike: how about culturally speaking? I'm curious if she experienced any kind of culture shock when she arrived

Scott: yes, there was a little bit of that...getting used to the way people act...I guess over there, people spend more time interacting with each other in casual settings than we do here...

Mike: did you experience any culture shock yourself when you were In Kazakhstan for those two weeks?

Scott: well, I wasn't used to taking a taxi anywhere...I was used to driving in a car (laughs)...it was a little bit different, yes

Mike: is the experience of living with someone from another culture generally what you expected it to be or were there a lot of surprises?

Scott: I've been married before and I know what my first year with my first wife was like...I mean, there was differences here, but it's still the same thing. you gotta get used to living with each other

Mike: I guess what they say is that all marriages are intercultural

Scott: yes, in a way they are

Mike: since families are cultures in and of themselves... my next question is would you recommend this process to anyone seeking the same kind of introduction service?

Scott: I have

Mike: what kind of advice would you give them?

Scott: the biggest thing is don't go there thinking that this is the biggest thing affecting the rest of your life...you can't look at it that way. if you look at it that way you'll get a broken heart. you should look at it as a very nice vacation where you can meet new people and try new things...and if something happens, so be it. one of the couples that was there with us...the man actually went to meet two other people and ended up marrying somebody entirely different...so you can know somebody so well through the letters and telephone but when you actually meet somebody there's a little bit of a difference.

Mike: that's all the questions that I have. thank you very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** “Helen” (marriage agency client)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** Minsk, Belarus

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August, 2004

Helen: as I recall situations from my life, I can tell you a lot of stories.... not only with me but my friends and my girlfriends...

Mike: I'll invite you to start wherever you want. (shows list of questions). Maybe you can start with question five

Helen: (reading from list) ... what are my hopes and expectations from the experience? There are two points as to why people use the Internet, as for me.... I will tell the story which is connected with me. First of all such points, nobody wants to be alone... nobody wants to have to live in poverty, and on the other hand it's business. For some of the women maybe they would like to entertain, but it's not for me. I tried several times when my husband died, and I decided to try.... so it was very interesting and it was new for me I decided to try. I hoped to meet a real friend... maybe a husband in the future because I don't want to be alone at all. I cannot imagine my life without a man... without love. (points to her heart) I'm looking for this first of all. But then I will see the character, something that is connected to the house, the way to have a good time, and so on. But first of all, it's love. So I decided to write a letter... I tried to find someone special for me in Belarus. But the problem is that from age 30 to 40 it's very difficult to find someone. It is not easy because we are serious people... we don't want just to entertain, just to have a good time... we look for someone serious for life. Maybe at the age of 35 a woman has more opportunities, but at the age of 40 it's very difficult because most of the men are married or they suffer from different problems. For example they are addicted to alcohol... problems with alcohol, problems with drugs.... maybe problems with health, and so on. It's very difficult to find at the age of 40 or 45. And I tried. After one year and a half I received a lot of letters... mainly they were from American men, one from Italian, one from English men.

Mike: so you went to an Internet service?

Helen: I did use the Internet but I do not have the Internet at home... I sent a letter just to the agency.... and then on the Internet they placed my information my profile... and then I forgot! And in a year and a half only, I started receiving letters. I had forgotten about it and I thought that everything was in vain, I was very disappointed and I forgot. But then I received letters. We had a correspondence through mail. Letters, photos.... some of the correspondence just stopped. I didn't like anything, maybe he didn't like anything. It just stopped. But I didn't like that all the men I wrote, I was 36-- my husband died when I was 35-- and after a year I decided to try. All men who wrote were 52, 53, 54. I was shocked! I don't want to have such a man. But there was one man I was interested in... an Englishman... he was 47... or 46... it was okay... 10 years difference. And he really wrote letters regularly he wrote and wrote and wrote... he asked to different questions, he sent photos... and it was very interesting

Mike: so you exchanged a lot of photos?



Helen: yes a lot of photos. He wrote letters handwritten... it was very interesting for me. I knew everything about him in detail, so one day he called me. Then he started to call me regularly on Wednesday... every Wednesday he called me. Then after my Internet courses, I was able to write letters using e-mail and before this I did not know how to do this. It helped us because it was the easiest way to exchange information...

Mike: so the Internet helps you exchange information

Helen: yes. But from time to time he wrote his letters with handwriting. But I wrote mainly using the Internet. Then he invited me to come to his country (laughs)... I made a decision very quickly because I trusted... I trusted my intuition. I knew a lot of facts about him. At the embassy I had to bring all the information... all the letters and his bank account information... they saw that I knew everything about him in detail, and on that day at 5 p.m. I got my passport with the visa! Only one day it took me. He bought the tickets and he arranged everything... to the embassy he wrote that everything will be at my disposal... food, house, everything. He will pay for everything... for everything. I only asked one question: how much money should I take with me (laughs). Because I understood that I must have money. He told me maybe \$200 would be enough. He met me at the airport, he took me to his house, he introduced me to his parents, we lived in that house. Everything was perfect. We traveled a lot, he introduced me to his friends. He wanted to get married and he wanted me to be his wife.

Mike: did he have children?

Helen: no... he had never been married before meeting me. Never. I think he had problems because of this. He did not have experience with women, so it's not good for a man I think. But we became well friends... and then I started to hesitate. It was a great problem for me... what to do? Because I didn't want this, to tell the truth. I didn't fall in love with him. For me, some things were strange or unusual in his behavior... he promised a lot but did little... something like this. So I decided to wait. Two weeks, we were together at his house and his parents like me very much. And they wanted me to be with them. His mother unfortunately suffered from cancer and he was treated for this. I analyzed a lot. Believe me, I was in despair. I was at a loss. I didn't know what to do. I can't be alone at all. I am very social and I must be among people... among friends. For me to stay at home it is better to die. Dasha, you see, is a teenager. she isn't at home all the time and she has her own friends. His parents were rather old, and he told me that everything will be for you... this house, everything. I told him that it is not important for me. It is not the main thing for me. Of course I would like to have a comfortable flat, of course! Everybody would. But it is not the main thing for me because I can get used to the sofa, to the pictures... to nice windows, and so on... but it is not enough. Something must give me energy... must make me feel emotions, feel happy. Not tables, not sofas. So everything was OK and I went home. He accompanied me to the airport. He is a real gentleman, but unfortunately he wasn't healthy. Diabetes, one kidney, never been married before... I decided to continue our correspondence. And then he decided to come to Belarus. I invited him. I introduced him to all my friends... to my parents. During the holiday that we celebrated my mother had prepared so many delicious dishes and he was very surprised. He ate ate and ate all the time! (Laughs). My niece was deeply surprised! He behaved as he was a very very hungry man! But it's okay

because it was very very tasty. I showed him a lot of places; we went to the opera house and different museums... I arranged everything. Some tickets he bought, some tickets I bought. Because at the concert hall I could not afford to pay \$1400. So everything was OK, he was deeply impressed. He learned everything and he went home. So then he invited me again but with my daughter. He paid for everything, for the tickets... and I went with Dasha to England... we visited London and we saw a lot of places. We stayed in a four-star hotel... everything was perfect. But then we came home. And I started to analyze the situation. My task was to be honest, to be honest. I did all my best for him; he did all his best for me. I value to this very much. But I could not dare to get married. I did not want to. I did not want to be his wife, unfortunately... because I understand he lived in a small town, I am used to living in a big city. I have here a lot of friends, there I did not have friends. Small town, quiet life. Mainly elderly people in the town. If it would be London, it would be much better for me. Quiet life, elderly people. Everywhere, elderly people. I decided that it's not for me. And then there was his business. I wanted to help him in his business. His business was casinos... it was the family business. His father and his mother and he worked together. He was the only child in the family. I could inherit everything. But the mother was very very ill and the father was very very old.... he was very very ill. I thought how would I survive. It's frightening. The job would mean from eight in the morning until nine in the evening just to exchange money. I would go crazy because it's not for my character. When I came home, I was in deep depression. I did not know how to behave, but I knew that sooner or later I would have to explain.... be careful not to offend him, using only the correct words because he tried to do his best. I felt sorry for him sometimes. A good man, but not lucky and not happy. But it was enough for me. I started very carefully, step by step, to prepare him for this information. And so we decided to part and to be friends. So that's all. That's the whole story. I can't live without doing anything useful, without people in a quiet small place, with limited space. I can't stand... it's not for me. And of course, for my daughter, there were no friends. That's very important too. Not just money. It is not enough for my heart, for my soul. I have everything here in Minsk. I have a flat, I have a job, I have friends. I haven't money! But I can't say that I have a miserable life. I have enough. But maybe I can not afford to travel a lot. Maybe I can't afford to visit rich restaurants... but it is not a problem for me. I am looking for a loving person because I understand that my daughter, sooner or later, will get married. She will have her private life, her own life... husband and children. Of course, I will help. But it is very difficult for all my friends because the men as I told you are married... and they want to have very successful women too. If he is rich he wants to have the same, or he wants a very young woman. Maybe 20 years difference. It's not serious.

Mike: how many friends do you have.... how many people do you know who are using these services?

Helen: a lot, a lot, believe me. When I was 30, I did not think of this way. I thought that I had enough time... I will meet someone here in Belarus. But now I realize that because I am 40 it is mainly men who are 52 who write these letters. Unfortunately, I don't want (laughs).

Mike: I was surprised to hear that it took a year and a half before you received any correspondence. Which company did you go with?

Helen: one of my girlfriends advised one to me but it was five or six years ago and I do not remember very well.....loveme.com. Men who were mainly from America wrote me. I only received one letter from an English man, they were mainly from America. So I decided to find a man again in Belarus because it's a long distance and correspondence might take one year or two years or three years. But to meet, sometimes it's a problem. To pay money for the flight, to come here, to live here. Some of them are suspicious. They don't trust, they don't know maybe about Belarus, about Minsk.... and of course maybe they are afraid of this. Because I was deeply surprised when the English man told me that he did not know about Belarus before. I was shocked. I told him shame on you.

Mike: sounds like he needed some more geography (laughs)

Helen: the distance is also one of the disadvantages. My girlfriends, three or four, have left Belarus and one of them lives in Germany and two live in France and one of them lives in England. And they have a happy life.

Mike: so it worked out well for them

Helen: yes. They have common children.... but their man, I can't say they are very successful or very rich, no. One of my girlfriends tells me-- she lives in Minsk-- for me it is better to live with their worker than with our engineer. You see? So they can afford to travel, to have a rest on holidays. But we teachers, we can't. I can't afford to go somewhere so I stay in Minsk. Can you imagine? It isn't fair (laughs).

Mike: I have a question about the photos that you use to construct your profile. Did you provide your own photos?

Helen: yes I gave them two or three different photos that I liked, and then I let them choose which one to put on the web site.

Mike: did they offer you any assistance or advice?

Helen: no, they didn't. But then it was my task to choose whether or not I wanted any correspondence.

Mike: what about the biographical sketch? Did you compose that yourself?

Helen: yes, of course. I composed the information about myself, but it was not so long... I sent just a small letter. That's all. My relatives were not against.... my mother knows, she knows my character, and she wants me to be happy. But where I will be-- here or there-- it doesn't matter. But I must be happy. She understands that I am educated. She wanted me to be happy. Of course, she warned me to be careful, to be careful. When you go to England, you must call me on that day. So everything was okay and I called with them regularly. Nobody was against.

Mike: did the company require you to sign a contract?

Helen: no no, no contracts

Mike: do you have a preference as to where you might want to live in the future? Or perhaps you prefer to stay in Belarus?

Helen: it's difficult to say... I would like to stay here and to be happy here. I would like to find someone special here in Belarus. But just in case, I try to find someone somewhere. I am not against having a correspondence. We can write letters and exchange information but then we will see... it depends on God, not on me. There are a lot of circumstances, and we depend on them, unfortunately. If I need someone special here, I will live here, with great pleasure, with my daughter and my relatives and with my friends.... my job, so why not? It would not be Eastern Europe. Only Christian people.... maybe in Europe.... of course it is better if people can speak English. Can you imagine to go to Germany to learn another language? Because to find the job I have to be realistic. It's impossible if you don't know their language. It's impossible! You can help only your husband, to be a housewife... that's all. It's not for me again.

Mike: have you had any negative experiences as a result of this cooperation with the company?

Helen: at the moment I cannot remember

Mike: are you relatively satisfied with the service you received from the company?

Helen: yes. They gave me all the information and they gave me the details. Different information about people. I have a list in Russian of things that I must know if I will leave Belarus.... all the details. Stories about happy couples, some pieces of advice.... telephone numbers, recommendations.... so I am satisfied.

Mike: so this is an American company?

Helen: yes, but they have in Russian. They are also in St. Petersburg.... another office.

Mike: do you know if they invite men from other countries to come here to meet women?

Helen: yes, but I wasn't involved in this process... I don't know why, but I would like to try. It is very interesting, something new for me!

Mike: have your friends had positive experiences with these companies?

Helen: mainly they had positive experiences.... one of my girlfriends now has a correspondence with a man from Germany. But she prefers to choose a man. So she opens a web site and she chooses a picture and the information. For me, it's just on the contrary. I prefer to send my information and I prefer them to choose me. I prefer this way. Because I tried, and I sent out 40 letters with pictures and I got no answers! These men get letters from younger women who are 25 maybe. Of course, they have a greater variety of women. And of course they will prefer to choose a young woman than a woman who is older, who is experienced, educated, clever, who knows a lot.... so it can be dangerous for some men I think if she knows everything.... but my

girlfriend is corresponding with this German man and after five or six letters he suggested to meet. He wants to come to Belarus and he asked her to organize the information form, and now she is very very busy and she is preparing for a meeting. But it's a long process because the information letter is prepared at our embassy.... the visa agency. She will have to send by mail. Then, he will go to his embassy and only then will he be able to come to Belarus. Maybe in a month or two months they will meet. But she wasn't married, she is 36, and she hasn't got any experience with men. For us, it's strange. It's about her upbringing.... she is very gentle and very modest and very shy and so she is not experienced. He does not want to waste time and says to her that we should have children very soon. And she wants to have children. No experience, no man. She is very nice, very educated, very intelligent, and very slim and slender and--can you imagine--she could not find a man here in Belarus. The relationships in her family are perfect; her family is very ideal and her father is an example.... and maybe that is one reason why she could not find someone special from here.

Mike: I have heard some stories of women who have fallen into some unhappy situations as a result of these arrangements. The person they married was not quite the person they thought he would be, or he is very controlling or very insecure.... works too much or something like that.

Helen: I know one woman who is not happy. She moved to Germany not so long ago. She left her husband and her children behind and she went to Germany but she is not happy because she does not know the language and she can't find a job. She lives in a house with a man who has children and she looks after the boys... she is a housewife and she can't work because without language it's impossible. And now, she is in despair because it is her fault. She was very easy going from my point of view. She didn't think before making a decision. As for me, I came to England once, then I came to England again and I wrote a lot of letters and I asked a lot of questions. I knew all the details, and only then did I make a decision to go or not to go. But she decided very quickly. Not a serious woman at all.

Mike: so perhaps it is less likely to work out well for a woman who is less educated and less careful

Helen: yes. Primitive, very primitive. She decided that life in that country is much better and that she will have a rich life... a rich husband and she will be happy. Just the contrary of what she has at the moment.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** “Inna” (introduction manager, “Viktoria” marriage agency)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** agency office, Minsk, Belarus

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August, 2004

Interview conducted with the assistance of an interpreter

Mike: please tell me how the process works at your company

Translator: there are two stages. The first one is the live communication. A lady comes in and Inna talks to her. They take her photo-- they can do photos themselves here. She writes about herself. She leaves her contact telephone number if she wants. They put her photos in the catalog. They usually group that according to age. A man who comes here looks through the photos and read about the women and he can also write his telephone number if he is too shy to call himself. When Inna talks to this person, she usually advises to call himself. Many people are shy to do that... hesitating. It seems to her that among Americans it's much simpler. People call each other.... go out somewhere. So the first thing that she advises clients to do is to get to know each other and learn about common interests. There's nothing bad about it you don't need to be shy to call her-- she teaches that. She also has men's catalogs. They usually are shy. They sometimes even don't leave the photographs. What is the most interesting thing about Russian ladies is..... just have a look....

Mike: (looks at the catalog) these are all the phone numbers that the women left behind?

Translator: yes, that's right. For example a man writes about himself but doesn't leave his photo. She usually needs to see a photo about this person but there is none. She also advises women to make a call to these guys.... call him and talk to him. In our country also women are a little bit hesitating to contact the men first. Inna actually doesn't see anything wrong about it. She also came here as a client... to this agency. In her main work she is on vacation now and she has a sister in the USA. Her sister comes here on the 10th of September. And she asked the director of this agency Viktoria to work here for awhile. During these two months she has made a lot of friends and many interests and also business contacts. She also has found a lot of men friends and they meet and they talk a lot...

Mike: sounds like fun

Translator: all of them are very interesting people. They have different professions and they come from different countries. These two have the catalog consisting of 3000 people but now they have lost count so they have a lot of people. This was the first stage of their work..... the agency is so popular and a lot of people know about it. They talk to people and try to help them and try to find their problems. Now they are reaching the stage where they are creating their web site... and they are scanning photos of the ladies. They also had a previous talk with Italian agencies. They also fulfill a double work...for instance if a man wants to open an advertisement, then they ask him if he wants to eventually have a future wife. With the help of the Internet they believe they will have more opportunities to have contact with foreign countries. (shows

pictures) this man who was communicating with a lady from Belarus.... they also help with making calls and help them to communicate and organizing a meeting. They would also like many guys from America to join their agency.

Mike: (referring to the catalog) are these mostly Belarusian men?

Translator: no (pointing to various examples) France, France, United States, Israel, Israel, Germany, Denmark, Poland, Israel, Greece, Australia, Australia

Mike: I see that there are fewer professionally made photos in this catalog

Translator: they have different photos.... they usually can say if it is a good or bad photo.... they usually don't insist on the photo to have high quality. Inna herself has not a professional photo and she likes it.... so people come here and they write about themselves. A person can bring a photo from his home album....

Mike: so you give your clients the freedom to represent themselves as they wish

Translator: there are limits of course. They will not allow anyone to write about themselves in a bad way.... or be too frank. When a businessman came here and she asked him to write about himself, and he wrote with a kind of irony that he was as kind as Scrooge from the Disney film and he wrote that he is a bastard with women.... but in general he would like to meet one. And when she asked him if he wanted to leave this text, he insisted to leave this text, with no corrections but this was only one case. They not only write about details about themselves but about what they are wishing to see in a partner.... because it's psychological sometimes people do not feel free to tell this directly. They can describe their ideal woman. The main advantage with a marriage agency is that people can see a person and read about a person... this is great

Mike: how long have you been with the company?

Translator: only one month... because she is on vacation this is a kind of temporary work. In the future if she has an opportunity she would like to revise her English because she is a professional interpreter. She graduated from the linguistic university. She would like to visit her sister also. And also she would like to combine the two works: her work and this one.

Mike: how do your clients learn about this company? Is it mostly by word-of-mouth or do you do a lot of advertising?

Translator: mostly they have advertising.... this is the part of business. They usually advertised in newspapers and magazines... also on TV. Not long ago there was a TV program made about them. She says that there are other agencies but not many of them reach such qualified service. They also do their best to treat to their clients in the very best possible way so that their clients will also tell the others. They are also located in the center of Minsk... this is considered at the center of Minsk. They have such a communication with clients that they can create an informal atmosphere... they can discuss really different problems... they can exchange their opinions and drink a cup of coffee together

Mike: well certainly they're bringing to you their very private concerns

Translator: and sometimes they combine services like if someone comes here to find the flat... people who come here they always have different life stories, they have different problems. It's not always obviously a sad story... it's quite different. Sometimes students will come who have learned foreign languages and they are shy to approach people in the street. They usually would like to make friends in this way... it's not always about looking for husbands or wives obviously. It shouldn't be a sad story where someone is disappointed. She says that the tendency in Belarus is that the popularity of such agencies is growing... people would forget how to get acquainted with people, so this is the reality... this is the modern way of getting acquainted. She also watched a TV program about American marriage agencies and how they function. And she arrived to the conclusion that either people from the US and people from other countries like Belarus or Ukraine have a problem meeting other people. She recalls an interview with one American guy and she remembers what he said. When the people from the TV program met him at a disco party, they decided to tape the interview because they saw him at one of the marriage agencies and they asked him what is his way of getting acquainted, and he also found ways of meeting people at discos and bars... such ways of getting acquainted do not suit him, because you never know what kind of person you pick up... so she thinks it's right

Mike: where do most of your men clients come from?

Translator: England, Italy, Turkey, USA, France, Africa... also Eastern countries. So in general it's Eastern and Western Europe... America and also Eastern countries. Also our countrymen come here who have finally decided to find a partner in life. That's why they come here and write about their ideal partner. They also organize meetings here. Also they participate in meetings with other agencies... they might go out to a restaurant, and they also organize cruises.

Mike: so there might be clients from other agencies who meet your own clients... is that sometimes how you work?

Translator: the director of the agency, Viktoria, she also learns from people from other agencies... being a talented woman, they also are in the market to rent flats and they also run this marriage agency.

Mike: so do some of the men clients stay in these flats for a period of time... to give them some time to meet women here?

Translator: yes this is highly probable... whatever the client needs. But they want to stipulate that the marriage agency is very serious. Sometimes there are cases when people see advertisements... and then they call the agency and they ask questions. This is their chance to find out if this is a single man and if he is serious about marriage. And they have detailed information that they try to explain to people that they have catalogs... people who are 18 and older can participate... for the purpose to create a family if people are ready. They usually give their address and they also invite to this person here... they want to meet this person, and after these procedures that person can join the club. Usually if person has some psychological



problems, or has some physical disability, they put a special emphasis on trying to find someone, but such people are not members.

Mike: all these catalogs here. How much of this is on the Internet now?

Translator: approximately half of these.... these are not all the catalogs. They have one more office where there are some special people who fulfill this technical work.

Mike: so a person who goes on your web site can see these photos but they will not see all of the people that you have...

Translator: the first thing is that they come here and then they find out that there is more to see, and they warned their clients that there is only half on the web site.... so their current clients and their future clients are very well-informed.

Mike: the marriage agencies in this country all have the same goals. Is it difficult to stay competitive? What in your opinion makes this company better than all the others?

Translator: good question! These are business secrets.... she can only give her own personal opinion. It seems to her that women who come here need a kind of guide to help them.... who can orient them and give advice... as far as the catalogs are concerned and other questions. Sometimes they simply need to talk.... sometimes when they give advice if the person doesn't feel that this suits him or her then they do not insist.... so if they are asked some questions then they are willing to answer. If they are not asked then they keep silent. The rest is secret. The main thing in her opinion is the human factor

Mike: do you find that the men clients carry any myths or stereotypes about Belarusian women?

Translator: still some stereotypes like they are good cooks, but the women who come to their agency are more of the European type.... and she recalls the times when Russian men were able to give flowers to ladies. Unfortunately it's different now. She wrote in her form that she likes lots of flowers, and all the people with whom she communicated are her friends now.

Mike: that's a nice way to get on your good side! (Laughs) are there any other companies that advertise on your web page?

Translator: the web page is not yet functioning... they are finishing the information gathering... it's still in the stage of creation. They have a large amount of participants then they can organize large meetings if needed.... but it's difficult to get in contact with foreign men

Mike: so foreign men become a very important resource for your agency

Translator: yes... they had a previous talk with an American and an Italian agency and also an agency from Ireland and they want to create an initial business with them.

Mike: so there is some preliminary work to make some cooperation with them.... does client fraud ever become a problem?

Translator: judging from her experience, she does not know of such cases.... when people fill out these forms they usually write the truth and they write about themselves and what they want to find. She wrote the truth about herself also.... and probably you can read about in her the real things.... and this is for the guy who will read it. She writes about herself as she is.... this is her individuality, and she won't be different

Mike: is it common for the clients to stay in contact with you after marriage?

Translator: this is highly probable, and it depends on the woman's character... and she has a lot of friends who are married. For example, she goes in for sports and many women from the marriage agency they also train with her and they still communicate. And later she also met some friends who also do jogging, but they do this in the evening.

Mike: so you've obviously made many friends through this company

Translator: according to interests, she's got a lot of friends. She wants to ask you when Americans usually do jogging... in the morning or in the evening?

Mike: in the morning... but I hear conflicting opinions about the benefits. How do you keep informed about what Western men are looking for? Is there a way that you can learn about them to get a better idea about what they are looking for?

Translator: usually the information passes by word-of-mouth... clients will tell their friends about the agency and so with talking to them they learn about the things that they want to see in Belarusian ladies. For example there was an immigrant who now lives in Israel... he is a Russian guy... came here to visit his relatives. He came here to the agency and then went to Israel.... he told other people about the agency, and now they call to the agency and they send faxes and leave their telephone numbers. This is the way to get foreign men.

Mike: I was wondering if you could comment on the issue of language differences. How do they affect your everyday business? How do you get around these barriers?

Translator: usually the ladies who have a demand to meet someone from foreign countries usually speak some foreign language...

Mike: so it's really not that much of a problem

Translator: this is not a problem. She sometimes can help because she knows Italian, and she knows the Spanish and she can recall English sometimes (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** Irina (associate interpreter, “European Connections” marriage agency)  
**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** Minsk, Belarus  
**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August 2004

Mike: First of all, how long have you been working with European Connections?

Irina: Actually, for a week.

Mike: For about a week? So, you're pretty new with the company then?

Irina: Yes. We were hired as interpreters to work during the visit of American men while they're staying here. And, so, that's all actually.

Mike: Okay. How did you find out about the company originally?

Irina: Accidentally. My friend called me and asked if I could participate as an interpreter in this program.

Mike: Okay. And my next question is: What kind of information does the company need in order to maintain its operations; do you know?

Irina: No. But, I guess that they need to establish contacts with as many women as it is possible, now a handful. Because, they want to look for women here. So, that's probably all the information which is connected with them.

Mike: Okay. Do you know in what capacity does the company consult with the women here? Do they interview the women first or is there some kind of screening process?

Irina: No, I suppose there is e-mailing only and no contacts. And, by the way, it was their first visit for three years in Belarus. They don't do it often.

Mike: Okay. I think I remember Kyle telling me that they were going to Kiev afterward. And then maybe to some other cities.

Irina: Ukraine is more popular. I don't know why. In Belarus there is no agencies which can represent American connections to there, probably because the way they cannot establish contacts.

Mike: Okay. And are the women who participate with the company, are they paid or do they pay?

Irina: No. They can freely go to a party. And I suppose they can take champagne also, which is free. That's all. The rest are contest where they can – you call it -- not contests -- like, lottery. They win money there.

Mike: All right. In your opinion, what kind of success has the company seen in actual match making?

Irina: I suppose there is a definite success in this field. What is the population of the U.S.A?

Mike: We have about, maybe, 286 million people.

Irina: Okay. If you divide this into two parts of 60/40, approximately how many men are in the U.S.A?

Mike: about maybe 130 million, 140 million.

Irina: Okay. Then, from this quantity, you can subtract married people and the young people. And probably, like, 30 percent is left, I suppose. How much would it be: like, 30 million.

Mike: Yeah, give or take, right.

Irina: And if ten percent of all these men are interested in meeting people by Internet or coming to other countries, not finding a person in their own country, probably it's still very popular. Because the great figure is left. So, probably very successful.

Mike: Okay. How would you describe the men clients? Like, of the men that you met so far, I know you haven't been working for a very long time, but how would you describe the men you met so far?

Irina: Polite, easygoing, flexible. They can understand the culture of our country. That's also a good thing. They are not so reserved as the British, for example.

Mike: Okay.

Irina: And, well, that's all probably.

Mike: Okay. And from what nations have the men come? Which nations are they? I think maybe there were German men; is that right?

Irina: No. Only Americans, but some of them, two of them, had Greek origin.

Mike: And the women clients, are they all Belarusian women?

Irina: Well, yes, I suppose. No Ukrainians or Russians, no. Only Belarusians.

Mike: Do you know if the company offers any kind of related services?

Irina: I'm not sure, but probably we'll draw some people who are interested in establishing a company here--opening an agency, which will have directly -- will try to have contacts with this agency. If it is -- there is demand, there is offer; why not?

Mike: To what extent do language differences have an impact on the business? I know that you're an interpreter. Do you see that language differences are a big problem for these kinds of arrangements?

Irina: For a young man, it is a great problem. For young men who are in this group, language barrier was thought as a big problem and they try to find a lady English speaking. And as far as older men, they don't find it a problem. Because, some believe that a woman can learn a language in a country like this is the easiest and the fastest way. If they find understanding and their relationships are serious, probably that's not a problem.

Mike: What kind of investment, do you know, was required to start this business? Do you have any information about that?

Irina: (guardedly) Yeah, I do. Do you need it?

Mike: It's for the dissertation.

Irina: Okay. To open an agency here, you have to know what judicial status you have. So, whether it would be a limited company or a company with foreign investments. That will depend on the amount of your statutory account that you have to form. Then you have to go to different organizations in Belarus, like, starting with bank, opening bank account. And ending with, I don't know, getting a license.

Mike: Okay. So, you do have to get a license?

Irina: This point should be consulted. I'm not sure, because I don't know all the activities that demand a license for you working. I'm not sure, but maybe. Also you need an office to rent, some computers to buy. You need a lot of things actually.

Mike: So, because European Connections is an international firm, it must probably have to get some permission from the government in order to operate here in Belarus or in other countries; is that right?

Irina: What information?

Mike: It was my understanding that such introduction firms do not need a license if they operate here in Belarus; but, I think, if they're international firms, perhaps they do need a license?

Irina: I'm not sure actually. I don't think that there is some information from the government. It's not so strict area of searching something. I don't think so.

Mike: Okay. Does the company cooperate with independent agents, like, people who are looking for women maybe to bring them to the socials?

Irina: To what?

Mike: Does the company cooperate with independent agents, independent people, who help bring the clients out?

Irina: I don't know. Usually, Belarusian ladies prefer to go to agents to register their names there to leave the information about themselves. I'm not sure about personal agents. Like, how can they represent other people? I'm not sure.

Mike: Do you know if the company invests a lot in web design?

Irina: Well, I suppose it should be. I'm not sure, but the web page is pretty expensive in our country. I don't know if it is in yours. So, it should be, of course.

Mike: All right. And what standards does the company maintain in terms of the women presented on the website? In other words, does the company require only certain women of a certain age group to participate or do they welcome women from all age groups?

Irina: No. There are no age limits, because they group women to this -- according to this point. They group women different, age groups from, say, 25 to 28, then 28 to 35, then older. And if you're interested in this age range, you can just look for the women of this age.

Mike: So, the company does not exclude women of a certain age or something?

Irina: Well, I suppose, no. Women of certain age, like, you mean, older than 60 or 70? They probably are not so energetic to participate in such things themselves! (laughs)

Mike: Say if a woman has children from a previous marriage, or something like that, they're not going to say, no, right?

Irina: Clients can stipulate that they don't want to meet women with children. As, for example, the person I worked with he told they he doesn't want to see woman with three things, like: Having children; and being a smoker; and she had to know at least a little English. So, they say what they want to see in a woman.

Mike: Do you have any knowledge about how the company keeps informed about what western men are looking for in.....

Irina: CVs maybe. You have to write what you expect and there are special forms with special questions. I'm not sure what I think. It would be logical.

Mike: And do women also fill out these forms to indicate what they're looking for?

Irina: Yeah. In other countries there are agencies, marriage agencies, also with a special form for women. They have to fill them.

Mike: And do you think the information helps these people find a match?

Irina: Yes. Because interests, again, smoking or not smoking, for some people it's a crucial issue.

Mike: Right.

Irina: Yeah. Sometimes it helps. Of course, you can't say much about the faults in a CV. Still, the previous impression is formed.

Mike: I wonder if client fraud becomes a problem at all? Have you heard of this becoming a problem?

Irina: No, I haven't. Maybe I'm not so long in business.

Mike: Okay. Have you ever dealt with someone who misrepresented themselves?

Irina: No, never.

Mike: Okay. Do you think the company is successful so far?

Irina: I suppose. They say that this is one of the greatest in the U.S.A., the largest.

Mike: And have you ever been a client in this industry at all?

Irina: No.

Mike: So that probably did not influence your decisions. Thanks for meeting with me today (END)

**INTERVIEWEE:** Ms. Elena Nesteruk (program manager, La Strada International, Belarus Chapter)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** NGO office, Minsk, Belarus

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August 2004

Interview conducted with the assistance of an interpreter

Mike: are you convinced that there is a strong connection between this online marriage industry and human trafficking?

Translator: they know about the marriage agencies... one of the special directions of La Strada is that it serves as a special informational line for women who want to go abroad. They also give help to the relatives of those who went abroad... and they want to find them sometimes, so they come here for help. And sometimes trafficked women when they come back they also come here. They've worked for almost 4 years and they've already received almost 5000 calls. Calls from women who go abroad for work are the majority, about 60%... or sometimes women call about their rights within marriages with people from other countries. Sometimes the women will see announcements from firms or agencies and they will receive calls. So they see it. It's easy to trace which agencies appear to have good conditions.... concerning marriage agencies. They didn't help any woman who was trafficked, and who was a victim and who went to such agency and had such bad conditions or such situation. They have 14 consultants and they teach them to raise their level of knowledge and to raise their qualification. Last year they had interesting training. The consultants were young girls. They visited the agencies. They pretended to be clients. They visited two agencies who provide work abroad and the marriage agencies. There is an agency who provides training to girls who want to go to other agencies... how to do it the right way. What should you know when going to such kind of agencies. So they are interested very much in that. So they went for such training, eight of them. And you know they had such impression that if they wanted to marry a man from abroad that they would go to such an agency. But there is one agency... they don't know what to say about others. Those marriage agencies do not need license for their work... but agencies to provide work abroad they should have license.... they should be registered. Anybody can go and register his own marriage agency. So nobody knows if someone has any experience in this area or not, and nobody asks.... nobody knows if there is some problem with trafficking because nobody asks. And nobody checks what he had in previous years or if he has education. But the agencies who provide work abroad are strictly controlled. When they get telephone calls concerning marriage with a foreigner, they usually ask where did they get such information. Sometimes women tell it but sometimes no. Sometimes it's not convenient to ask a woman about such situations. Sometimes they think that the women don't say the truth. Sometimes it's difficult for women to say that she wrote an announcement in the newspaper or that she went to such marriage agency. Sometimes they get acquainted through the Internet... in these cases the women often don't have enough information about the possible husband. They know only the information that he wrote in the e-mails. Sometimes they know only his Internet address. No confirming, no documents and even sometimes they are not sure that he is even from that country. Sometimes a girl is invited to go to that country and she is not sure that it is really serious situation and... nothing will help this girl. Usually they give advice how to behave in such situation... how to be safe.



Mike: do you think these women are too trusting?

Translator: sometimes yes... especially when women have no financial resources to be independent... or when she is staying in a hotel in another country and she agrees to go home with a person. So it relies on the situation. But they don't know whether she was acquainted through marriage agency or some other way. It is not serious in our country that we can see connection between Internet acquaintance and some human trafficking. So it's difficult to say if there is any connection. There is such a program in our country for prevention of trafficking and prostitution. It's a state program. It's for five years. Maybe the Ministry of Justice needs to make a program for the licensing of such agencies. She knows that this year the Ministry of Justice gathered information from NGOs who work in this sphere.... about their experience, about their vision, so if there is any connection between trafficking and activities of marriage agencies. They know that information was gathered but no results. No conclusions. They know that there is connection between the model agencies and trafficking. So sometimes when the girls... not adult persons... they go to work as a model abroad but nobody knows how they are used. There was a survey of the work of those model agencies and it appeared that many of them has connections with trafficking, and some model agencies were closed. And maybe they will be judged or punished. Penalized. The model agencies should have license for providing work and only one agency really had a license in Belarus. All others maybe they were not so legal.

Mike: are you convinced that licensing is the answer?

Translator: it will be a kind of control... especially for the model agencies, and also for the agencies who provide jobs abroad. You know, a license is not a guarantee. There was such a case when one firm had a license for providing jobs abroad, but anyway they also sold women to Cyprus. It was well-known case because there many victims were. There are some cases where they have a license but still illegal job. So they advised the woman not only to check the license of the agency but also to see what is the reality.

Mike: have you heard any stories where a marriage agency sends a woman to another country to be photographed or something like that?

Translator: some agencies they make pictures here and put them on the Internet, so it's possible to do here... it's not needed to go abroad

Mike: I was just looking for possible scenarios where a marriage agency might be involved in trafficking

Translator: theoretically, they think it's possible... but they don't have real facts. From the victims who were in their office they do not have such facts

Mike: there is a lot of advertising going on in this country for marriage agencies and it seems almost popular and perhaps with the popularity of this that maybe there is more risk for women?

Translator: perhaps the situation in our country is different from the United States but if you ask someone from Minsk Department of Internal Affairs, she will say there are a lot of

advertisements and announcements from individual women about meeting someone. So sometimes it's advertising for prostitution... female sex workers. Of course in this announcements you can't read it but it's evident that it's just advertising for sex work. And many people know it. And sometimes militia man can phone from these advertisements and they understand that they are calling to a sex worker. It's not a real advertisements about meeting somebody for marriage or serious relations.... but even sometimes if it's written for serious relations, it's still just sex work. There are many announcements on the newspapers but also on the Internet sites. You can get acquainted with somebody not only from Belarus but the Independent states. They know some girls who are looking for a husband only from abroad. The situation is changing because the newspapers are read by local people but the Internet is available for everybody. So sometimes on the Internet it's difficult to find the advertisement for sex work and sometimes on the Internet there are real advertisements for marriage. So many young girls who can work with Internet and computer... they understand that sometimes they shouldn't go to marriage agency but they can find the information themselves. It's not necessary to go to the agency, they can do it themselves using the Internet.

Mike: how many of these marriage agencies do you feel are legitimate? Proportion or percentage...

Translator: they think nobody has such information; sometimes it's impossible to say how many. Sometimes such agencies are registered but nobody knows what will they do later. At least if the agencies had to be licensed then we would know how many of them we have.

Mike: I was on the Internet recently and I noticed that there was a marriage agency out of Gomel and it was started by two young guys, a 17-year-old and a 19 year old. So it seems that anyone can start such an agency.

Translator: on the Internet, yes it's possible. It can't be controlled and there is no need for license.... and sometimes they are not even registered as an agency but rather just an Internet site.... without any registration. It's very difficult to control... there is no control

Mike: to what extent would you connect these kinds of introduction services to sex tourism?

Translator: it seems that there is some connection... they think it's normal when a man comes here and meet a girl here... it's not so widespread... but sometimes they think it happens. And you should also take into consideration that Belarusian women are very beautiful (laughs)

Mike: I agree! (Laughs)

Translator: they know that it's possible for people from other countries to get information about women here and if they can come here to meet someone, why not? Even sometimes they understand that they will meet this woman only for one night. Such situation is possible, because there are women here who believe that it's a way for them to raise their financial resources... to be married with a foreigner. And when they meet foreigners they try everything to make him be interested in her. So we can understand that the foreigner can also use the girl. Such situation may even be not so seldom. So maybe we are not so well organized here in Belarus for sex

tourism because the visa is not cheap for our country and we have not such developed hotels or such infrastructure for people to come here for sex tourism.

Mike: not that the companies are actually advertising such things but I think that sometimes this can be implicit...

Translator: sometimes agencies don't speak about such things, sometimes they had telephone calls when a woman was supposed to go meet a man and she didn't know him before, so sometimes agencies say to that woman that we did our best for you to meet him and so now it's your problem to make him interested in you.... and sometimes a woman doesn't understand that an agency means that sometimes it's possible to have sexual relations. And sometimes the agency doesn't quite know which man is prepared for a relationship. So sometimes a man will use the agency only to find a woman from Belarus or Ukraine for sexual relations.

Mike: because it gets me thinking about the reasons why a man would look outside his own national borders....

Translator: they also understand why men from Western Europe are looking for women here. And the women should understand that if they are looking for a foreigner it can be a problem if they don't know the foreign language... sometimes they don't know the laws of that country, sometimes they don't know which language they will use in communication, and even can't get acquainted as real persons (laughs).... because what can they do together having no language? Such woman should understand that she can't count on serious relations. And even when they really have marriage to a foreigner they might have serious problems later...

Mike: do you think that this is likely that they will have severe marital problems through these kinds of arrangements?

Translator: it depends on the man.... and maybe the purpose of that marriage. So a woman, if she doesn't know the language and the laws, she might come under total control. She could even become as slavery.... but even not thinking about it. So she would be controlled in all aspects: financial, friends, and so on. She says that the same situation can happen here (laughs).... but here, at least she knows the language

Mike: but she has more access to her family support and her friends....

Translator: of course, it's easier to be here because she is acquainted with the social sphere here. Abroad, it's very difficult because she doesn't know...

Mike: what kind of resources do you have here to help Belarusian women abroad when they are in trouble?

Translator: depends on the country.... depends on the source of information. Usually they don't call here, they call to their relatives. And so their relatives call here for help, because they don't know how to act in such situations.... there is no possibility to find someone abroad. They say where to go, and how to write documents, how to organize the process of finding a person

abroad so they have such information. If there are some cases of emergencies then they can have quick access to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to find the location of someone. And there are also organizations abroad who can help a person in another country. So they can call to that NGO abroad and they might go to the police or the embassy or somewhere.... they know better the local situation in their country.

Mike: from some of the reading that I've done, I understand that there are many countries that receive women who are trafficked.... perhaps it might be easier to make a list of the countries that do not receive trafficked women. Would you agree?

Translator: they have a list of countries where women have been victims of trafficking... almost 60 countries.... including some exotic countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso.... there are so many countries. But this is not a list of countries where women were trafficked to, but rather countries from which there were calls for help... you can say that take any country with a high a standard of living and our women were trafficked there.

Mike: if you have conclusive evidence that there is a woman or maybe several women who are in trouble in another country, can you go to the government for help?

Translator: it's a confusing situation because they can't be sure that the women really want to come back... maybe it is only their relatives wish to bring them back here. It's a little bit confusing so they give all the information to the relatives.... where to go and how to begin that process. By the law, they cannot do it themselves. But they will give advice to the relatives. They had one case where the girl that one husband had asked to bring his wife back... he told her that she couldn't come back and she needed assistance... that he has a daughter who lives here and at last when he found her, it appeared that she didn't want to come back to her husband. Some cases that happens

Mike: do you see any connections between the Internet marriage agencies and pornography?

Translator: they are not sure but maybe... maybe not all agencies. But they think it's possible because almost all agencies ask for a picture of the whole figure and the face, so now it's possible using computer technologies to combine figure or face and then to make something.... so nobody knows how your picture will be used in Internet. Sometimes it depends on the age of the Internet site how the pictures may be used.

Mike: with the Internet marriage agencies, do you know the process by which the women are represented on the web sites?

Translator: there is some variance.... different possibilities. Sometimes a woman have to pay for her announcement, but usually the man abroad pay for this information about women. They know that it can be really expensive to get access to that information.... but here it's rather easy to find an agency. If you don't know a foreign language they will help with translation... they ask for a picture of the woman, and some information about her. Different agencies ask for different information.

Mike: it seems that on these marriage agency web sites, it can be easy to play with the truth in terms of how someone represents oneself. Would you agree?

Translator: of course. Nobody can check it, and nobody even can check whose picture has been sent to the agency. It could be a picture from not the present time but 10 years ago. Nobody can check.... so people should think seriously about all the possibilities when they see a picture on the Internet. If you receive a response you should understand that sometimes it's not true..... for women, it's safer to meet a man here. There was one case where a woman came for consultation. She was 48 and she wanted to marry a Belgian and she found an agency in Belgium and they invited her to go there.... and they promised to organize four or five meetings daily for her... and she went. They saw this case for the first time and they were surprised that she went... such a proposal for a woman to come to the agency, because here, she didn't have possibility to find an agency because of her age.

Mike: while I'm here in Belarus I plan on speaking with as many people as possible who are related to these marriage agencies to answer my questions about representation and how the women are recruited.

Translator: you know that many things are depending on the person who owns the marriage agency... the owner. Maybe some people are really involved in that process and they like their job and they are honest in their job... and the information about men and women is true. But sometimes as somebody gives other information because people are different... so you can use the information in any way because nobody can control it.

Mike: that's all the questions I have. Thank you very much for your time

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** "Lena" (marriage agency client)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** telephone interview

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** October, 2004

Mike: My first question is about the Gimeney Internet business.... now you had mentioned to me that you had found them on the Internet, and you have been cooperating with them since January, is that correct?

Lena: yes

Mike: have you been relatively satisfied with the service that you have received from this company?

Lena: no

Mike: and why is this?

Lena: I didn't get enough letters from men...

Mike: do you feel that there is something the company can do to help you more?

Lena: (laughs) well, I don't know... maybe it depends on men.... I don't know, really

Mike: OK, in your response, you mentioned that you were hoping to find someone abroad but you have abandoned this idea. Why is this?

Lena: well... let me think... I've been corresponding with very many men... but I didn't find the right one, and well I'm a little bit disappointed. Maybe it's not the right way to find a husband.

Mike: I see.... so are you thinking that there is a better way?

Lena: well, yes, I think that just meeting people face-to-face is better

Mike: OK. And you mentioned that you feel that your demands are too high.... do you feel that you are like many other Russian women? Do you feel that Russian women are too demanding, or is that just you?

Lena: I don't know... I think it's only me

Mike: I was wondering if you could tell me more about the men with whom you have corresponded.... do you feel that they have represented themselves fairly?

Lena: no, not all of them.... for example, one of them was married, he just wanted to have some fun

Mike: and do you think that this is a problem that many of the women using these web sites are experiencing?

Lena: I think yes.... and not very many women in Russia do know the English language.... it's a big problem for women they do not understand very many things

Mike: I remember that you said in your response that it would be more safe to be outside of Russia. Do you still feel this way?

Lena: yes

Mike: and why is this?

Lena: I don't like the processes that are going on right now... I can't explain it because you've never lived in the communist society, and you can't understand that. But I feel that things are going closer and closer to communist society... I don't know how to explain it

Mike: so do you feel that things are likely to return to the way they were?

Lena: yes.... and I don't like it

Mike: do you feel that many women in Russia are concerned about the same things?

Lena: no, I don't think so.... because they think only about their future, family and children and things like that

Mike: I wanted to give you a little background. I was in Belarus this summer, and I was there for two months, and I spent some time interviewing with some agencies, and one of the owners of such an agency.... he told me that the men in his community... that they don't really care about what he's doing, because they're always drunk... and this is what he said. I asked him if people in his community have a problem with him giving people opportunities to correspond with other people from other countries, and he said, well they don't care because they're always drunk, this was his own response, which I don't think was necessarily true. Do people in Russia think the same way?

Lena: (laughs). Well, yes, it's a big problem... men are drinking too much. I understand that it's a very good reason to leave this country, because there is no future for successful women...

Mike: among Russian women, what are some of the more popular destinations, to your knowledge... is there a such thing as a more popular place to live among Russian women?

Lena: I think it's the United States and Germany and maybe France

Mike: in general, I heard from some of the people that I interviewed that the families are encouraging their young women to marry abroad.... is this true in Russia?

Lena: (clears her throat) yes, yes, I think so.... I have an acquaintance who made his daughter to marry abroad... he was the father

Mike: he pressured her?

Lena: he made efforts, yes. I thought that she didn't want, but he insisted... because he was thinking about her future

Mike: being an American, I'm a little bit curious about how Russians perceive American men. Among Russian women is there a kind of popular understanding or popular conceptualization of American men?....

Lena: (laughs) well, cheerful... very cheerful

Mike: anything else?

Lena: well, most of them are kind... at least the people that I met... very pleasant and easy-going...

Mike: and have you been to the United States before?

Lena: no, but I met very many American people here in Russia and France and Germany.

Mike: right.... you're a director in a travel agency, and so I imagine that you've had many opportunities to travel and meet people.

Lena: oh yes

Mike: you mentioned that you are cooperating with some other web sites such as American Singles, match.com.... have you found better service with these companies?

Lena: no, I don't think so.... match.com I think was better. There were very many resumes

Mike: you mean, you literally received hundreds of responses?

Lena: yes

Mike: that must've taken a lot of work and a lot of time to go through all the responses

Lena: yes (laughs)

Mike: but it must have been kind of exciting too, right? Do the men that correspond with you normally include photographs of themselves?

Lena: yes, sure



Mike: do you feel that the photographs they provide make an important difference for you?

Lena: yes... I prefer to imagine the man during corresponding to know how he looks

Mike: in your cooperation with the web site, did you find it difficult to choose a photograph of yourself?

Lena: no

Mike: did you provide a photograph of yourself or did you have it professionally done?

Lena: professionally done

Mike: that seems to make perfect sense for women who want to make the very best impression that they can, certainly.... understanding how visual men can be.... that's something that I know a lot of women find important. By the way you mentioned that the service is free of charge for women, right?

Lena: yes

Mike: and you can also find men's profiles on the web site?

Lena: yes

Mike: are they mostly Russian men on the web site or are they men from all over the world?

Lena: from all over the world

Mike: so it's not very popular among Russian men to put their profile on a web site?

Lena: yes, I think so

Mike: have you attempted to contact some of these men on these web sites?

Lena: yes

Mike: you mentioned that you learned of the Gimenez company through the Google search system... do you find that there is also a lot of advertising in your city for such companies, like, say, in the newspapers or on TV or on the radio... do such companies do a lot of advertising in your city?

Lena: no... no, not at all in Chelyabinsk

Mike: that's really surprising to me because in Belarus, the companies are doing a lot of advertising, and I thought that this was the same in Russia... then I imagine that a lot of women

are telling each other about these web sites, and that the companies are relying on referrals and word-of-mouth, would you agree?

Lena: maybe, I don't know

Mike: have you encouraged any of your friends to correspond with the Internet agencies?

Lena: yes

Mike: how have things gone for them?

Lena: one of them is married already... others are still in the process

Mike: are they finding any difficulties with the companies themselves, or are they generally satisfied with the service they are receiving?

Lena: I think that they are satisfied... I never heard complaints

Mike: have you heard of any stories of women getting other than what they were expecting from one of these companies... have you heard of any stories from your city that surprised you?

Lena: no

Mike: the reason I ask is because I'm trying to find if there is some connection with criminal networks... and from what I've seen so far it looks like there's very little connection. And that's a big relief, certainly for the women involved and for everyone, really, because when you think about the possibility that someone might be putting themselves in danger, then that becomes a more serious matter. Do you think that it's possible that a woman could put herself in danger from such correspondence?

Lena: yes, if she's stupid

Mike: so she has to be very very careful, would you agree?

Lena: yes, I agree

Mike: because, you see, here in the United States we have received reports in the news about women from other countries, who married men who became very abusive with them or neglectful or something like that and so that's a big concern for us here in the United States.... and now there is some pressure in the legislature to pass some laws that will force these companies to provide information on the backgrounds of these men.... if they have any previous criminal background or if they were divorced many times or something like that, then the companies would be pressured or required to provide the information to the women who wanted it... and so that way there's more honesty and a little more safety involved.... Do you know if there are any laws in Russia that regulate these companies? Is there any regulation that you know of?

Lena: no

Mike: my last question has to do with family and friends. For a woman to correspond with men from other countries... to have her likeness on a web site.... is there any social impact in your community.... is a woman admired for doing this, generally? Or are there some other reactions?

Lena: admired? I don't know about being admired...

Mike: sometimes women will tell their family and friends what they're doing, sometimes they won't... and for the women who don't, there might be real legitimate reasons for them to not tell their family and friends what they are doing.... and maybe they are concerned about the opinions of others, and I was just wondering if you could provide some insight into that. Is it generally accepted for people to do this?

Lena: yes, it's a normal thing

Mike: so it's very popular then

Lena: yes... at least in my circle

Mike: now of course some of these companies offer tour packages for the men to travel to countries like Russia to meet women, and I am wondering if you know of any companies in your city that do this

Lena: no, I don't know

Mike: that's all for my questions. Thank you very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** Ms. Oksana Boychenko (owner/director, "OksanaLove" marriage agency)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** telephone interview

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** October, 2004

Mike: how long has your company been in operation?

Oksana: well I had this company in Russia for eight years and in the United States for 2 1/2 years

Mike: and do you have any business partners in Russia?

Oksana: no

Mike: how would you define your county's mission and its purpose?

Oksana: well it is creating marriages between foreign men and Russian women

Mike: what kind of information does your company need in order to remain in operation? Where does it obtain this information? For example with the women on the web site would kind of information do they need to provide?

Oksana: well they need to fill out the questionnaire... there is an example on the web site and electronic version of the questionnaire that they fill out on paper when they are in the office abroad... basically this questionnaire is printed on a piece of paper, and they fill out by hand. My managers plug in this information on my web site. Each manager has a password to my system and this is how they operate.

Mike: how are the women recruited? I imagine that many women find out about this company by a word-of-mouth. Is this correct, or do you do some advertising?

Oksana: we do some advertising in newspapers sometimes and a little bit on TV, but in most parts here we have girlfriends bringing their girlfriends, daughters bringing mothers or mothers bringing daughters.... friends who got married in the United States, who moved already to the United States, they are talking to people here.... and these people talk to someone in Kazakhstan or Russia and then send them to my agency or something like that.

Mike: so are most of the women that you work with mostly from Russia or are they from some other former Soviet republic?

Oksana: we have offices in five countries.... they are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Riga, Russia, and the Ukraine.

Mike: so you have offices in all those republics

Oksana: yes

Mike: are the women who participate with the company paid?

Oksana: no

Mike: are they charged a fee for the services?

Oksana: no. all service is free for them.... including all translations, pictures... everything is free for the girls. And they are not getting paid either

Mike: what countries do your mail clients come from? Are they mostly American men?

Oksana: yes I would say so.... I would say about 70% of American men and 30% from Europe.... England, Italy.... I've several clients from Australia....

Mike: how do men learn about your company.... do they find you on the Internet for the most part?

oksana: some guys are finding me on the Internet and others from the referrals.... so the same way, somebody who got married sends his friend here.

Mike: is it easy for you to describe what your men clients are like?

Oksana: it is usually an average man with average income.... around 40,000 a year.... something like that. The age ranges for the most part between 30 and 50.

Mike: is it easy for you to describe what your ideal men clients are like? Or should be like? Is there a such thing as an ideal man client?

Oksana: well there is no perfection in the world (laughs).. everybody is unique.... there is a special one for every guy and it doesn't matter what kind of character he has. He can find a special woman in his life if he just makes a trip over there. The ideal clients I really cannot explain. I don't know.... I love everybody (laughs)

Mike: what would you say are some of the major obstacles that your company has faced so far? For example, do language differences exert a significant impact on your business?

Oksana: you know the language differences not really a big problem... for most guys. The thing is, if a woman is really interested in someone she will start taking classes regularly and sometimes even before the guy arrives to meet with her. Language barrier I would say isn't really a big problem for the most part.... but the biggest problems? I don't know, I would say that maybe it's the adaptation of the girls to this lifestyle when they arrive into the United States....

Mike: does your company assist the women with getting adapted to life in the US?

Oksana: you know we do hundreds of marriages and there are many many of these girls who are already here.... of course I will give her the phone numbers of the girls who already live in her state, maybe a city. So we have a little community between our girls here. We do help each other and it really does work.

Mike: so there is somewhat of a community of women from other countries and this community is somewhat centered around your business, is that right?

Oksana: yes. It is somebody who got married through my agency... these kinds of girls are talking to each other

Mike: what kind of related services does your company offer for the men? If a man for example finds someone who he would like to correspond with, does your company offer any additional support services?

Oksana: yes of course. Are we talking about services that we do through my company? Customer support?

Mike: yes, customer support

Oksana: well, in most part I know my clients personally.... I'm talking about the girls and I'm talking about the men. So we're trying to keep all my work, all my agency on a personal level.... so if I don't know the girl then my managers definitely know her. I get e-mails from my managers all the time. And if the guy is talking to the girl then there will be some kind of advice for him.... because they are working on that part. They know what the girl might think-- what she is looking for or if she has some kind of doubt or something. We are trying to exchange this information and help the man make the right decision

Mike: please tell me about your staff. Have you hired interpreters to help you with your business.... and how many managers do you have? Is it a big company?

Oksana: well, it depends on the size of the city. In some offices I have five people working for me, and another I just have one person. I am hiring additional people when we have a group of tour.... a group of guys going on a tour and then we hire additional interpreters, drivers and additional stuff. But it depends on the size of the city and where they are working. And also with managing our database there are different factors....

Mike: so your company does offer some tours to the men who want to travel to these countries, is that right?

Oksana: yes we offer group tours and we also offer private tours

Mike: does this require very large investments, if you don't mind me asking?

Oksana: um, it depends on how good your taste is, I guess (laughs). You can make a trip over there and spent some time and after everything it might cost you 4000 or 5000.... if you do it

right. Some guys arrange the weddings for like \$15,000 over there... so again, it's up to the choice really...

Mike: does your company cooperate with independent agents who referred these women to you?

Oksana: I have one agency working for me in the Ukraine for example... they are providing some of the profiles of the girls. It's like a 50-50 separation. My office does half and they own the other half of the office and staff. But basically I have a control over their people and they do the work for me but they also do their work on the side.

Mike: does your company invest a lot in web design?

Oksana: well with web design it's a one-time deal. When it's done, it's done.

Mike: so it's not something you have to constantly change

Oksana: not design, no. Structure, yes. For additional programs for additional services, these kinds of things are changing every time.

Mike: what kind of standards or criteria does your company maintain in terms of the women presented on the web site? Can anyone be on the web site?

Oksana: yeah, well basically we have a criteria. We usually serve women up to 45 years old. If a woman looks great and she's in great shape then we can still place her profile no matter how old she is. Other than that, we do not accept women who are overweight. Other than that, everybody is welcome

Mike: how do you keep informed about what Western men are looking for, in terms of what they want in a woman and their own desires.... does this information help you in helping the women find an ideal match?

Oksana: well everybody's taste is different... so, I really don't know how to answer this question.

Mike: the reason I ask is because it seems like some companies have a kind of marketing strategy to help convince men that this is a very good option for them. Does your company have a kind of marketing strategy?

Oksana: well, like I told you we are keeping everything on a personal level. If the guy feels that it might be the right woman then he might go on a tour and we will just continue our work.

Mike: does client fraud ever become a problem?

Oksana: yes. You're talking about men, right?

Mike: men or women really

Oksana: um, yes of course it does.

Mike: I was wondering if you could tell me some examples

Oksana: like some of the guys have tried to hide their age. When the truth comes out, it's usually before the wedding (laughs)... in some parts it does become a problem but it doesn't affect the relationships in a bad way.... some of the guys are using pictures that are like 20 years old. Then, when he shows up in real life... it's just a little bit different. With women, misrepresentation doesn't happen very often. We check their IDs before we place their profile, we run a report on her... so we get an idea before we place her profile on the web site... we get an idea of what kind of person we are dealing with.

Mike: have you ever been a client in one of these businesses?

Oksana: I actually found my husband... yes, I have.

Mike: did that influence your decision to start this company?

Oksana: yes, that's how I started this company... when I was almost 18 years old, I sent my pictures and my profile to different agencies. I actually found my husband exactly this way.

Mike: outstanding. Thanks very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW



**INTERVIEWEE:** “Svetlana” (marriage agency client)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** Minsk, Belarus

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August, 2004

Mike: how did you learn about the Internet company that you are cooperating with?

Svetlana: my friend, she works at this company, and she just typed something to me. That's how I know about the company.

Mike: is it relatively easy for someone to learn about the Internet companies in Belarus?

Svetlana: yes, some of them do advertising.

Mike: are you on the market?

Svetlana: yes, I am.

Mike: for how long?

Svetlana: for one month.

Mike: are you dealing directly with the company or are you dealing with an agent?

Svetlana: with the company.

Mike: did the company offer you any advice in the preparation of the photographs or the biographical sketch?

Svetlana: yes, the photo should be attractive. The company advised me a photographer.

Mike: so you can choose your own photographer with this company?

Svetlana: they have their own photographer.

Mike: what are some of the main reasons you decided to cooperate with the company?

Svetlana: I don't know.... because nowadays I don't have a match, and a lot of friends of mine have been abroad, and a lot of my friends have married abroad. And that's why I thought why not, but to tell you the truth, I don't think I really want to marry and live abroad..... it's just an interest. Perhaps the main reason is that I just wanted to get acquainted new people and have friends abroad.

Mike: actually, you just answered my next question. You say that you have friends who have done that. But do you have friends who have cooperated with this particular company?

Svetlana: not friends but acquaintances

Mike: do you know about their experiences? Do you know if they had a good experience with this company?

Svetlana: yeah, they are happy as far as I know.

Mike: no complaints?

Svetlana: no.

Mike: what were your expectations and hopes for the experience?

Svetlana: Friendship! you know I believe in the fate and things like that and I think that I will meet him for sure

Mike: did you have to pay for the services?

Svetlana: no

Mike: were you required to sign a contract?

Svetlana: it was a kind of contract because it's done on the Internet

Mike: if your experience is successful, where do you hope to live in the future?

Svetlana: (laughs) ah...um..

Mike: are you able to answer this question?

Svetlana: no

Mike: what do you think are the advantages to working with this company?

Svetlana: with this particular company?

Mike: yes

Svetlana: no payment, of course, good people in this company.

Mike: are there any disadvantages?

Svetlana: with this particular company?

Mike: well, with the experience in general.

Svetlana: as for the disadvantages, I don't have a computer at home, and I don't have the Internet

so I need to visit the Internet cafés and spend some money of course. This is the main disadvantage

Mike: do you anticipate any problems from this experience?

Svetlana: no

Mike: no difficulties with anyone so far?

Svetlana: no

Mike: if you don't mind me asking, did you receive some encouragement from your friends or family?

Svetlana: nobody knows about it! (laughs)... even my parents don't know. My close friends don't know

Mike: would you possibly move away from Belarus?

Svetlana: never say never!

Mike: if you did move to another country, do you think you would have some regrets?

Svetlana: yes, I'm sure that I would have some regrets.

Mike: maybe you would miss your family and your friends....

Svetlana: yes, sure

Mike: What kind of man are you hoping to meet?

Svetlana: you mean character?

Mike: yes.

Svetlana: he should have a good sense of humor. He should be very kind, and he should be sincere. I hate any kind of lies. He should be a kind of safety for me, and I would lie if I said that appearance doesn't mean anything for me (laughs)... of course that does matter! And it's impossible that a successful person would visit these web sites!!

Mike: oh, that's interesting!

Svetlana: yes, a successful person would not visit these Internet sites

Mike: well, I guess it depends on what you mean by successful.....

Svetlana: I mean, in life, of course. Is he satisfied with his life <cell phone rings>

BREAK IN TAPE

Mike: you were telling me that many of these men who are participating are not successful....

Svetlana: well I know that there are many girls who often say, who talk about the goats (laughs)

Mike: yes, there are a lot of goats out there!

Svetlana: so it's a game, but I believe in fate...

Mike: I think just like with everything else when you're talking about a group of people involved in some activity or have some kind of wish ...it's always more appropriate, I think, to recognize the diversity within a population..... and so there is a group of men who are in this candidate pool.... a group of possible candidates... some of them, yes, are not very successful in life, and some of them are. Some of them are very kind to women and others are not. Some want equal relations between men and women..... I think it's more appropriate to understand that there is a big diversity.... and the same thing with the women. In the states, for example, there are some men who believe that American women have changed so much that they are too interested in career....

Svetlana: they are too emancipated

Mike: yes.

Svetlana: emancipation is too great in Europe and America.

Mike: while this is what some American men believe..... and I mean some, because if a man believes this then he is more likely to go to the Internet to meet a woman internationally

Svetlana: Russian women are used to that attention... like when a man opens a door, or if a man gives me his hand when I get off the train. Or something like that, it's just polite, it's nothing more. But I know that some American and European women take it as if "don't touch me, I can do everything myself." For me, it's just silly...

Mike: it's true that some American men feel that women are too independent and too career oriented... they don't value family anymore, and so some might believe that, for example, Belarusian women are still interested in family

Svetlana: well, they are lucky if they meet such a woman, but I would be lying if I said that there were no Russian women who wanted career and looking for self realization, because I know it's very important for me... my work, my job... and the main perhaps aim of my life is self-realization and I will do it in many ways. Because it's also a question of whether I will find ways of self-realization...

Mike: that's an important point, I think, because if you are in a place where you are less convinced perhaps that you can attain what you want for your life in this place, then the desire is to go to another place.

Svetlana: yes, but there is one more side. We can talk about self-realization and career, but I am also a romantic person, and I want true love... so I really want to find this kind of man, who will really love me and for sure I would never leave a man who really loved me. But it's...I understand it's impossible to find this love and to find self-realization and to be successful in career (laughs).... for me it's a kind of dream.

Mike: I was wondering about something else.... are you fully aware of the way that you are being presented on the Internet?

Svetlana: yes, I have seen the web site.

Mike: and does your photograph.... does the profile have autobiographical information about you?

Svetlana: yes, it has some various information such as age and weight and color of eyes and height, and just some words...

Mike: did you write those words?

Svetlana: yes, everyone writes it and I know that when women doesn't know English, she writes it in Russian on this paper and then the translators gives it in English, and I was a bit shocked that I had wrote something in English and that it came out different. The woman at the company said that everything should be the same, because they have very strict control from the head of the organization. So it's very strict and the translation should be the same.

Mike: do you think it would be nice to have a web site where women can look for men?

Svetlana: oh yes! It would be very interesting for me! That was one of my first questions! Is there any web site that has only men.... right now men can choose women but not vice versa. But what was written on your paper, something about being "on the market" was not very pleasant. It's not like I'm being sold to somebody, nobody can buy me....you understand? It sounds..... shit. Because they are just letters, nothing more. I know that man, they pay a lot of money.

Mike: some men pay thousands of dollars.... from the beginning of the search to where there is a commitment to marriage or an engagement, some of them will have spent thousands of dollars for subscribing to the service and writing letters and sending flowers and gifts...

Svetlana: (laughs) and we girls are so mean! Sometimes I just poke fun...

Mike: sometimes the men will pay for tours.... at Hotel Yubylena in Minsk there was a function hosted by European Connections..... a company based out of America. The tour director told me

that they are going next to Kiev and the men will be introduced to more women. It becomes like a big tour for more than a week.

Svetlana: in the Ukraine, the agencies have very high quality photos. The photos are very professional....most of them can be used in magazines. Because I know that they are making makeup, and they are making hair, and it seems that they are using a computer to take out blemishes in the face, so the skin is perfect. So anyone who looks at it will say "she is so beautiful"..... there is a story about when a man who came to the agency he saw the woman, and he immediately went away (laughs)

Mike: maybe some of the photographers work for professional magazines.

Svetlana: yes, some of them do, but it's not fair...

Mike: you don't think it's fair?

Svetlana: I think it's not fair. Because in real life..... my photos are... I'm pretty, really pretty

Mike: no problem with you!

Svetlana: but I understand that when I look in the mirror I find that I'm not so pretty like in the photos. I find that the beauty is natural.... no computer work. What's on the web site is the work of a good photographer, nothing more. But it's me, I am very pretty, but I am not gorgeous like....

Mike: not like a fashion model...

Svetlana: yes, yes

Mike: I talked with some of the people AngelikaMinsk.com and I interviewed with one of the managers there. What they do is they take one professional photo and they also take one amateur photo as well.

Svetlana: well, people can also exchange photos while they are writing letters.... but my agency advises professional photography work. Because when I see the work of a professional photographer....she knows how to photo and there are no carpets with flowers or some background of France or some thing like that! And the quality is not the same. We are talking about the quality of the photo and nothing more. And when you look at it, you see it immediately. There is a difference between this and the amateur photo....

Mike: because I think what they say is that just the quality of the photograph can make the difference between a few dozen letters and a few hundred letters.... because a lot of men are very visual. Most women know that and the companies know it.... so if your purpose is to gain correspondents than you want to put your best foot forward, as we say in English. You represent yourself in the best possible way....

Svetlana: well, you know, women always want to look the best

Mike: and the men well, do they always have to work so hard to represent themselves?... maybe sometimes they do. Let's say that you are e-mailing a guy and can a woman be 100% sure that he is being honest in how he describes himself.

Svetlana: but you know, it's not a description. It's just words. I was exchanging e-mails with a guy from Mexico, and he was writing letters, and he was very very kind, and he was a good psychologist. Because when I was writing, he predicted my thoughts.... so it was a surprise for me. It was really interesting for me exchanging these letters. (Laughs)... but when he sent his photo! Then I knew that appearance meant for me much. That day, I understood that it meant for me too much.

Mike: more than you thought it would. Was it a professional photo or amateur one?

Svetlana: it was an amateur one.... (pause)... I love myself. I really love myself.

Mike: what's wrong with that?

Svetlana: I know that I am pretty clever.... so my evaluation is quite high. And that's why I understand that I will search for a good man for years. I'm not sure that I will find him (laughs)

Mike: well, it's your life and you set the standards...

Svetlana: yes, it might be very difficult for me... this is my understanding of my personality... because why should I say that I'm not clever.... why should I pretend? You know, how, some men like silly woman (laughs)... so why should I pretend that I'm silly? That I don't understand something. And when I see my acquaintances, such a girl, they are happy in marriage..... and I envy them.... they're so silly and they're so happy. Sometimes I think I elevate myself too high...

Mike: but why should you be someone other than who you are....

Svetlana: because I know that for example with my work in this camp..... I can work with children, and they like me, and it's easy for me... I'm a creative person... I can dance, and I can sing

Mike: and so you're honest with yourself and you're honest with other people....

Svetlana: yes, yes.... and when I look in the mirror I can say to myself.... Yes, I am not the most beautiful woman as I want to be... but I think that I'm rather pretty, so that's why I am satisfied (laughs)

Mike: they say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder...

Svetlana: beauty is in the soul.... a woman can be very pretty. But when she says something, when she opens her mouth.... or there might be something with her behavior.... and then

immediately all this beauty disappears...

Mike: I know that some of the men do take the opportunity to travel... when I was at AngelikaMinsk, I saw a German man. He was at the office. He was working with their staff, and I think he had already been there for a few days, and he was answering all their questions. And they were getting to know him, and from what they learned from him, they felt that they were better able to find him a match, because they knew him better. And they say that for their business it's better for a man to travel to their company. They can better help them and show them around the city and help them find the right bus stop or help them find the address or something like that.... the correspondence can be exciting... for everyone..... and also for the man, if you're communicating with someone from Mexico or Sweden or Britain or Canada, I suppose that you're also dealing with cultural differences

Svetlana: yes

Mike:.... and cultural values... it can be a big learning experience assuming that everyone is being honest.

Svetlana: and yesterday, my friend from this agency called me and said that I have a letter from New York or New Jersey or something (laughs)... I really want to use the Internet, but there is no Internet. I want to read this letter and to answer and explain that I am at the Camp and I cannot just write letters...

Mike: there is something intriguing... there's a lot of intrigue and excitement!

Svetlana: and he wrote that he is searching for a queen!

Mike: sounds like a real romantic (laughs).... I've known men who travel to other countries.... they feel like there are some possibilities for romance.... some of them come home disappointed, some of them never come back.... with the Internet it's interesting because you are casting yourself in this global ocean... and you're opening yourself up to any kind of possibility... it's interesting.

END OF INTERVIEW



**INTERVIEWEE:** "Alla" (marriage agency client)  
**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** e-mail interview  
**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** October, 2004

**How did you learn about "Gimenez". Did you find them, or did they find you?**

I have casually found "Gimenez"

**How long have you been on this website?**

Approximately 7 months.

**Did "Gimenez" (or agent) offer you any assistance or advice in the preparation of your website photograph and/or biographical sketch? If so, please explain.**

I have simply filled in the questionnaire and have sent a photo

**What are some of the main reasons that you decided to cooperate with this company?**

For had no value, with what company to cooperate

**What are your expectations/hopes for this experience?**

I still hope, I believe, that I meet the remarkable person and we will be happy together.

**Do you receive encouragement from friends/family to look for a foreign mate? How do the people in your community generally feel about it?**

I share with the girlfriend and family, they support me, want, that I have found the happiness. But men from other countries, I think, not always sincere, I, think, many to be afraid of a deceit.

**What kind of person are you hoping to meet? What influences your decision about choosing someone? What is your "ideal" mate? What particular aspects of men do you value most?**

Kind, sure, reliable, careful, loving(liking), gentle. I appreciate honesty, decency, sincerity and sense of humor.

**Do you anticipate any problems from this experience? Have you had any negative experiences or difficulties thus far?**

No. I do not expect problems.

**Why have you chosen this particular method of meeting someone?**

I do not think this method specific, it is one of ways to not be lonely and to meet the the man. I do not want other ways and I do not want to get acquainted with Russian men.

**What do you think are the advantages to making such a decision? What do you think are the disadvantages?**

I can have a free choice.

**How do you feel about the possibility of moving to another country? What kinds of hopes do you have for the future? Would you have any regrets?**

Yet I do not know, I never was in other country. But, I think, I shall regret not so for Russia.

**If you are successful, where do you hope to live in the future? What do you know, or what have you heard, about the men there? In your opinion, how might they compare with the men of your country as potential mates?**

The country has no value (anyone, but not the country of the East). I, think, people everywhere identical. There can be women in the West more enterprising, building the career and family., it not the most important. Russian women (I can not speak about all) more want što domestic heat, attention and care of relatives.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** "Marya" (marriage agency client)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** e-mail interview

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** October, 2004

Hello, Michael!

I send you answers on your questions.

**How did you learn about "Gimenev" Did you find them or did they find you?**

I have found this agency in internet.

**How long have you been on this website? Are you satisfied with the service from this company? Why or why not?**

I've been on this website since May 2004. I like its service, it's interface is suitable to use.

**Did "Gimenev" offer you any assistance or advice in the preparation of your profile? If so, please explain.**

Gimenev explained what information I must write about me and my wishes to partner.

**What are some of the main reasons that you decided to cooperate with this company?**

I tried to cooperate with several companies including Gimenev

**Do you know anyone else who has cooperated with this company, or a similar one? What kind of experience did they have? Please explain.**

I have no such people.

**What are your expectations/hopes for this experience?**

May be I was something naive, when I placed my profile. I tried to solve all problems with the one step. Now I'm understanding, that all problems are situated inside a person. May be I'm not ready to make such a serious step. Now I have no any hopes.

**What kind of person are you hoping to meet? What influences your decision about choosing someone? What is your "ideal" husband like? What particular aspects of men do you value most?**

I hoped to get acquainted with responsible, clever, handsome, little bit

romantic man with a reasonable difference in age, loving children and dividing my interests.

**If you are successful, where do you hope to reside in the future? What do you know, or what have you heard about the men there? In your opinion, how might they compare with the men of your country as potential partners?**

I did not manage to get acquainted with the suitable man. Through other Companies ( but not through Gimenez I received many letters from men (from 27 till 57 years) from very different countries of the world. The majority of this letters have been written by the men from very far countries with too different for me culture, some letters were rather frivolous.

**Why have you chosen this particular method of meeting men?**

I would like to get acquainted with the man - foreigner. In my usual life I work much, and I do not visit places where it is possible to get acquainted with interesting people. Besides, all my friends are married.

**What do you think are the advantages/disadvantages to this?**

Advantages - wide geography of dialogue, lacks - the information is not always true, there are certain difficulties for meetings. Many people place not correct photos (from their young years).

**How does your "destination place" compare with the place where you currently live, in your view?**

It is hard enough to live in our country but I would like to replace a residence to the country with similar culture and mentality.

**Do you anticipate any problems from this experience? Have you had any negative experiences or difficulties with anyone thus far?**

It is unpleasantly to send letters and to receive any answer. Sometimes I was very offended when I've received letters with so many promises and suggestions with the following disappearing without any explanations.

**Are you getting encouragement from friends/family in this process? How do they feel about it? How do the people in your community feel about it?**

Friends are supporting me, but not many of them trust in such way of acquaintance to create a family

**How do you feel about the possibility of moving from your home country? What kinds of hopes do you have for your future? What might you regret about**

### **moving to another country?**

It seems to me that it is enough difficult to leave the native country: friends, dialogue (in other countries people are more independent, friendly dialogue is understood in another way). Probably, it is the main reason - fear to remain without a habitual circle of dialogue, without habitual problems. In our country the majority of people are able to survive, instead of to live in comfort. Without difficulties it becomes boring.

Excuse me my mistakes in English. I tried to help you in your research.

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** “Robert” (former marriage agency client)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** telephone interview

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August, 2004

Mike: thank you for offering your time to talk with me today. I wanted to keep this very conversational... I think that's the best way to go. I got some questions already written out but I wondered if you would just simply like to tell your story, and tell me how you were able to meet your current partner.

Robert: well let's see here... it all started about seven years ago.... you want the story from the very beginning or....

Mike: sure. Did you start out with oksanalove.com?

Robert: no. What happened was I got fed up with American women's way of attitude.... seems that American women today are more concerned about career and when they have babies it seems they want to put their children in child care and want to have their career. Family is not important in American women's life today. And I'm 52, and I felt that if I met someone who was 38 or 39, I was too old for them. And if I met someone 50 because my son is age 10, then they already raised their kids..... so I just started on the Internet looking for some worldwide stuff, and I thought that maybe I should go somewhere into Canada or maybe somewhere like that. Then I saw something on TV about Russian women and I knew I had to be careful because you get scammed every once in awhile...

Mike: I've heard of stories like that. So you saw an advertisement on TV?

Robert: no it was a documentary... and I heard some people talking about it so I thought ‘okay.’ In about ‘97 or ‘98 I went over to Moscow. Met a lady. And she was going to come over but her mother got sick.... she was all clear to come over but her mother got sick and so she couldn't come over. And two years later I went over to Ekaterinburg, and on the way there I met another girl who was from Latvia.

Mike: so you met a Latvian woman en route to Ekaterinburg.

Robert: yes.... I had a couple drinks on the plane and I was up there for 17 or 20 hours.... didn't get any sleep for almost a day or a day and a half because of the flight.... and she just thought I was all messed up.... I couldn't talk and.... actually what I had was severe jet lag. So I was left in Ekaterinburg for four days all by myself, with nothing to do, and on the fifth day I tried to meet some people but I was just kind of like “forget it”.

Mike: so you were traveling alone, is that right?

Robert: yes. The first time in ‘97 I went to Moscow and I took my son with me. The girl I met, she had two sons and she took one son with her. The second time I went alone.... and then more recently I went over to Kazakhstan. This was through oksanalove. And rather than picking eight

or 10 people to converse with I picked two or three. And when I went over there I told all three of them that I was writing all of them.

Mike: so you told each woman that you were writing to others.

Robert: yes. When I went to Kazakhstan,, the one I really wanted was at the airport, and I got some sleep and we hung out a little bit, and the next day they had a social.... where about eight or nine guys walk into a room with about a hundred women. And we're supposed to circulate and socialize and play games.... that type of thing. Then the next day I met one of the other girls I was interested in and we walked around a little bit and I got back to the first girl I met at the airport.... and I was interested in only her.... and we hung out and had a good time. About two days before I came home, in the middle of the week, we decided to get married. But I was writing to her for about three or four months

Mike: so you guys had been writing to each other for three or four months. And you've been married for how long?

Robert: we got married on August 27

Mike: so it's a relatively new marriage!

Robert: she's not here yet but she got her visa to come here... and I understand that she had to get some paperwork done from Kazakhstan to come over so she's working on that. She should be here sometime in November.

Mike: good. So were you relatively satisfied with the services you received from this web site company? Oksana love.com?

Robert: yup, they are very honest and open, yup... .. they're a very honest company and I was very happy with what they provided

Mike: great. I'm curious about... did you have any existing knowledge about the women from Russia or Kazakhstan.... what was the appeal by and large?

Robert: well supposedly they are true to their man, they are interested in family life, and that's about it. And it seems to be that way. The one I found... I mean I can't say it's true for all of them... she has never been married, she is 29, she wants to have a family and be together.

Mike: how about your friends and family... did they provide you with encouragement in your decision to do this?

Robert: yup

Mike: I wonder... does your wife have any friends or family in the states right now?

Robert: she's got some friends... yes she does. They won't be in Florida but she can stay in contact through e-mail or telephone or Yahoo.

Mike: what kind of advice would you offer someone who is thinking about him meeting another in this way? Would you have some advice?

Robert: I would say... I would say... it's good.

Mike: did you encounter any problems or snags when you were traveling?

Robert: none

Mike: this your first marriage?

Robert: I was married at 42 and divorced about two years later because she wanted to find somebody else and I gained custody of our two year old child.... and it's been that way ever since..... I've had other relationships, I've lived with a girl for seven years from age 22 to age 26 or 27.... and I hung out with another gal for about four years.... hung out with a girl for about a year or year and a half.... it didn't seem to be very productive.

Mike: do you feel that the Internet presents the best way to meet a foreign bride? Do you think that the Internet is an important aspect of this way of meeting someone?

Robert: if they are 10,000 miles away, yeah (laughs).... you can send pictures, you can send texts.... if they have a computer then you can do the microphone thing... I think it's called ICB or something like that.... that's what they have over there.

Mike: were you able to convince any of your friends to try this?

Robert: no, not yet. I work at home now. I have one job and I really don't get out of a whole lot.

Mike: what kind of work do you do, by the way?

Robert: uh... health care at home. Home health care.

Mike: how about the people in your community.... you mentioned that, by and large, family and friends were supportive of your move... do you anticipate any problems with acceptance in your community of your marriage or your new wife? Do you have any concerns about that?

Robert: no

END OF INTERVIEW



**INTERVIEWEE:** Tatiana Volokhova (“Tanya”), Administrative Associate and Interpreter, “Russian Queen” Marriage Agency

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** agency office, Vitebsk, Belarus

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August 2004

Mike: is maintaining a web site a very big expense for the company?

Tanya: that is a better question for Vlad, because he manages the money for the company. I do not manage the financial aspect.

Mike: because I was interested in finding out if the web site itself is important for the success of the company...

Tanya: our own web site does not bring in very much money at all.... because it's small, it's not well known. Men just occasionally come there.... sometimes we buy information.... but the profiles of our girls go automatically to 40 very big international web sites of our network and from here we have much profit.

Mike: so there is a network of web sites.

Tanya: yes

Mike: and Russian Queen.com is part of that network

Tanya: yes

Mike: so is it possible that some of the women who appear on this web site will be on other web sites as well?

Tanya: yes, automatically

Mike: do you consider the representation of the women on the web sites to be important.... the photography and.... I'm interested in learning more about the way women are represented on the web sites. Perhaps you can say something about the process of representation.

Tanya: the representation is very important because we have a huge amounts of women in our network.... something about 50,000 women on all the sites.

Mike: did you say 50,000?

Tanya: yes. That's a lot.... many women just get lost in this network. High-quality pictures are required, and as far as I understand some men actually read the words that women write about them and about their future partner, but some men don't. The picture is maybe 99% importance.

Mike: about the text.... the women are encouraged to describe themselves, correct?

Tanya: yes

Mike: if they don't know English then you translate for them, right?

Tanya: I must translate for them anyway because they all write in Russian.... they communicate only in Russian with me.

Mike: so you are translating everything for them so that the information can go on the web site

Tanya: yes

Mike: you told me that the men come from all over the world, and with that doesn't become difficult in deciding how to represent women? Or do the women choose how to represent themselves visually? Men from different cultures find different things appealing... so how do you get around that?

Tanya: but you must understand that most of the men come from Western countries.... a very high standard of life.... United States, Canada, France, Japan..... it's one culture. We don't have men from Africa for example or men from Eastern Europe.

Mike: in terms of the actual decision-making, regarding the photography, did the women more or less decide how they want to represent themselves?

Tanya: yes. They can bring their own pictures and make them in advance especially for our agency or we offer them our photographer.... that's Tatyana... she is a professional photographer. She does really good pictures and women then can choose which one they like for the web site.... but mostly it's our right to decide which pictures we like.

Mike: have you found a situation where a woman did not have much success with one photograph and then you changed the photograph and then all of a sudden, boom, there's a lot of correspondence. Have you ever seen that happen?

Tanya: sometimes it happens but if we put a woman's profile on the network for the first time then it's on the first page..... the first row. The older ones go down. If at first she doesn't get much success than it's very difficult to get noticed again because the men look at the first three or four pages or maybe 10 pages but they don't go much beyond that.

Mike: but don't the women appear by age group... can't men also search by category?

Tanya: yes.

Mike: have you ever had a situation where a woman describes herself in such a way and you advised her not to say that. She wants to say something about herself, but you advise against it.

Tanya: we don't usually tell women what they should write about themselves. They write only what they want to write... some women write poetry but some write just typical words.... but if they write about money than we do advise them not to do that

Mike: so the agency does have a rule about certain things.

Tanya: yes. maybe they are not written, but they do exist

Mike: do you offer a service to the man who wants to come to Belarus and meet some people?

Tanya: yes, it has been our headache for the past two weeks... we had to write everything about tours to Belarus... so we offer individual tours. I'll men can buy a tour on our web site and come to Vitebsk. And we will offer him five addresses of his choice from our catalog and everything he wants to pay for.... The secretary will call and arrange a meeting but what happens during the meeting is not our problem.

Mike: how long have you offered the service now?

Tanya: it's not new but we have made some changes on our web site and we have to write more, but men usually don't come to Vitebsk. They don't come often... I've been here since May and we've only had one client here.... he came to us randomly and he was from Italy. The agencies in the big cities have many clients... the men by tours and they come to these cities and meet with women....

Mike: what do you figure some of the biggest obstacles for making a successful match?

Tanya: first the man has to find the network but then when he starts to write to a woman she might be on vacation or have things to do and so he can not write back promptly. Then the man might think that she is not interested and doesn't want to write him back and then he will discontinue using our services.... I know some cases where men wrote to our agency and they were ready to love so it seemed to me that for them it wasn't a matter of where she is from or what she wants, I just want to love her... so I will write to her and meet with her and we will see.

Mike: from the experience that you've had here, do you see any problems with the way that Western men imagine Belarusian women?

Tanya: I'm afraid that there is a popular misconception about Belarusian women.... that they are all poor and they want to escape from Belarus and it doesn't matter with whom and they will have sex with anyone just for money. But it isn't true at all.

Mike: so there are some stereotypes are myths that Western men have about Belarusian women

Tanya: yes, but it doesn't happen very often... but it happens, those stereotypes, and they behave according to those stereotypes

Mike: you also offer a flower and gift delivery service. Do the men frequently use the service?

Tanya: yes the men use this service may be every week or once in two weeks....

Mike: do you find that the men who use the service are generally more successful in finding a match?

Tanya: I don't know, I can't say that

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** “Viktorija” (owner/founder, “Viktorija” marriage agency)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** agency office, Minsk, Belarus

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August 2004

Interview conducted with the assistance of an interpreter

Mike: tell me about your own motivation to start the company

Translator: her own loneliness... and her staff working here were also lonely people. And all the ladies offered her to start a company of this kind... and they wanted to see the real man in this country.

Mike: so you received a lot of encouragement from other people

Translator: her own staff supported her.... they wanted to see what they could try and they started to make their own photos and they had approximately 300 people after a week.... they decided to do it for themselves. They understand that it is profitable and they managed to collect a lot of people.... and this has become a kind of serious work for them.

Mike: had you had any business experience before you started this company?

Translator: she had the experience for seven years with the company that rents flats.... probably their own loneliness was the reason they started this business and they decided to start a marriage agency for extra profit and they were very successful. The quantity of women are like 10 to one with men in the agency.... and the statistics say that in this country that after age 40 there are 50 woman for every man. There are also a lot of lonely men from other countries.... in our country the women are just dying without men.

Mike: you seem like you enjoy your work very much

Translator: definitely the work gives a lot of enjoyment... she is very communicative person. Her agency this year managed to win the first place among the agencies here in Minsk... both in the sphere of marriage agency and in the sphere of renting flats, and she said that there were some TV programs made about the agency. There were some programs about which man our Belarusian ladies would like to find....She would like to leave you some telephone numbers of her ladies....you've come such a long way from the US and you will go home without any telephone numbers! She says that he is going to call right now to some ladies....

Mike: I think I picked a dangerous topic to research...

Translator: she wants to write down some phone numbers for you right now

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEE:** Mr. Vladimir Zaplitny (“Vlad”) (co-owner and founder, “Russian Queen” marriage agency)

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** agency office, Vitebsk, Belarus

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** August 2004

*Interview conducted with the assistance of an interpreter*

Mike: how long has this company been in operation?

Translator: it was 10 years on the 15th of April... he is an ex officer of the Soviet army, and he lived in Latvia for some time... there is a problem with the political situation and that's why he stayed in Belarus.

Vlad: I began to work in financial information service for banks... I am owner of a local TV station and newspaper, and other information services. One of my services is a marriage agency

Translator: when people have trouble finding information he usually has the market solutions for the people. That there are a lot of beautiful and clever women who couldn't find a good match and the financial part of this equation is very important. It's one of the most important problems at this moment in Belarus. When he first started the work of the women came and they paid money and he took their information but the technology of his work was very simple. But it was impossible for them to do it to themselves because there wasn't Internet so they used his help. Then the letters came and he gave them their letters; those who did not get letters became crazy and they paid only one time and they wanted letters and letters and letters. So now he can say that in this business only God can do something... everything depends on God

Vlad: I am practicing Belorussia... 10 years work in Vitebsk, Belorussia is nonsense. My companions go to Latvia, Cyprus, Russia... very economical situation in five years ago... very bad.

Translator: those women who are lucky, they didn't come back... so he doesn't have much information about them. Those who paid money and didn't get any letters they came and demanded letters. So God didn't help

Vlad: but I work, I am work every day.... I... new technologies and go... future

Translator: so he continued working and when such problems started only his name, his reputation saved him.... so this technology wasn't very lucky because he used a lots of money but he didn't get a return on this money.... so it was the same in Belarus that people who worked with this technology, they gave lots of money but they did not get a return

Vlad: but I, my wife, go in future... because we have a money in other business

Translator: and so five years ago American people created an Internet... a special web site and they used money from the men who are interested in Russian women and it became working. So

in Minsk and there is a large agency it is called Angelika and they had two agencies...Natalie and Angelika. So they worked a lot in Minsk these two agencies... so they were working hard and they decided to use Vitebsk also because the market here is also large. So the agency Natalie found Vlad and his agency. Using this agency, Largo, they opened....

Vlad: Representative... Angelika network. Systems from Minsk... marriage agency and begin to work. But my lady who work in this business, when she speaks with Natalia, more material problems but after three months we have a problem because agency Natalia don't want to pay money for our work... and my lady have a moral crisis and go out from this work... but ladies who worked with me, they begin to ask me: do you have a problem? I say no I don't have problem.

Translator: so he took the power in his hands...

Vlad: Mike, I am finished Riga secondary school in some subject of English-language and military school in Kiev for English language but I haven't a lot of practice. Five years I don't speak English language. Last I speak English language in Cyprus five years ago.

Mike: well your English is better than my Russian (laughs)

Translator: so he didn't have any information and he started working and searching Internet to get this information.

Vlad: hardly I go in future and begin to write letters in these technologies. I have letter from United States, from state of Texas, and go to Sevastopol, Ukraine... to study on agent. I study but no representative... look at social state Vitebsk.... I'm have a good wife, Tatyana, she's our Russian queen. There is a queen for King.... eight years and I began to make web site....[www.Russian-Queen.com](http://www.Russian-Queen.com).... it's my web site and my wife and we begin to expensive in Europe and United States of America, and began to work.

Translator: so he took the power in his hands and he had a lot of resources... but his representatives started to make some problems

Vlad: but, I am very like American democracy. The owners of Angelika system see the problem in Minsk and they began to work with me...

Translator: so seven years he has been working very hard and he did good work, so now it's very good

Mike: how do you obtain your information in order to get the profiles on the Internet?

Translator: so they gave some advertisements but the best advertisement is just talking... informal conversation between people... the town is small and the chat can be both positive and negative... but everything depends on your attitude toward your job and towards your self. So it's impossible to be good for everybody. Especially in Belarus because there is less freedom of speech and freedom of privacy. It's not problem of government its problem of people.

Mike: a cultural condition?

Vlad: yes

Translator: people are lazy, mostly and they want as much as possible but they don't want to give much. The same thing with women because the ability to become a wife, to marry a man, it's also good work.... and I know that when I need something I will fly to the cosmos. Some people think that he can present his face... like a god, but he just gives information. So his fate is in their hands

Mike: so in other words, people expect you to make miracles for them but you can't really do that

Translator: sometimes miracles really happen, but we should work hard for it. We have good results...

Mike: that was my next question. How successful have you been in finding matches for women? What kind of success has the company seen in terms of successful matchmaking?

Translator: he doesn't give any advertisements but when girls come, Tatyana makes photos and they are really beautiful and they are made with soul and these girls tell their friends about this.... it is in progress of course. When the information is on the Internet everything depends on God. The task of this agency is to give information to help them find someone. He gives just 50% of the information... we have a democracy so people can choose to get the whole picture. So he can control the part of the information, for example a man can send flowers or presents through this agency so this percent of men is controlled. Other parts of men can just take e-mail or address and just talk but not through the agency. So he loses some money but it's very good because he cares about it. Most rich men are in the USA. Europe is a bit greedy about these things... they try to do it in some ways so as not to pay money, but there are a lot of women who leave for Europe... so we don't know information about these women... they work like spies... so they don't pay money.

Mike: which countries do most of your men clients come from?

Translator: the whole world.... Australia, Japan, England, Belgium, Italy.... all international.... New Zealand.... even Alaska.

Mike: is it possible to describe your typical men clients?

Translator: they are all different but they all have their advantages and disadvantages.... everyone has his soul and everyone has problems.

Vlad: when I go from this business and see this business from other site, it's my main work. I have a problem....



Translator: if males in Belarus had higher financial level then girls would not know this agency of course. In the Europe and the US the situation is vice versa.... the males have enough money but do they need good housewives, moral support

Mike: so you see American men looking for a certain type of woman, is this correct?

Translator: they are divided in three categories: men who are searching for adventures, those who really want to find someone, and those who are bored and they just try to...

Vlad: more interesting... they have money... but our life is unreal.... and many people only see on monitor.... in virtual life, think that virtual life is real. It's nonsense!

Mike: so are you saying that a lot of men are only interested in a virtual relationship?

Translator: the virtual life is different from the real-life

Mike: do you cooperate with independent agents who refer the women to the company?

Vlad: no. I work in internal agency. When ladies are very large they not work.... or they are older

Translator: so they agreed to get acquainted with our men. Our women don't need our men because they are not interesting... sometimes they are drunkards

Mike: does client fraud become a problem?

Translator: (after long pause) it's a very difficult question.... a lot of things influence a person... his culture and how he was brought up. Sometimes there are frauds from women. Sometimes the situation can be very difficult and he has to become a judge and solve a problem. Usually the men who pay money, they don't lie. When a man is not controlled and he doesn't write letters through the agency he can do whatever he wants and sometimes he demands the something from the agency but we can't do anything because we don't control some parts of the person or his culture.

Mike: are there times when you will give a man some coaching about how to communicate with a woman?

Translator: it's difficult to give any advice because the situations are really different and we don't have rights to influence somehow their relationship

Mike: could you please comment about language differences? How does the problem of language affect your mission? You are the company interpreter and you are here to help people overcome the language barriers. Could you comment on that?

Translator: often the differences are in the cultures.... for example in Cyprus any person knows English.... and in Europe every person knows his native language and also English because it's

normal for them. But we even don't know Russian sometimes. As for me, my mind is not a Belarusian... its Western! There is no problem man because they all know English but there is a problem with the women... the women over 40 don't know English because they lived as part of the Soviet Union. The women who are younger mostly don't have problems.... but middle aged Belarusian women are more popular among American men because Americans are looking for something in particular... they are not looking for just adventure with young girls but they are looking for stable family. Here there is a problem with language because we are talking about women over 40.

Mike: because these women typically do not have strong English skills....

Translator: yes. But he is an optimist and he thinks it's not a problem.

Vlad: you can give her money and she can start learn English....

Translator: it's important that their souls find each other. So a partner in England said that they really want more mature women because the younger girls usually wants just money.... so in England there are lots of Russian wives because the Russian life is 33% wife and 33% friend and 33% 'lover' .... a kind of prostitute.

Mike: is he describing what he believes to be an average Russian woman?

Translator: yes, he thinks so and the English people have proven this and it's normal because you know that in America there is a problem with emancipation and when there is something wrong a woman can just go to the judge.... and he says that American men are the same as European men except that European men pay and American men don't pay (laughs)

Mike: (laughs)

Translator: it's very expensive for Americans to come here, but usually they visit Minsk and the Ukraine and Moscow... and European men are greedy, they count money.... so from the financial and the moral aspects they are interconnected... they depend on each other. It's not in the Belarusian culture to try to find a soulmate abroad... but Americans, if they were normal like we are, they would go to find an American wife, but they go somewhere abroad... to Belarus instead. Sometimes there are problems with visas or when the man calls a woman in Belarus and she does not answer and he starts to get nervous. We cannot compare an average man from Western countries and a man here in Belarus because they have different backgrounds.... but sometimes they find some chemistry and a miracle happens.... but this happens not to because of what is in their heart but for some other reasons.... five years ago a lady came to the agency, she had two children, she had financial problems... she was 43 years old and she had two children and to ex-husbands. She was pretty and good-looking but her life was finished because of her age and problems with these men. Vlad told her that she had no chance. He thought so. But that there was a man who was seeing it in another way, so Vlad came to see that he had to appreciate the situation... that's why Vlad does not want to interrupt this process. So this woman got a letter from an English man and this man was very handsome

Vlad: he was very good-looking and I see him at Minsk Airport and I crazy because “what Nick do in Minsk?” This lady was interested...

Translator: so he wants to meet her. So she arranged a visa for this and they met at Vlad's parents family in Riga. She didn't want to go to England... she wanted to meet in neutral territory.

Mike: so you anticipated problems getting him to Belarus... because of visa problems

Translator: yes

Vlad: no problem! Good man. Go to my mother, drink vodka! She bring him tapushkyo.....

Translator: slippers!

Vlad: I don't understand! Drink vodka! Excuse Larisa that he drank vodka! Very good traveling. Then, in December, in our lady, Peter meets someone from foreign agency...

Translator: then one more English man comes to this girl

Vlad: his father is an English man and his mother is Vietnamese... he stay in our flat and very glad in Vitebsk because it is best.... traveling.

Translator: he was everywhere: Tahiti, Jamaica.... and he stayed in a cold flat but he liked Vitebsk very much

Vlad: my mother said that Larisa have very good man... very duty man. Interesting. When I go to airport with Peter in Minsk, Peter see Larisa with Nick! Nick, I don't know to say because very beautiful man. I think that this man... with his beauty... what he do in our Minsk? With our ladies?

Mike: so you couldn't understand what this very handsome man was doing in Belarus.

Translator: so Peter and Nick went to London and Larisa to Minsk. So Nick proposed to Larisa.... he thought she was the most beautiful, the most cool girl. But it can't be so because this man is very handsome and he could find a woman in England. She says she's very happy because she also visits a lots of countries and Riga.... and Nick invited her to London to look at his house and see his kids... then Vlad thinks that he is so handsome so why does he invite her. Perhaps he is a man eater!

Mike: you mean a woman eater!

Translator: so Vlad says, “go....perhaps you will be eaten, but in London!”

Mike: (laughs)

Translator: so she comes and asks to give a paper where she works but she didn't have... for visa

Mike: she tried to get a visa to get into England?

Translator: she needed a paper that she works in Belarus. He could help her because it's illegal to give such a paper.... so she went to the embassy and told the truth. So she told to the British consul that she didn't work, she didn't have money, no flat, she had two kids... all the truth. So English ambassador is crying! Because her situation is very difficult... and she got a visa.

Mike: so then she got some sympathy....

Vlad: 43 years... nonsense. English visa... nonsense. I have things that it's nonsense. But so what are things that it's really? It's practical! Okay.... go Larisa in London, see her nation...

Translator: he said that she is now a princess in London

Vlad: and now I begin to criticize my work... I became to see this problem. Other side! Nick is married 20 years with his wife, but she is lucky. His wife give him three child.... but his wife began to be a cow!

Translator: she became overweight!

Mike: you mean Larisa?

Vlad: no, his former wife

Mike: so he divorced his former wife, in part because she became too heavy.

Translator: yes. His reasons became very simple.... Nick wanted to find a woman who has a daughter because he was concerned for his own daughter. So Nick went to the Internet and he chose a woman.... any woman who had a daughter of the same age so that the two daughters could become friends.

Mike: so you were not expecting for Larisa to be able to find a man, but she was able to find someone based on some criteria that you did not expect.

Translator: we have many such unusual cases. We never thought at the age of 43 that she would change her life. So they all had different problems but through these problems they found mutual solutions. So you see that there are different situations and there are strong and not very strong positions.... and it's difficult to command the situation and Vlad does not interrupt.... he just helps with information

Mike: so really it sounds like you're letting the information itself do the work. Do you see yourself as a person who simply provides information?

Vlad: yes.

Translator: I work in the informational advertisement market...

END OF INTERVIEW

**INTERVIEWEES: "John" and "Katya" (American/Russian married couple)**

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** respondents' home

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** November, 2001

**Mike:** Since you've been living in the states you've been assisting Russians in meeting Americans, is that right?

**Katya:** Yes, but that's not the only thing I'm doing. It's not my business. It's a tricky business--you never know. I would like to help people, but I don't want to be the one to blame. Because sometimes it doesn't matter. When people meet and they're good friends and they get married then everything is perfect and it's OK and I feel good and I feel like I helped them. But if in the next year they get divorced, I feel guilty. So when I was part-time, I had more time. Now I'm full time, so I try to escape this kind of business but I noticed lately a lot of people like you said, probably before September 11<sup>th</sup>, people think America is rich country so what do women want? Something stable and secure and probably that's the reason why they look everywhere--like in the last 10 years it's been easier to meet people on the Internet and by traveling and phone calls--its easier now. As for Russia after perestroika, so that's another reason why people have international marriages. But I started telling my story about ten years ago. I worked as an English teacher there and I worked for city government to interpret for American business or religious purposes, anything. As much as I knew, interest was in just business or friendship. Since Americans were introduced it was a faraway country and people just wanted to know more about them and a lot of newspapers and magazines published addresses like friends and pen pal clubs. But that was ten years ago. To start with, I would say people wanted to travel and visit each other, or at least that was my idea. So I met some people in Russia and men and women exchanged addresses and stayed in touch and then my husband somehow found my address here for a kind of friendship/love something like that and then he sent me a letter. It was in English and it was interesting, you know, to exchange information. He was interested in Russia. He took Russian and was thinking of spies and things like that. He was crazy about it a little. Even now I can say he knows Russian and speaks a little. He had souvenirs from Russia and stuff like that, it's just interesting for them. So it became more serious and he wanted to visit me and that's how we met and then we decided to be engaged and eventually we got married and I came here. So but it's different story. When I came here I worked a little bit at UK teaching Russian and that's how other people found me and asked for help and that's how I interpreted for a few people. When I came here I found the Anastasia business and I didn't feel comfortable because I thought, OK every time someone meets me I don't want to tell everyone. Most of people thought bad things because you have good marriages and you have bad marriages and especially lately I noticed a lot of girls just looking for anyone. Maybe they just get married and get divorced. I don't know but it's strange. And Americans are crazy! Men are crazy! You know old men look for young women. Like in my experience if he's over 40, not old, but he is looking for a 20-year-old. Does it make any sense? Maybe they have problems. Maybe they cannot find American woman here. Because I don't know American women, what people say. They're different but most of Russian women are family-oriented and they will do everything to keep the family. American girls are kind of different. If they do like it well that's my way and this is your way. In Russia you still have a strong family institution. Sometimes women sacrifice just

to keep the family, you know. That's the most important thing. That's why men look for women there. So I've been thinking about it a lot because it's also interesting, but I don't want to do any research.

**Mike:** So you've never charged anyone for helping them?

**Katya:** Well I've charged for my time of course because, well, usually on weekends. If I had to translate a phone call or a paper or a letter, of course, I didn't mind if the couple is really in love but sometimes it's just business. That's all, but I try to keep it special, as a business. If you take it too close, like one couple the first couple, they wanted to get involved. He's a nice guy but I don't know, too simple. So, they got married and he's not happy and she's not happy, I don't know. Probably they're going to divorce. So I decided that's not good for myself. You worry about them, he calls, she calls. I have trouble, so I try to keep it strictly as a business.

**Mike:** Well it's difficult when there's not even a common language...

**Katya:** Well that's another thing. To me it was difficult. In Russia I even interpreted there, but still different country different people, traditions, values and I had to start from zero. A new career and everything-- it was hard. So I don't understand sometimes, girls have no English and they are totally dependent on her husband. But some women, especially if they are really smart might succeed if they are young and smart. I knew of one American man who was a really nice person, smart but really big in weight so he couldn't find anyone here, so I interpreted for him and he went to visit her twice. But he didn't know that she had someone else. He sent her a lot of money and set up a business for her and a car. She just used him like that. He didn't know that she had someone else. While I'm glad he realized that, he spent so much money and time, it's just dreams. But again he showed me the picture. She was like a model and he's really nice and kind but not many women especially young women, care about that. They just need money. If you take one American dollar to Russia you will get 30 rubles. And that's easy especially, I didn't care much before but lately a lot of Internet services make good business. Even if you just want addresses to write letters it can cost \$10

**Mike:** What year was it when you started assisting people in meeting each other?

**Katya:** Well people used to call me and to help translate and to interpret. Usually men call and ask for help because it's expensive for women to call from Russia for example or the Ukraine. I suspect any European country, so usually men call. Thirty minutes or 45 minutes or an hour of just talking and trying to get information to get to know each other and then usually they go visit. There is also a service but it's even more expensive, when you hire someone like a lawyer to set up all the papers or someone to help you to assist you there like an agent and organize a welcome party. There are a lot of women in Moscow I know that have services like that. They even showed some documentary about it on American TV or Russian TV, I'm not sure. I watched the program about it

**Mike:** Do you have an estimation as to how many people you've helped?

**Katya:** Like I said it's not my business, so I try to stay away and especially this year, just a few. I know one couple, I don't stay in touch, I try not to. He got married last year. It took him about a year. I helped him with letters and phone calls and paperwork. He went to visit and then brought her, but she sounded OK. She was a doctor. She knew some English. So the last time I heard from him he said thank you and stay in touch so it looks like they were happy at least for a few months (laughs). And this big guy I told you about, he tried a couple times but he got sick. Well, last time he went to see the lady he was disappointed because he got the flu. When he came here it was a little bit late, the virus affected his heart and he started medication. At about the time of my last husband's birthday he came to visit us, but we just made good friends. He likes Russian women even despite what happened to him, he said he visited the country and it's beautiful, even all the dirty places and the troubles and the economic problems, but the people are very nice and the women are beautiful. Another couple that live here in Lexington, not as I told you it looks like they are not happy. I met another couple here and she knew a little bit of English so we just helped them to get to know each other instead of inviting them—I didn't work. He is a nice guy and she is nice and they got a baby and it looks like they're happy. I know some other people that might be interested in telling you their stories—but it's their private life, but they are in Lexington. They have different stories and most of them met here in Lexington.

**Mike:** Maybe at the University?

**Katya:** Yes, but one couple actually met in Germany. They were married five years and then got divorced. Because cultures are different, people are raised differently, and at least I know in my family, still even though you can love and respect each other you are different people, plus different cultures.

**Mike:** As I understand all marriages are intercultural, whether or not there is an international boundary involved because we all come from different family cultures...

**Katya:** Well it's easy when you are open-minded and well-educated and you see things differently. I have a sister who is older and I asked for just to be polite if she wanted to come and live here. She said no and my mother does not want to come here. It's not like everyone wants to come to America, but a lot of people do—young people probably. Maybe for more opportunities. I agree it's more stable and there are more opportunities. But my husband loves Russia and he said let's go to Russia. He thinks it's so easy.

**Mike:** Maybe for him, it is.

**Katya:** Well I don't think Americans can survive there because the water is not as clear as here and the medicine is not as strong and I know Americans cannot survive without any Advil or Tylenol every other day.

**Mike:** These are things we take for granted...

**Katya:** Exactly. Life is just different there, and, I don't know, again different cultures—you just have to be born there to survive, and for Russians it's easy here because life is easier in America. Here you can get what you want if you work hard. In Russia you can work hard, but the system



is not ready for these kinds of people who want to open new businesses. It's not ready yet. I used to work at school with another teacher. She got married before me and also we had religious dedication we interpreted for them. We spent some time talking and she told me it looks like he's coming back and they want to get married. They live in Texas with their second child and they're happy. Her father died and her mother is coming this year. That's another example. And there's the Filipinos...

**Mike:** From what I understand, the Filipino government's banned the mail-order bride industry...

**Katya:** Well I think that is happening here already because the American government also does not like it because it's crazy, it's like an epidemic!

**Mike:** I think it's because there is a higher potential for abuse in these kinds of arrangements. Are Russian families supportive of their children marrying internationally or not?

**Katya:** I don't think so, but why did that Polish man give you his daughter's phone number? I think they want their children to have an easier life. Again the movies they show on TV there, everyone is rich, they don't work. But when you come here you realize you have to work hard. When I go back to Russia and I visit my friends and family they want to know what is it like? Tell me! Tell me! I tell them, well if you want to have a good life you have to work—work, work, work. Of course, if you have rich parents, or if someone died and left you millions and millions, then you don't have to work but, I don't know. So I don't think families are supportive, because again when you compare currency usually people here support families there. That's common.

**Mike:** Do you think there's a greater potential for abuse, spousal abuse, in these kind of arrangements?

**Katya:** I heard stories and I get to Russian newspapers, and so yes very often. Men are controlling and in Russia men are different. They are more like, how should I say—it's just my opinion—as much as I observe here. I think, in Russia people respect women more. Here women have to fight for rights and sometimes it's crazy when a woman has to pay for herself for example—again I don't know how to explain--maybe different cultures. We go to the restaurant—it's very nice to allow your boyfriend to pay for you, but we don't look at it as if she's a feminist or something—we don't think about it. A woman will take care of the family, the kids, at home and she was raised to this way. He will be very helpful and do whatever she needs and if the woman says I want you to do this and that, it's not a problem. Here, it's a difference, at least in our family. We had some rough times to start with—I brought some traditions from Russia, family traditions that I think were hard for him to understand. I would say I want this and I wanted that and he didn't like it because it sounded like orders to him and I said well no I'm just trying to build a family so everyone can come here and we have a nice house—well, again, if people are smart enough they are willing to talk about it, but if they are not then it can create problems. Because many here, they think well I will just get a Russian woman and she will do whatever I want. Well, I don't think so. So, some women, maybe—but,

you will not have a good relationship if you try to control or suppress—so that’s why I heard a lot of stories like that.

**Mike:** Do you think that, in America, there is more of an adversarial relationship between men and women? That they tend to compete more than they cooperate?

**Katya:** Maybe you are right. I didn’t think about it—but now that you’ve brought it up its very interesting. I think, in Russia people respect women more. Here women have to fight for rights and sometimes it’s crazy when a woman has to pay for herself for example—again I don’t know how to explain—maybe different cultures. We go to the restaurant—it’s very nice to allow your boyfriend to pay for you, but we don’t look at it as if she’s a feminist or something—we don’t think about it. A woman will take care of the family, the kids, at home and she was raised to this way. He will be very helpful and do whatever she needs and if the woman says I want you to do this and that, it’s not a problem. Here, it’s a difference, at least in our family. We had some rough times to start with—I brought some traditions from Russia, family traditions that I think were hard for him to understand. I would say I want this and I wanted that and he didn’t like it because it sounded like orders to him and I said well no I’m just trying to build a family so everyone can come here and we have a nice house—well, again, if people are smart enough they are willing to talk about it, but if they are not then it can create problems. Because many here, they think well I will just get a Russian woman and she will do whatever I want. Well, I don’t think so. So it’s like, it’s not natural. In Russia, it’s more natural. People ask “how are you” and you feel maybe something bad and then they say “well, tell me” and then you can talk about it and you feel better. That’s why, speaking about cooperation and competition here probably that’s important and when we speak about raising children here in the states, people are born and at least until a certain age they don’t know what to do and they do the same thing to their children and their children do the same thing and people leave everywhere. You get a better job, more money, for example, everything else is not important and I do understand because if you don’t have enough money to provide house, insurance, education, then it’s tough, there’s no way. But I feel it’s too much around money here, and competition also. When someone gets a better car and they work together, then you feel like you have to have a better car also because what will people think about it. Well, some people don’t care. My husband doesn’t care. I just observe it. I don’t care about cars, but—yes, I want a good car because I feel good about it but when people are asking what kind of car you’re driving—we have a neighbor here a couple weeks ago—she asked me “have you seen my new car?” but I don’t know much about cars, so big deal! (Laughs) Anyway it’s just different values and as for cooperation, I like it better. And maybe many people want to it but they don’t know how to do it here. They try to get a wife and think, you know, she will make you feel good and she will help you build a family. But she is from one country and he is from another country and if you cannot cooperate then I don’t know.

**Mike:** I’ve heard that some American men, in the reports that I’ve read, feel threatened that they are not considered the sole provider anymore, that they are no longer the person making all decisions and that decisions have to be made cooperatively and maybe that’s why some men go overseas, because they perceive that whoever they find will be very submissive...

**Katya:** Well don’t go to Russia, because Russian women are strong and matriarchal—there, it’s about the women. People worship the mother and the women in general. She might be a

principal at school and a housekeeper at home and she doesn't mind and the husband doesn't have to be the principal, but still they would have a good family and a good relationship—it's not about competition, it's about a good relationship. I was married before, back there in Russia. And we had problems, but still we were friends. We never argued. But the reason I divorced once was that he started drinking too much, and that's the worst thing—that's probably one of the most important reasons why the women there don't want to marry Russian men, but again, life is less stressful because there's no competition—it's just about relationship. You go, you are friends. My friends there—I didn't see competition. Here, like you said, men feel threatened and I don't know why—to me, it's like let it go. I was surprised, why do women have to fight for their rights here—and probably they have to because every year I see more and more and I read such crazy stuff—men are paid more because they are men and women are paid less. I didn't think about it in Russia because it didn't matter. I don't know—it's just strange. The world is strange lately—just crazy things.

**Mike:** Do you think that it takes a certain type of Russian women to come to America and marry? Does it take a lot of courage?

**Katya:** Well, yes. Again, the Russian women are really strong—when they want something, most of them will do whatever they can to get it. For those who come here, it takes a lot of effort, money, courage, to make a commitment. In a different country, a faraway country, you never know—you have to take risk. We say in Russia “if you don't risk you don't drink champagne”. So, again, it doesn't matter if you are in a different country—if you think there is a potential, go try it. At least later on in your life you will not say “oh, I should have” and I didn't even try. Well, you try and it didn't work, but that's okay. Or, you succeeded, and that's great.

**Mike:** What recourse do women have if the marriage in America is not successful? What kind of things can they do? What alternatives do they have?

**Katya:** Well, again, Russian women will do probably whatever it takes go to keep the family. They will sacrifice job, time, pride, whatever. But, if he's really abusive and there's no way and it's not a good example for children, then probably divorce if there is no other way. If not, I know of no other way—I don't know, runaway or something. But it's not like Filipinos—at least again, the stories I heard, I didn't live there, I don't know. It seems to me they are more, how should I say—Russians, they have freedom inside, they cannot make you a slave—the spirit is very strong. Spiritually, people are very strong. Its historical. We are raised this way. But the Filipinos, they just cry and.....give up maybe.

**Mike:** I know it's a problem sometimes because when a woman moves to another country she loses the support that she gained from her family and friends. They can still stay in contact by telephone or by writing letters or e-mail but they are not there and that is one thing that I understand is true that makes women a bit more vulnerable when they come to another country and marry someone. Do you agree with this?

**Katya:** I don't know. People are different (sighs). My mom was upset because I told her that I would probably get married and live in America. They were thinking it's so far away and we won't see you. As I said, in Russia, relationships are very important—that people live close and

see each other everyday--but now I feel better. The first years I felt like I lost part of my heart and left it there. I cried a lot. It was tough. But again, when you are part of a nice family, you think "I can sacrifice something", but at least I have a good life, so it makes sense.

**Mike:** So there is a bit of risk involved...a lot of risk maybe

**Katya:** I don't know. You cannot say "well this is how it works". People are different. For some people it's important. They didn't have anyone to lose. They come here to get married and start all over again, maybe. A friend I had, the one I told you about, she was about 28 years old. It is considered to be an old girl. In Russia, you're supposed to get married before 20. Now, it's a little different. We are little bit Americanized. I was very young when I first got married. My mom said maybe he's not the right person for you and I told her "we are very good friends", we have stuff together. He was a disk jockey and I was working in the club as an entertainer. I studied during the day and worked at night. I was 19 at the time and my sister got married at 19 so I thought it was the time. But then of course, when I graduated I started thinking "gosh, what did I do". It's nice, we were friends. He was a nice person, and it's nice to have a nice friend but when you're married it is different and then you realize "OK, he's my husband. We're supposed to have children, but I don't want to have children because he drinks too much." I did not think about it, so....I don't know what I was talking about....

**Mike:** Does the Russian government create problems and complications or does the American government create more complications with these international marriages?

**Katya:** All government changes, opinions change. Again, I came here six years ago and I worked for the city. They said "well couldn't you find a guy here?". And I said no, I couldn't. And I looked around and I found that most of them drink a lot and everything was kind of ruined and there are not so many people who want to fight to build something because people think it doesn't make any sense—I mean business or house because either the government changes or the rules change and it's better not to try. Now we get more opportunities but people were punished so much, historically. Probably men don't even want to try to start all over again, and again—it's hard, yes. And that's why it was difficult for me to find someone just to build something. I'm speaking in general, not like, literally (BREAK IN TAPE) whenever, too many changes—people lost money they lost everything, like my mom was saving a lot of money, she lost everything because of economic changes and money changes and of course that affects relationships, but women, being strong still look for something and men probably feel that I have to provide, but I can't.

**Mike:** Yes, that can become a huge source of grief, I think, for men, if through no fault of their own it becomes difficult to provide for their families. Not that it's their sole responsibility, from what I understand from you, as but it becomes a source of grief.

**Katya:** It's a kind of disappointment--I don't know. The principal I worked for was angry with me also because I left. Smart women are leaving. So if you want to keep your women, fight for them. Do something. Some women have to fight for themselves and how can women do it? Get married!

**Mike:** Do American men have a certain stereotype or perception of Russian women? Since you've been here, have you picked up on certain stereotypes that American men have?

**Katya:** All of the American men that visited the country, they say Russian women are very nice, they look beautiful, they like to dress up and use makeup. I'm not saying 100 percent do this everyday, but they do care about themselves, and spiritually, good women---I'm not saying we have a lot of prostitutes—but if you are looking for good woman, there is a chance for you to find blond and smart. You know, I'm blond again but when I came to the states I heard a lot of jokes. You know, blond women are stupid. So, why? I don't know. It's just that you can't be blond and smart at the same time. So I changed my hair color. I didn't like it so I changed back again—I don't care! Anyway, I think Russian women—I'm speaking about the good, the top, you know—they are well educated and very spiritually rich. They can listen, they can understand. They have pride but it's not like "ha! I don't care".

**Mike:** They're not arrogant.

**Katya:** Well, I read somewhere that photographers like to work with Russian women—Russian models. Why? It's because to make pictures they like what they have in their eyes. Probably because they read a lot. Here, I talked to my students. Simple things that they haven't even heard of, like famous composers or writers—I don't know, they watch movies and play games and that's it. I ask them—I had good students I mean in Russian classes, usually stupids don't take Russian classes, it's supposedly very difficult. So I had good students but I would try to explain certain Russian words in English terms and they would say what is that? A subject or predicate? That's easy to understand.

*At this time Katya asks her daughter to send for John, Katya's husband, who is upstairs watching TV.*

**Katya:** We read a book that he bought recently about international marriages maybe you need to look at it. He bought it in English for himself and for me in Russian (she comments on the needless expense of buying the Russian book). And that's another reason by the way--I think American women like to spend money. I do like to spend money and go shopping but I don't go shopping every weekend and I like to dress up but again it's not like that's the most important thing in my life so I'll be happy to find something really cool that's on sale since I'm a small size. For men, that's a good thing—they want to save money. You should talk to men also because I hear them complain to each other—likely we have new year's parties and you're welcome because we have friends here and you might want to talk with them informally just get information. I don't know. What do you think about your girlfriend?

**Mike:** Well, my first wife was also American but after we divorced, I had this notion that maybe I wanted to go outside the United States to meet someone and I think maybe that was an unconscious motivation for me to start teaching English overseas. And sure enough I fell in love when I was out there and I started writing back and forth to the people I met. I met one young lady in London and spent a couple of weeks there but she didn't have the kind of maturity I was looking for. What I think happened with me was I became critical of my own behavior and I started wondering why am I doing this. Is there some kind of perception that I have of women in

that part of the world—or people, in general—that caused me to start writing and dating people, or is it's just that I'm curious? I think that's one thing that you see a lot of men in America find a kind of mystery with people from overseas and especially women because the women around us are very familiar—they are like our moms or sisters and I think that maybe some men want something more. Maybe what they have around them is fine, perfectly fine, but they want something more or they are just curious or they have a need to experiment and try some alternatives because I think everyone wants to expand their world a little bit and try to make it better and if anything romance, love and all that allows people to communicate and encourages them despite international boundaries that divide us. I find it's fascinating and is beautiful at the same time that people would want to expand their experiences culturally speaking and even linguistically—having to learn another language. I've got a good friend who lives in New York State. He is now learning Russian. He is learning how to write and speak. He is a bit older than me but he has never been married. I met him in Belarus at the language camp and he met a Belarussian woman at the camp and he became very interested in her. He liked her a lot. She's an acrobat. She traveled with a circus for a long time and he is an artist and so they have a lot in common with performing and all that and they started writing letters to each other. Of course, they would have to translate them. When he would get a letter from her, he would have to translate it. So he went to a friend who could do that and that's how they were going for probably a couple of years. They wrote back and forth and now he's more actively trying to learn language. And who knows maybe they will meet again. I think they did. They met one year and then again the next year and who knows, maybe something will happen.

**Katya:** I think people should try. Even though we have good and bad examples.

**Mike:** Like I said I became interested in learning why I was doing this. I lived in Warsaw for a year and I still don't know Polish. I can say a few words and I was there for one summer in 1996 and then I went back the next year and then the following year I went for the entire academic year and it was difficult of course living in Warsaw and not knowing the language. Fortunately, I was able to make some good friends.....I think we can probably talk about the Internet as a way that people can meet each other because I know that this is becoming a big business.

**Katya:** You know, unfortunately. It's so scary. It's like playing with people's hearts. That's why I don't want to do it anymore, because I realized it's like walking on a thin edge. It's scary. There are so many women around and some men are not smart enough to figure out what's going on. Maybe there is one waiting for him, but how you know which one. And also I'm sure there are good women who are looking for good men but how do you know? It doesn't say here. It's risky business. And I don't want it to be business, but again people need opportunities. It's like everything else—good, bad. They work together.

**Mike:** Do you think a company in Russia, if they wanted to start up a web site with photos of Russian women and little biographies of them saying what kind of men they are looking for, that they could make a good profit?

**Katya:** A lot of money—like I didn't know that he wrote letters to some other women but when he realized that he wasn't interested in others and he wrote letters of nine, 10, 12 pages to me—I wrote letters also but some of them were just like “hello! How are you doing and that stuff”—

just a page or two—but he was writing like books and I thought “that is the man for me”—kind, smart, romantic. I think women want someone romantic and kind and smart and I want some kind of challenge in my life also. I don’t want like my previous marriage. I grew up step-by-step. I went to college, graduated, got the job, got promoted and he stayed there and he came to me to talk and ask me questions and I didn’t feel comfortable (laughs).

*John, Katya’s husband enters the kitchen and joins in the conversation...*

**Mike:** I’d like to move the conversation over to the Internet—as we were talking about. From what I understand the Internet mail order bride industry is growing and it is an introduction service where they sell contact information on the Internet. If a guy sees someone on the Internet that looks interesting then he can go to the company and order her address and he can write to her and she can write him back and that seems very harmless—it’s just exchanging information—and it appears that there are over 200 Web sites on the Internet right now that are part of this industry and it’s serving many different countries all over the world including some South American countries like Colombia and Ecuador and Peru.

**Katya:** Have you heard that some of these services are going to be closed?

**Mike:** Well I’ve heard that in the Philippines, the government is trying to curtail this activity because I think they’re losing a lot of women and they are hearing about abuse problems.

**Katya:** Well, in Russia they are concerned because it’s crazy right now. We’ve got to women who...how you say? Genotype?

**John:** Brain drain!

**Katya:** Also what seems to have happened to know especially after September the 11<sup>th</sup> is they have stopped issuing Visas for people to come. I don’t know for how long. So, he said it’s a growing business but I don’t know for how long. I read in several newspapers and magazines....

**John:** Do you know what kind of visas they have stopped?

**Katya:** Not completely everything, but all kinds of student visas...I should probably have saved the article...

**Mike:** Is there a certain success rate among international marriages? How successful are they?

**Katya:** If he is rich enough to come back to Russia again and again several times and look for someone better or something...

**John:** If you have enough money you’ll have a 100 percent success rate—if you are talking about a general overview. The question is how many of them are married for at least five years after they marry—that’s what I think might be a successful marriage, ten years might be successful, I don’t know.

**Mike:** I guess it depends on how you define what is successful...

**Katya:** Some people keep looking—they get married and they are still looking on the Internet—it's just personality....

**John:** I don't know if he would have a better success rate getting married to a Russian women then he would to an American woman, I mean you still have the same problems—I don't know if it would save you any frustration or if it would be any different because you have the same problems. It's very romanticized. If you think you can go there and avoid all the problems you know here and think you can go there to find what you want then it would be a different story, but it's not.

**Mike:** Of course there's the language barrier to contend with. I understand that some of these web sites are offering English classes for the women....

**Katya:** They offer whatever you need—translators, interpreters, guides!

**John:** And they're always in it for profit. That's their number one motivation. A lot of these web sites and the people we see involved—they are not only a mechanism for people who want to meet, they are also a mechanism for bad societal elements—prostitutes who want to make money and there are married women who are doing it to support their families—they will latch onto a guy and drain him of all his money and when the money disappears they will just move onto another one. And they can make it a business they will just cycle and have three or four of them, just cycling through and getting payments to support their families. It's a business and you see some of the same girls from site to site, just putting their face up their as much as they possibly can.

**Mike:** And I noticed that some of these web sites are more professional-looking than others. I remember seeing one of them called Mordinson.com and the photographs of the women on the Web site—I think it's a Ukrainian Web site—have the women made up like fashion models, professional photography—beautiful gowns and things...

**John:** And they probably don't own a single thing they are wearing—I mean it's just a matter of production levels. Some people let the girls send in their own pictures, their own amateur pictures and some of them have the women go to photographers and have pictures made and then send them in. Some of them even have agencies within the country that handle the photography—they handle the video segments, the video clips and you can hear the voice—whatever they can to lure you in.....When we first got introduced, we were introduced through a pen pal society and I knew some others...they had Anastasia out of Winchester...another girl I met was through one of these clubs and I don't even think they're in business anymore—it was out of Texas. And I had ordered a whole bunch of them—they were like rejects—you could get 30 photos for \$10. Nothing came out of it. This one girl I met one time she was from Tallinn, Estonia—I had a wonderful vacation with her and her family and I still write to them today—she ended up seeing another American and he went over to visit her and was very disappointed in the experience and he wrote to me because he saw pictures of me there at her family's house and wanted to know what happened and how does this work and I put him in touch with this



company in Winchester and he came and wrote to them and he went on the tour in St. Petersburg and he met his wife there and they live in Minnesota now and since they got married...I have their picture here somewhere and address but I haven't written them in five years. There's another mail-order bride web site company right here out of Lexington and it's called SCANNA international. He has a P.O. Box here in Lexington. It's the same guy. He and his wife used to run Anastasia and there's an article on them in the Herald Leader about six years ago and I guess they've since divorced and now he runs SCANNA international and she runs Anastasia. But SCANNA has been around since the early '80s.

**Katya:** My friends tried to work for them as a helper for a while—she said Grandpas come looking for young girls which is funny...

**John:** While Russian women don't seem to mind if a man is a great deal older than them, age doesn't seem to matter to them for the most part—they don't care if they are 20 years older—there's probably a point where too much is too much....

**Mike:** But still these web sites are providing a service because they are providing information to people who want to meet other people...

**John:** On a very strict basis they are simply providing information, and information is something you pay for—it's as simple as that.

**Katya:** I shouldn't take it too close probably. I should look at it like open "yes, that's a business and that's okay to make money"...

**John:** But it's very suspect how reliable the information is...there's no screening of the individuals they are being connected with...it's like a caveat emptor situation...and the people who are getting into this are basically really naïve individuals...

**Katya:** If it were my friend I would tell them just go for a while and do it the natural way—before you get married, at least, and spend some time...

**Mike:** Maybe you would tell them if you take a genuine interest in a country and its people then you would want to go there and do whatever it takes...

**John:** That's why we got married because I always had a great interest in her country. I studied the language and culture before I even met her. Most of the people who are using these sites--and I only know four or five—they simply want to go find a wife, bring them back, but they don't care if they never speak Russian, they don't care if they never go back to their country—it's about making their life better here...

**Katya:** As Michael said before, it's kind of mysterious and men like it probably but when they come close to reality...

**John:** Everyone talks about trying to get away from the game that people play here in America—well they play games in Russia too...

**Mike:** What do you mean about game playing?

**John:** Well you know how girls are out for a free meal—you take girls out and they're out for a free meal and you take it out for a month or two and they get bored—they want something more exciting. Its game playing--or something you say that you don't mean. Same thing in Russia--if the girls on the Web sites played the whole thing—they say they love children, they love family and creating a cozy home environment and then they get over here and yes they like that stuff but that's not what they really want—they want to go out and buy clothes and find an exciting job and they don't want to live in the country if that's what you have, they want to live in the city and live the exciting life...it's just normal.

**Katya:** Well people are different. Men do the same thing—to get married...

**John:** Yes they will say I have lots of money and I have a great house...I've got a great car, it's wonderful...

**Mike:** Maybe there is a perception among some men here in the states that things have changed so much between men and women that it just doesn't seem possible anymore...

**John:** The one difference I can see in America as opposed to Russia as far as dating relationships is that American women seem more willing to end relationships without devoting enough work into them—I mean divorces are a very easy option—you get tired, you get upset you get stuck in a situation you don't know how to fix, then just get a divorce and move on to the next marriage, where that doesn't seem to be the case with most Russian women—they'll go through hell and they're willing to tolerate a little more and they're willing to forgive more and they're willing to work to find a solution

**Katya:** I told Michael already it's probably a different culture—because we are more family-oriented divorce is seen as something really bad and it's like a label..

**John:** It's like going back to the '40s or '50s in this country, like you know if a girl got pregnant (snaps fingers) you get married, if you even have sex with a boy, you get married—you know, shotgun weddings and all that sort of stuff. My experience is that Russia is just like Eastern Kentucky back into the '20s and 30s during the Depression. People are great--they'll give you the last scrap of food they've got and they really want to help strangers—just an old-fashioned way of life, that's all.

**Mike:** But now here we have the Internet and it's offering American men a huge market, like a globalized marriage market—where if the women around you don't seem very interesting you can get on the Internet and find women in Peru or in Colombia and the Philippines and so there are lots of options and of course Americans love options—we love to have options.

**Katya:** And service—everything provided—lawyers and agents...

**Mike:** And maybe we can see the Internet as a kind of desiring machine where anything you want is available—if you want to order up a bride then you just go right onto the Internet and you can order the English lessons and you can order the gifts and send the flowers...

**Katya:** It's so scary—it makes people lazy. It's very scary for the country.

**Mike:** For which country?

**Katya:** For America. It will make people lazy and there is little hard work, spiritually, nothing—people are not learning anything—they don't suffer, they don't feel romantic—like you get up in the morning to buy flowers to surprise her...something will be missing and is missing already. It's OK to make money but...morals. I don't mind when good people meet, but all this Internet business—let me tell you I suspect that 99 percent of women on the Internet—pictures and everything—these are well-trained...how should I say...schooled...women. They know what they want where they go and it's scary—it's not like they want to love and have family and to make someone happy. It's just something different.

**John:** One girl described it to me as their shot of living the good life, however they define it and by whatever means they can attain it—they want to eat in the best restaurants, they want to go on vacations. They don't care if they have to get another man they don't know to pay for it--maybe they will have to give up a little sex for it, big deal. That's what I have to give up to live the good life

**Mike:** Maybe the problem is that men are going on the Internet with a certain attitude—they are seeking relationships with a certain attitude or seeing women as a commodity, as something you can buy or something you can shop for and you said it doesn't seem natural and may be at the very outset an Internet business can attract men who see relationships as very one-sided—they take the initiative to go out and find someone that they like but then they become disillusioned when they find out that of course the women on the other side have desires too and they have dreams and goals...

**Katya:** That's what happened to a guy we know—he is looking for another one now—they got married and she is Ukrainian. She was married and divorced and raised two girls. The picture he saw on the Internet—beautiful—he just fell in love with this picture. Of course when he went and visited her and later on when they got married it got worse. And he is a very nice, very simple and kind guy...

**John:** Again, we are talking about very naïve individuals. I get a telephone number—someone introduced me to a man who married a Russian women—he speaks Russian and I think they have a very good relationship, but I don't know him I just met him the other day. He's the first one that I met so far that doesn't seem naïve. Someone that hasn't found success here is going to find success somewhere else—through if nothing else in just finding a wife initially and then trying to work out the problems—because you are selling your citizenship and that is something you worry about in this sort of situation. Is she really in love with me? Or she just looking to get citizenship? And then when she naturalizes, she's gone. That happens to a lot of relationships.

**Mike:** It might take a few months or a few years...

**Katya:** There is something that I've heard about that going on...to most of marriages...

**John:** And it's just to run around immigration laws—they've learned how to get over here quick and easy and the easiest way is to marry someone or become a fiancée—you come over here and do your time like an indentured servant and then once your time is done and you become naturalized you just to go about your own business.

**Katya:** I think you have to be in a marriage two years, right?

**John:** You get resident status after two years—and you naturalize after three years.

**Katya:** It's like one lady who told me—she used to complain that her husband doesn't have any money—that she has to say in the marriage until she gets a green card...

**John:** I read a book about a guy who had been divorced and he tells about going to Russia to make a film and he met another woman who had a child and he talks all about their courtship and the things they understood and assumed as being true and the things that women assume of their partners and the things that we assume of our partners and how the things don't fit together and how this causes frustration...

**Mike:** Isn't it a lot less common for a Russian man to seek marriage with an American woman?

**John:** Russian men aren't looking to get out of the country—they have high incidence of alcoholism, they are pretty much locked into their communities and they don't feel themselves as being a viable commodity; women know that they are a viable commodity—they know that all they have to do is put up a sexy picture and people are going to look. Russian women—even my wife—know that sex sells. It's a very strong point and they will do everything to utilize that in their country or in any way that benefits them. They have very chauvinistic attitudes—they wanted their men to be manly and strong and decisive—and they are willing to sit down and take care of the home and be the trophy wife. That's something acceptable to them and for American women it's not. American women want the equality first and all the rest doesn't matter and that's another thing that might lure a man into doing it. Some people are just power freaks—control freaks—they want to be the head of the family. The Russian woman is willing to accept that but they do it in other ways because they come from the society that is very much like the black community families—very maternally centered, with a male figurehead and the woman might be willing to be under the man but she's making all the power decisions and that's the way it is in Russia—it's a very maternal society where males are put up there to be particular figures but they really don't have any power within the family and that's where she came from and we struggled with that. Because here the man is the power center and he makes most of the decisions. It's the old-fashioned stereotypical relationships here in America—we've had to come to a point of power sharing and understanding what we can deal with. It hasn't been easy to deal with for either one of us.....everybody has their own ideas they want to promote: if

someone wants to show you a stable Russia, they will show it to you. If someone wants to show you a corrupt Russia, they will show you that...

**Katya:** Well, that's why it's nice to listen to everyone. I tell my students all the time, they come and sometimes they are very critical in about something they heard and I tell them listen to other people and then make up your mind. Try not to talk to people who came here from Russia a long time ago because they have a very different opinion and it's not true anymore—just ten years or so people are angry because something happened.. You can go and listen but life has changed a lot. Like my friend--she came here--she's Russian and he's American. He teaches in physics department at the University—nice people, we are good friends, but they met here. She came here about 10 years ago and she has really bad memories—I mean she loves Russia. Until now it was the first time after ten years he went back and she came back to America fascinated. She thought “all it's so different now”—and that's what I mean—life changes. Changes probably for the better, I don't know. I certainly hope so.

**Mike:** Your husband started telling me why it's less common for a Russian man to seek an American women for love and marriage and I would like some clarification about that....

**John:** There are other things about Russian men—they are very chauvinistic and very spoiled. Their mothers do everything for them—they take care of them. It would be lowering themselves to have to seek a woman outside of the country. They need to be the perfect example of manhood—“I can have any woman I want”, the bravado and all that....

**Mike:** Especially when they are young, right?

**John:** Even older!

**Katya:** I don't know. Just people are different everywhere...

**John:** People are different but we are talking stereotypes, of course. Stereotypes generally are true for the most part.

**Mike:** There's a certain element of truth in them...

**John:** Yes and there are exceptions to every stereotype....if we're talking about the good men over there, they are not wanting for companionship. If the man is a good doctor or scientist and he is a good husband, he will not be without a woman. She'll take good care of him and they will have a successful marriage. Is something happens then he can find another woman very quickly. And the ones that are good husbands are alcoholics and don't have very much marketable about them...

**Mike:** Or what they do have they are less likely to hold onto...

**Katya:** I don't know. Again, it's different. You cannot just write “this is like that”. Still I think it's a good thing about Russian family and how people raise children because boys learn how to respect women—it's very important because when they meet women, they treat them better than

the way father used to treat mother. Well of course other people when they get money...I know some people who are not rich but a little bit (laughs). More money than average but they think much about themselves, but again it's something negative. Again it shows not much here (points to head)...

**Mike:** I suppose we can bring this conversation into the health of the Russian economy or health problems such as AIDS—which is a problem everywhere....

**Katya:** Not in Russia..

**John:** Yeah? Well tell him the story about when you went to get the visa!

**Katya:** Yes, John got cold and I got cold and I took some medicine—you gave me medicine, American medicine. It was Alka Seltzer, I think...

**John:** Well we went to the pharmacy and bought it and then you took some...

**Katya:** Well anyway I took some medicine and they took my blood test and they run it usually through a machin--it was all normal. And of course, next day when I came back, he said let's talk a little bit more. They usually don't run expensive tests for AIDS right away—only if shows up normal then it takes a couple more days to do another one. They said “your husband, did you know him for long time?” I told them we had been writing letters for the past few years. I told them we met after that and he is a kind, sweet, decent man and I know he did not have many women. They said “well, it's possible that you have AIDS”. I said “excuse me?”. Well first I knew that you cannot just have AIDS like that—we know we had a relationship for only a few months only and it takes sometime. And then he asked me “OK”—my daughter was born in Russia—“did you have some blood transfusion?”. I said “well probably, but I don't remember” and I got scared so much, but it's something unusual for Russians. Now we talk about it more often but still it's not like here. The problem is not as bad—maybe it is as bad as here, we just don't know because it's not so much controlled. It's a huge country and for medicine it doesn't have enough money. But it's scary—especially nowadays with international marriages. But to come here you have to give blood and do the tests which is good.

**Mike:** Is that a federal law?

**John:** You have to have TB tests—TB screening blood screening--I don't know if you would be denied a visa on the basis of positive testing but they could force you to get treatments.

**Mike:** Would they force you to get American treatment or does it matter?

**John:** Well at that point in Russia we were married and it's just part of the battery of tests but the biggest concern is TB—because there is a super concern for TB in Russia, they're trying to keep it from coming to America. AIDS is probably just a matter of why we got it. To find out what the age of the population is, just test them—maybe just for statistical purposes..

**Katya:** Well I heard stories somewhere that if you don't pass this medical tests then you are not allowed...

**John:** But I mean we got her here on a visitor visa...we just abandoned the original visa process and got her here on a visitor visa and then went through the whole process here in America—and even at that point I don't think she would have been deported just because she tested positive—I can't imagine that...

**Katya:** Fiancé visas, they have different rules. I don't know if you know. When paper work is done you come here for three months. If you don't get married, you go back. If you get married, then you stay here.

**John:** You get one shot at it, too—you don't get to do it again. Which seems a little unfair to me because a man can go off and lure a woman here for three months and just cycle through a bunch of them—you know, he is at no risk to make the marriage successful. If she comes here and takes her shot and goes back then she never gets another fiancé visa again.

**Katya:** I don't like it. Women are treated like when you go out shopping...

**John:** And sure there's quite a bit of abuse of the system by the men here—they're looking for maids, cooks, housekeepers. They couldn't care less whether women want to go out shopping or get a job—there's a lot of that.

**Mike:** Maybe you might sometimes find articles in the newspaper or something on the news about when things get out of control, but I'm not sure if that necessarily means that international marriages are more susceptible to abuse...

**John:** I don't think that's necessarily so—there are problems with marriages regardless of where you're at. You need statistics to back it up.

**Katya:** It's too much money involved—people probably think before they get married...

**John:** The lowest element of society will be weeded out by cost—but you're still going to have those successful individuals who still are nice individuals—they're going to make some money to be able to afford it. I don't know--maybe 5 to 10 percent are these sorts of controlling chauvinists...

**Katya:** I also heard stories about all these Internet businesses—they just involve women—take them, bring them, make them passports and force them into prostitution. I've heard these kinds of stories....they used to publish a lot of stories in Russian newspapers—good and bad stories—but I don't keep them and they are in Russian unfortunately...

**Mike:** Do you think that the American immigration laws are unfair because they protect American men more than they do foreign women, as far as fiancé visas are concerned?

**John:** American immigration laws are racist to begin with—they exclude certain races or peoples and are willing to accept more of a quota—they accept more northern European looking people... there are a lot of problems in American immigration.

**Katya:** I don't think they cared a lot about it before, but lately the governments of both countries started talking about it and changes will be done soon—because I was surprised about it. People are concerned. They want to keep good people there in Russia. And-- well I don't know what's going on here--I mean, it's OK. American men can marry other women but the women might not like it here. There are people here who don't tell me but when we start talking they say “are you from Russia?” and some people just hate Russians I don't know why. It might be because of education and ideology—I don't know. Another thing is that I feel how people look at me sometimes. They say “another Russian woman” or “another prostitute” or something like that. That's why I just don't feel comfortable meeting people and I usually feel it. So I say “OK, it's their way”....but women are more aggressive than men—men usually don't care, they are nice—but I got more negative sayings or attitudes from women here.

**Mike:** Perhaps it's a little bit easier here in Lexington because it's a university town and there are instructors and professors who come from all over the world and it would be less unusual for them to see...

**Katya:** I have many friends, good friends. But on speaking about when you go to the park somewhere—average people—it seems the first thing that comes to mind is that I am Russian...

**Mike:** Is there a prevailing perception among Russian women of America that would encourage them to try international marriage?

**Katya:** The most important thing and I think this is the truth is that women are looking for something stable to start relationship and start a family and raise children because most of the Russian women are family-oriented—the family institution is still very strong in Russia. And it's natural to find someone stable to raise children so that's the most important reason. Of course, speaking about Internet and business—it's about crime and it's about making money—but in successful marriages, the idea is just to find something because when you hear about America or you watch some documentaries you get the impression that it's like a fairy tale—like Cinderella—they jump over 50 years to a better life and better opportunities for you and for your children—a better future...

**Mike:** At least materially speaking...

**Katya:** Yes.

**Mike:** But that doesn't necessarily mean that all aspects of American life are better than Russian life...

**John:** But they don't know that...



**Katya:** Well when I came here I read a lot—I knew some people, I talked about things like life here and there and still when I came here and I saw it with my own eyes I said “oh maybe I made a mistake”. I don’t know. People are people everywhere and it’s a nice place, I like it. It’s better than some other places...

**John:** They hear a lot of good stuff about America—the stuff that they don’t hear about is like taxes and they don’t hear about insurance that you have to pay on everything--the medical system shocked her...

**Katya:** Yes, and the educational system—Americans spend too much time working hard to get money....

**John:** She had a very good life where she was—she had money and position and power—she was very comfortable. She just wanted something better—something more stable for her future. But it hasn’t always been pleasant for her since she has been here...

**Mike:** Any kind of acculturation process brings about hardship it seems—whether it’s language or culture even something as simple as food...

**Katya:** Well you have to find friends and find food that you miss—simple things like going shopping...

**John:** Or transportation. The five years that she has been here she has never bought stamps....

**Katya:** What stamps? You mean send a letter? I keep telling him--John just cannot understand—he says: “oh let’s go to Russia and live there”—he doesn’t realize how hard it is—it’s not like that. I came here even though I knew the language—and speaking about myself I’m speaking about other women. You don’t tell anyone you don’t have friends and you don’t have family—no one to support. If your husband is not supportive, working too much or something and there is nothing then you might as well die—you but you have to survive if you have children. That is what I was thinking: “gosh what am I going to do to survive”—you have to be strong to raise them. That is what helped me the first year--I cried a lot and I got stressed. Well, then things got better—but it’s because I wanted things to work out and I am strong enough to say “okay I have to get a job, I have to start from zero”. Once I came home and I was tired and disappointed because someone told me something at me as if I was nothing. I had a good career there and people treated me like a...

**John:** A prostitute.

**Katya:** They were saying “well of course you have to earn your respect”, and I said well you are right—of course people don’t know me but it’s hard you know. I had to learn computers—I didn’t have to but, for myself to feel as good as I used to. Driving, as I said when you live in a small neighborhood, I walked everywhere. It’s not like here. Over there, we walk everywhere or we take public transportation.

**John:** In some cities you know if you go out to take a bus—the bus comes and goes and disappears over the horizon—here comes another bus every three minutes...if it's not busses, it's trams or trolleys.

**Mike:** Do you feel that many Americans don't know enough about Russia and hold a lot of stereotypes?

**John:** Americans don't know enough about anything...

**Katya:** He took me to his work one time and people looked at me as if I was a museum exhibit. One guy told me "I thought Russian women were all short and wear a handkerchief—you don't look like a Russian women". I said "well sorry I am a Russian women". It's like at school--students sometimes look at me and whisper to each other—they say "she looks like an American!". It's just ignorance. Maybe it's better in New York or somewhere. I didn't have many Russian students here although I got e-mails from Washington and New York and they are looking for free opportunities to get education to study Russian and they need Russian teachers, no one here needs a Russian teachers. It's just maybe Kentucky—you ask what is the capital of Russia. In Russia, the educational system, you are supposed to know big countries, capitals—that's the minimum to get a satisfactory and for a good grade, you have to know more than that. We study up to 15 subjects and we don't have just six classes every day—we have different. You study everything—they study English from fifth grade, history, everything. Arts, literature, they write compositions and they read books—even those who don't want but to pass you have to do all that—here, teachers complain that they have to grade five papers for their portfolio for high school—and teachers are not happy because it's so much to grade. It's just amazing. I had different opinions about America. I think the country survives because of immigration. A lot of smart people come here and work for the country and work hard because it's difficult to come here and get a job so—they try to do the best on the job....

After a short period of silence Katya tells her husband my story about when a security guard in Warsaw offered me an unsolicited phone number for his daughter...

**John:** No possibility left unexplored—they are not naïve people—if they don't ask or don't offer you have lost an opportunity. They can always figure out later if it's a good opportunity or a bad one. They are very entrepreneurial and are willing to try anything.

**Katya:** People are not ashamed to talk about anything—we are more open...

**John:** That includes sex—you can go to her family and speak to her father about having sex with his daughter and that would be a normal...

**Katya:** Well, I don't know about everything...

**John:** Well, it's not like I would say to him "here's what I do to your daughter", but I could say that we are having trouble with something and he would say "oh yes, that happens to us too and

this and that...". It's not always something you would discuss in mixed company—but they don't have the kinds of hang-ups that Americans do...

**Katya:** And I don't think it's something bad—and matchmaking if someone knows a good person then it is okay to introduce and then it's up to you—either you like or you don't like....

**John:** They're interested in being happy.

**Katya:** Men here probably look for something....sexy.

**Mike:** While there are many websites that fill that market and it does promise a great deal of profit for the people who start these companies then they're going to try to open up as big a market as they can—but I didn't know that in certain Russian cities, once an Internet business starts up, they could in just one week have hundreds of women lined up submitting their photos...

**John:** What they will do a lot of times—say when we go on vacation for two weeks in Russia—you'll see a newspaper advertisement and flyers around town. They say "we are interviewing Russian women to meet American men" you say you are going to be at a hotel and you will be there all day and you now have an assembly line where you can go take pictures and have them tell their stories—they might even pay a little fee—maybe 100 rubles just to cover costs and you could probably cycle through a few thousand because they will come and get in line. I couldn't believe it: we were in Moscow and there was a man handing out fliers to all the young single girls getting off the subway....I forget what that was for, maybe to be an escort.

**Katya:** Yes, something like that.

**John:** But it's a business over there—it wouldn't be that hard to go from city to city if you want to, but if you only have connections in one city--and there is not a lot of free travel from city to city--and if you know someone there, you could go there for a day and get three or four hundred women...

**Mike:** And let's say that a young woman decides to do this but she has a boyfriend in Russia...

**Katya:** There is no such thing like a boyfriend....if you start sex then you have to marry. It was 99 percent that was like this but now I would say it's about 80 percent because it's a shame if you have sex and you're not married and—why I like America better—people here are more sexually educated and you don't have to get married with the first guy—you can get to know each other better. Again, its cultural.

**John:** But there are women who are married who go through these services in hopes of what I call trading up—or they are in a bad relationship now and they want something better but they will give up what they have until they actually have something better...

**Katya:** This is very typical I would say because you get married and then there is nothing to lose—they are husband and wife but it's like girlfriend and boyfriend—they have sex and they

live together but actually it's not a good family. It's not the best choice or match—and that's why he is looking or she is looking.

**John:** She's comfortable--she's got the house and she's got everything stable at home for the moment—but now she has the ability to go out and look for something better. That's fairly common but divorce is very high among young adults. It means a lot to the services on the Internet because if you go and look for women from 20-28, they are probably divorced with a kid. If you do a search for women who are between 23 and 28 and the search parameters allow you to define either married or with or without kids and if you start looking you'll get such a high response of divorced woman with children. If he wants to weed out almost 90 percent of them then put on single and no kids and you'll get next to nothing...

**Katya:** There's almost no chance to find someone who has not been married before the age of 23...

**John:** Yes, if a girl had not been married by the time she turned 23 she is like an old maid. You're a societal reject.

**Katya:** I tell people stories—it's different here, it's OK--my friends here have children at 40 and it's OK. It's a little late for the first child but that's OK. With the medicine here...but over there, if this happens they will say "is she crazy". It's just a different culture I guess....

**Mike:** But I wouldn't want to portray Russian women as opportunists in my writing...

**John:** I think that's exactly what you should, do to be truthful—and to them it's not bad—they are just taking advantage of a situation that is favorable to them...

**Mike:** But what about the notion of loyalty or being faithful to your husband out of love and out of the vows that you made...

**John:** They don't have the same romantic values that we have...

**Katya:** (irate) Wait a second...are you a Russian woman? You know better, of course. Thank you....I think...this is how I feel...if you have a husband and he is a good man then why would I need to ruin my marriage and look for someone else? Of course if I have problems like in my first marriage—we were really good friends and he loved me a lot but I needed some more....and then I didn't care—I didn't want to hurt him—but I didn't care to find another one so I was looking...and it's just my example that I know a lot of other women like that....

**John:** Russian women believe in romance but their idea of romance is not the way we've romanticized things as an American culture. Romance for the two cultures is two entirely different things—for us love is endearing, never dying—its eternal. For a Russian woman (snaps fingers) it might be five minutes. We got married and an hour later she was telling me "I hate you! I hate you!" and then five minutes later "I love you"...

**Katya:** It's just women...

**John:** To you, it's women, but to me it's psychosis!

**Katya:** It's just women...

**John:** She always tells me "it is a fine line between love and hate—today I hate you and tomorrow I love you" and that's so foreign to me, I can't imagine. I say "that's impossible! If you love someone, you wouldn't feel that way. Love is everlasting! Love is enduring! Love is forever! Love is beyond all means of understanding!" And she would say "no, I hate you".

**Katya:** It's just words! Like our daughter, she would say "mom, I love you; Dad, I hate you" and I say "she's not even thinking about what she's saying"—you are expecting her to say I love you and she made a joke--it's a bad joke. We talked about it. But it's just because we are different, I guess.

**John:** But to tell you the truth, opportunistic is a very good word to describe them—in a way that is not critical. It's just simply a matter of fact...the same way that everyone is opportunistic...

**Katya:** I would look at it as nature-mother rules ....

**John:** You know, if you are living in a shack with holes in the roof and a fire in the middle of it and someone gives you an opportunity and they say "hey, there is a nice house, someone is going to provide all the food!". Well, who is going to be stupid enough to stay there? I mean maybe you are married to someone—you know it's one of those types of struggles—and for the most part they are very opportunistic. I think that's a good word—especially for a single woman who doesn't have any ties. They are willing to do whatever it takes...

**Mike:** They can be upwardly mobile...

**Katya:** While speaking about American men—that's an opportunity also to find something, you know, smart and beautiful and nice and who will love you....

**John:** With an American man, his citizenship enables him to get the sort of wife he normally would not be able to procure in America—you know for each man he has a level or status of which he could obtain a particular type of woman of beauty or whatever. He can upgrade above what he would normally be able to mate with or match with in this country by going to another country and the only thing you are doing is trading your citizenship because you have something to offer to that woman if she were to come here—at least in her eyes—she may not be well-informed...

**Mike:** It seems like we're touching on a very interesting sort of (BREAK IN TAPE)

**John:** It's like I said: they don't have the developed—and I don't mean this in a bad way—they don't have a developed sense of romanticism the way we do—going back centuries to the middle ages where a particular rose has meaning and the whole definition of unrequited love—they have no idea what unrequited love means whatsoever.

**Katya:** So why do Russian women make a big deal about flowers and candies if they are not romantic?

**John:** But that's not what I'm talking about though...

**Katya:** That's romance!

**John:** But I'm talking about the traditions and the history and the developments of romanticism as a cultural belief...

**Katya:** So we haven't knights fighting for women and duels—Pushkin died...

**John:** Yeah I think that's great, I'm not saying they don't—like I said, not in a bad way...

**Katya:** Maybe it's just your opinion....

**Mike:** (trying to diffuse a possible argument) I didn't think about this before. I just assumed that what is defined as love and romance and what marriage means and how people define it is universal—but I guess I am mistaken.

**Katya:** To me, love and romance—that's great if you have the basement which is material. You cannot have love and romance if you are miserable and hungry. In this world we are still living things, we are animals. What do we need? We need to make babies so this world can survive. And how animals make babies? The male looks for a female to inseminate and the woman looks for the best one to have the best children. I think that point—it doesn't matter where or how. We have nature inside us...

**John:** It's fertility struggles and the strategies of fertilization...

**Katya:** And then everything else—we have the government who has to (tighten) rules, something, or let it go. It's OK for now and then there are the business people who want to make more money. They say it's very popular now, it's easy. Every thing should start from nature-mother and that's my opinion....

**John:** But the education and culture and everything is different—the things that they just assume is their nature to be true are completely different. There was another thing: we went to a birthday party with another Russian/American couple and somebody flipped out the subject of the atomic bomb. You know both of us Americans said it's a good thing we did that—we saved a lot of lives. You and I, we assume that's true. Well, you wouldn't believe the argument that started. The Russians were saying “the Americans were using it to scare Russia—it was all against Stalin and you didn't save any lives, you didn't have to end anything because the war was over and besides America wasn't even in the war”. They fought all of World War II and they were in the war and America just came in at the end just to get a piece of the victory...

**Katya:** Don't tell me it's not true.

**John:** See?

**Katya:** How many Americans died? Tell me, how many Americans died?

**John:** Much less than Russians.

**Katya:** Well, how many?

**John:** (guessing) About 35 million?

**Katya:** Americans?!

**John:** Okay, maybe about 12?

**Katya:** (scoffs) Maybe 2!! And 20 million Russian soldiers died!

**John:** I agree! I agree! Do you see how deeply she holds her beliefs?

**Katya:** It's not beliefs—I studied history not from the point of view that they use to teach here, OK?

**John:** She holds her beliefs so differently—she has such strong beliefs. It's hard to believe the range of topics that they believe so differently than we do.

**Katya:** You see the world from American world—you have to go and live somewhere and watch Americans from their point of view...

**John:** And I do! Are we talking about changing me or are we talking about.....?

**Katya:** No...

**John:** But do you see how strongly she believes stuff? You don't even know the range of subjects that they believe differently than we might. And it doesn't mean that our beliefs are true—it's just there is a whole range of things. People walk into relationships not knowing what they're going to have disagreements about.

**Mike:** I think I see where you're coming from here. For example, American children are taught things early in their school careers—they are taught certain Americanisms. These might create a certain kind of citizen—this includes television and movies and so forth-- who is brought up to see certain historical events from a particular point of view.

**Katya:** The same in Russia. But you have to be over it...

**Mike:** This is fascinating because you two are actually overcoming, through your marriage, these sorts of Russianisms or Americanisms and that breaks down the boundary and the

historical and cultural frictions...and that's why in many ways I applaud the people who marry internationally because they get to see a different point of view and through work and through effort and through understanding and actually extending themselves they become more open.

**Katya:** Yes, you have to be open-minded. As I said, I had a really good teacher—it wasn't allowed before—but he was just very smart and he taught us well—he was one of the first to say that Stalin was probably wrong and it's easy now to say—but he showed us good and bad. But I get an impression that people (here) teach that America is good and what they do is right—it's just one side of the story. And some teachers in Russia, especially a long time ago—maybe ten years ago—did the same thing. I was lucky to have this teacher. And now I am trying to do the same thing. That there is no such thing good or bad. There is something in between—there is no black and white (points to her husband) he is like a yes and no, black and white, I am a person in-between. Like sunlight, it's black but it's not black, you know the spectrum. I watched Russian news and I watched American the news. And I see the ideology. And I try not to swallow it. I try to stay on top of it.

*Mike tries to connect the conversation in with teaching geography and his experiences with similar problems in classrooms.*

**John:** You know when we got married—we would go out and I would want ice in my drinks and she would say “you are going to get sick!” or I would want to sleep with the window open because it was hot and I wanted to make it a little cooler and she would say “we'll all get sick because you opened the window”. If it's cool outside everybody has to bundle up in a big coat. She would say “you're going to get a cold”. In America, colds are called viruses. As long as I wash my hands and don't come in contact with everything, it doesn't matter how cold it is, I'm not going to get sick!

**Katya:** Okay, I took medicine for two years. And I'm a nurse...

**John:** Their science is even different than ours!

**Katya:** OK, viruses, of course. You get sick because you get viruses and how do you get viruses? As you open the window and fresh air, cool air cools your body down and that's an opportunity for viruses to attack you better. That's how you catch a cold! He's trying to get me upset right now...

**John:** and oh my God if you give ice cream to a child under two years old, my God, the child would die!!

**Katya:** Now that's not true—(referring to their daughter) she eats ice cream...

**John:** Under two years old?

**Katya:** Probably I wouldn't give.

**John:** See? See? (laughs)...and no chocolate under two years old...



**Katya:** (correcting him) under three...

**John:** Under three—(teasing) sorry, what was the reason for that?

**Katya:** Why does a child under three need chocolate? Its caffeine and sugar...

**John:** I just hadn't heard it...

**Mike:** Well it seems to me that these are not intercultural differences but...

**Katya:** He's just trying to get a reaction because he loves it when I am like this...

**Mike:** I think we can all agree that marriage equals work...

**Katya:** Yes. I say this every day—love is great but...I used to teach the course and I learned a lot myself. It was about love and family life. Once a week it was a requirement. So what is love? How should I translate it...its mental—when you are friends you need each other to talk when you need each other and are talking to each other. Also its hearts and spirits and you feel good around each other. People talk about the legend where God long ago was angry and people had like four arms and four legs and two heads but God separated them and people are looking for the other part. So that's a heart and spiritual and its physical when you actually have sex and you feel good about each other. So all three together—you are not just, some people say, Platonic love. There is no such thing. If it's just Platonic it means you are just good friends or something like that—or it's just sex. No! If its just sex it's not love—and now I love you—maybe you do something ugly and the next minute I hate you. Or if you do something and I don't want to be with you anymore. You killed someone or you said something and that's the end of our relationship—I used to love you but now it's hard to separate—we used to have a relationship but I can't be with you anymore. It's just something like love forever, he says. No it's things we do every day—things we tell each other to build a better relationship. I agree with you, it's everyday work.

**Mike:** A relationship based on some sort of idealistic fantasy is not going to work I guess..

**Katya:** Like our friend I told you a story—he fell in love with this image of a beautiful woman in a picture. He married her and she brought over two girls. Why didn't he think about it? Two girls! Its typical for him, he doesn't have enough money for himself. I mean probably he does but...

**Mike:** But still the Internet seems to be serving this fantasy perhaps that a lot of people have—not just American men but also Russian women. On both ends, it seems to be catering to fantasies. A fantasy of an American paradise versus a fantasy of a beautiful Russian woman who is traditional in her orientation and wants to take care of children.

**Katya:** We are raised on Cinderella stories. A teacher I had also, he said “I want to give you some advice—don't look for a prince, there is no such thing. There is no prince in this world”. I

don't know, he kind of disappointed me but he made me realistic and practical. I would love to look for a prince but I would probably do it until I die—keep getting married.

**John:** That's probably what many Russian women are doing--they are looking for the perfect American man and we have a long courtship pattern here. You have so much time before you get married that you learn each other's faults and problems and you say "I don't need to deal with this". I'll go looking for that prince. Our relationship is probably stronger just because we knew each other for such a short time before we got married. We were married instantly and we learned our problems after we were married so we had to work it out--we couldn't just leave.

**Katya:** It was difficult the first year and then I just sat down and I said "do you want me to pack and go?" and once he said yes, just pack and go. And then I told him, "OK I'm ready". Well then he got scared and then we sat down and we had a conversation. I asked him if we would work it out or are we going to divorce. "What are we going to do? I know I don't want to divorce again. Do you want to divorce?" And he said no. and I said "well then why are we arguing?" It takes some courage to sit down and talk. It easier just to get a divorce.

**John:** I have a cousin who is 35 years old and I don't know if she has ever had a serious relationship. She is looking for someone perfect. You are just never going to find it.

**Katya:** Last week he was upset a little bit. I was just stressed out—I have some friends and they got divorced, they have a wonderful life—they get money from their husbands to support and they work for some more money and they have split custody so one-week probably—I don't know how they manage but—one-week at her place and she is responsible and the next week she is by herself. She goes shopping, she goes out, she has lunches and she has time. I forgot what is it to have private life. I told him I want some time for myself. That's why American women I think are smart enough to realize why do I have to be married? I can get married and get a child and split custody and get money from him—some women do it, I was surprised. Watching programs on TV, especially my first year when I didn't work I had time to watch all the shows like the Springer show. You see crazy people, crazy Americans and I say that there is something strange here. Well let me tell you. It's not normal. People since childhood are raised strangely. It's not natural—the movies and the programs that they watch. They don't read. I don't know about the music they listen to. The children become like small monsters—violent and aggressive. You know if you get some stress in your childhood then you get used to it and then you need more stimulus to shake your nerves even in sex. It doesn't just satisfy something natural—they look for something just not normal.

**John:** And things she told me--you know if she was American, why would she need to get married, why would she need a man? She could have a child of her own and the career of her own. She could have children as she wants. She doesn't have to get married for any of this. Why does a woman need a man? It's just another mouth to feed! And it's true! A lot of American men are like boys! But it's no different in Russia because lots of men there are like boys. But there if you want children and you want a family, you get married.

**Katya:** You don't have family institution here—you don't have to get married and it's OK. People don't talk about it. In Russia, if you don't get married, it's not OK. People don't like it. That's what I mean. If the family institution dies, I don't know what is going to happen....

**John:** They are just very close-knit families—they live in the same town for the most part..

**Katya:** They try...

**John:** If one family member runs out of money, the other ones chip in and help out—even with babysitting chores, the friends always help out. Here, our culture is based on mobility.

**Katya:** I think people are egotistical here. People think like one guy he was a minister in Russia-I interpreted for him. He said "you know what, it's amazing". He stayed at an old Grandma's house and she had one bed and she gave him her bed and she slept on mattress on the floor in the kitchen and he didn't feel comfortable. He said I wouldn't do that for my mother. And I realized how egotistical people are here. And he was right—not all people of course. But there are so many spoiled from childhood—parents don't spend time with children—they will work and are tired and tell them go watch TV, go play computer games. Let's to go shopping and I'll get you a toy, a bigger toy. In Russia it's more like relationships...

**Mike:** Well we just had a Thanksgiving holiday this week and we know that this is probably the biggest day for travel all year long for Americans. People are visiting family and they live on the East Coast and their family lives on the West Coast. Maybe this is not quite the case in Russia. Maybe not so much migration on such days....

**John:** Well they have the same thing, but it's just called Sunday.

**Katya:** What he means is you don't have to travel from one city to another...

**John:** It's a lot like Eastern Kentucky. People don't want to leave the community—even though you can get a job somewhere else you just don't do it. Some do, but just like here in the '30s and '40s, people went to Detroit and Cincinnati for jobs...

**Katya:** But again his family see each other at funerals and weddings and Thanksgiving and that's it—people don't know each other, they don't remember names or birthdays and they don't know what to talk about and they are bored around each other. It's nice to see his family but I see something missing there. So maybe international marriages will fix the problem....I doubt it.

**Mike:** Yes, maybe it's easy to criticize people who go on the Internet but maybe we can say that they are pioneers or that they are looking for something a little bit different that they feel is lacking in their own lives...

**John:** I thought, you know, when I started this and I knew I was going to do it—I believed I was a little part in fostering better relations between the countries, the superpowers. I don't do a lot—but in my small family and from her small family each of us gets an idea of what the other country is really like. And that's where it all comes from. It's just little pieces here and there.

**Katya:** Peacemaker. I don't care about all this stuff, I just want to be happy.

**John:** But there are still members of my family that look at her as a prostitute. My father who had bad relations with his family and divorced my mother was married three times to Filipinos—so my family already had a bad opinion of international marriages. It didn't have a bad opinion of the women he married because they were all wonderful women—but they are suspicious. They just think “something is wrong” and they look at every possible option. They ask is she a prostitute—guess he has problems, he doesn't look that bad, well look at her. It doesn't matter where she has gone, if they find out she is Russian and married to an American, she gets that look. And nobody says anything. But she just gets that look. And after a while you know what people are thinking.

**Mike:** But certainly a lot of positive results come out of international marriages and opportunities or dreams realized—certain things that were made possible that otherwise would not have been....

**John:** Yes, for every positive story there is going to be a negative one. For every fantasy that was realized there was a dream that got crushed.

**Katya:** I look at it in the big picture—as I said in the beginning that's nature-mother calling and then you just get married and do your best. If it works, great. If not, keep looking or quit. That's your choice. It's a great opportunity for you, to look not just in your place but everywhere. Maybe someday the world will speak one language...

**John:** Fat chance.

**Mike:** It's a nice dream though (*laughs*)

*END*

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