Crossing Global Borders: ‘Mail order brides’ in Atlantic Canada

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Abstract: In this paper, we draw on neo-Marxist post-colonial feminism in order to better understand the complex ways in which gender, race, class, nationality, and education affect women who have migrated to Atlantic Canada as so-called ‘mail-order brides.’

I find what I need. Magic. First man I write. I find very quickly. Like magic I find him. Russian woman (a so-called “Mail Order Bride”)

My friends couldn’t believe it. “Why would she want you? You are old and she is young” … They could not believe that there was a woman on the other side of the world in Russia who was interested in me!

Canadian man

Some men see the woman as a sense of possession because they have invested a lot of money into the relationship....I just say to them “you can’t purchase a person”. Immigrant Service Provider

Introduction
Globalization has changed and continues to change the face of migration. Previously isolated communities are now influenced by intercultural experiences, environmental changes, and technological advancements. The movement of people from region to region is occurring for a multitude of reasons including: environmental degradation of land and resources; extreme poverty; discrepancy of resources among people within regions; forced migration (e.g. trafficking); and the development of new relationships and new opportunities. The variety of motivations for migration are often intertwined and complex. The migration of women, in particular so-called ‘mail-order brides’1, is a complex phenomenon which is impacted by class, gender, race, culture, nationality, and education.

The practice of so-called ‘mail-order bride’ marriages is a poorly understood and inadequately considered aspect of women’s migration to Canada despite the fact that it has been growing internationally, particularly since the advent of the Internet (Brigham & Lacroix, 2006; Kojima, 2001; Perez, 2003; Simons, 2001; Vergara, 2000). So-called ‘mail-order bride’ marriages are defined as “a formal transaction between a [Canadian] man and a woman from …countries [of the South], usually brokered by an agent, who is part of the mail-order bride industry, via catalogues or the internet” (Philippine Women Centre of BC and the Status of

1 We recognize that this highly ambiguous term ‘mail-order bride’ is problematic as it has been used to construct a certain group of women in a certain way, and it mis/represents specific groups of women who are/were citizens of other countries (not originally Canada) usually from ‘developing countries’, who may or may not have established a legal relationship (e.g. a legally recognized and registered marriage, including Common-Law and Conjugal Partner Relationships) with Canadian men through profit-seeking international marriage brokers (such as Internet based match making agencies). Hence the reason for using ‘so-called’ here in the introduction and for using single quotation marks around the term throughout this paper. As we continue our work we may develop a different working definition, but in this paper we continue to use ‘mail-order bride’ with this caveat.
One of the main objectives of this relationship is often to enable the woman to immigrate to Canada (Langevin & Belleau, 2000).

At the outset, we trouble the term so-called ‘mail-order bride’ marriages and the representations of this phenomenon. The so-called ‘mail-order bride’ marriage assumes compulsory heterosexuality and glosses over the racialization and sexualization of the women in these relationships, the role of the state (in peripheral and core countries, e.g. state policies), the desires and needs of individuals under the regime of neo-liberal capitalism, the exploitation and violence perpetuated against the working classes world-wide, and the social conflicts and contradictions that are part and parcel of a racialized capitalist-patriarchal ‘globalized’ system.

The purpose of this paper therefore, is to (begin to) pick apart some of the complexities inherent in the so called ‘mail-order bride’ relationships. Specifically, we draw on neo-Marxist post-colonial feminism, in order to better understand the complex ways in which gender, race, class, nationality, and education affect women who have migrated to Atlantic Canada as so-called ‘mail-order brides.’

Our modes of data collection involve in-depth interviews with so called ‘mail-order brides’, Canadian ‘grooms’, immigration officials and immigrant service providers (e.g. women’s centres, immigrant settlement agencies). Our research is at a preliminary stage therefore, for the purpose of this paper, we are focusing on a limited data set. Specifically, we refer to the transcripts and notes of interviews with one Canadian man and one Russian woman (a so-called “Mail-Order Bride”), both of whom used an international Internet matchmaking agency, as well as two immigrant service providers in Atlantic Canada.

**Theoretical framework**

Our theoretical investments are multifaceted to ensure a holistic analysis of the experiences of so-called ‘mail-order brides’. First and foremost, we recognize that women are not a homogenous group (e.g. they are divided by class, race, ethnicity, citizenship, location, level of education, etc.). We also recognize that the politics of difference result in unequal social relations locally, nationally and internationally (Dhruvarajan & Vickers, 2002; Razack, 2002). The discrepancy in social relations have a significant impact on women, particularly women from the South, as a result of the historical and present day inequalities that exist between the North and South (Brigham, 2002; Hart, 2005; McEwan, 2001; Philippine Women Centre of B.C., 2000).

In addition to our gender-based theoretical investments, we also recognize that economic inequalities contribute to power discrepancy at interpersonal and societal levels (McEwan, 2001). Globalization and the unequal distribution of economic wealth and resources have had a significant impact on migration (Status of Women Canada, 1997).

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2 Eva Osorio-Nieto, past Co-ordinator, Halifax Refugee Clinic, tells of a client who married his so-called ‘Mail order bride’ and has children with her but he has not applied for a visitor visa or sponsorship, which would permit her to come to Canada, apparently he does not intend to. “In this way, for him it is like a permanent vacation, a piece of paradise [always available]” while the woman lives in the hope that he will eventually sponsor her and bring her and their children to Canada.

3 Because these international matchmaking agencies are usually not regulated in Canada and most operate outside of Canada, they are not be bound by Canadian law (see www.lawforforeignbrides.ca).

4 Although several attempts have been made to interview immigration officials in Atlantic Canada, our efforts have twice been stalled due to bureaucratic processes and a concern that the officials requested did not have sufficient knowledge of the policies and procedures as they relate to ‘mail-order brides’.
Furthermore, the legal framework that exists in Canada has enhanced the level of vulnerability for migrants to Canada (Langevin & Belleau, 2000).

**Background**

*Prevalence of the ‘Mail-Order Bride’ Phenomenon*

Historically, the means and methods of marriage have often included the intervention of a match-maker (Kojima, 2001; Langevin & Belleau, 2000; Simons, 2001). The current prevalence of the so-called ‘mail-order bride’ industry is virtually unknown due to lack of research on the issue and the lack of credible data (Simons, 2001). In the United States the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) estimate that between 4,000-6,000 ‘mail-order bride’ marriages occur in the annually, comprising approximately four percent of all immigration, but this figure is contested repeatedly in the literature (Simons, 2001). The US government also estimates that one-third to one-half of the 37,000 women entering the US in 2005 on fiancée or spousal visas were as the result of a match-making agency (Zare & Mendoza, 2008).

Little is known about the so-called ‘mail-order bride’ industry in Canada (Brigham & Lacroix, 2006). Of the little research that exists on the experiences of immigrant women and the relevant policies, the literature is almost exclusively focused on the experiences of women from the Philippines (see Philippine Women Centre of B.C. and the Status of Women Canada Policy Research, 2000). According to the Philippines Women Centre of British Colomba, 3,500 women from the Philippines have entered Canada on ‘spousal’ or ‘fiancée’ visas, however this figure does not reveal how many of these women have met their partner/spouse through a match-making agency (Philippine Women Centre of B.C. and the Status of Women Canada Policy Research, 2000). There have been informal data collected within Citizenship and Immigration Canada on the numbers of so-called ‘mail-order brides’, however this data is not accessible to the general public for issues of privacy and security (M. Fifield, Regional Program Advisor, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Atlantic Regional Office, personal communication, February 22, 2008). Although no reliable official numbers are accessible as to how many women arrive in Canada as so called ‘Mail-Order Brides’, several cases have been reported in Nova Scotia where the women in these relationships have been denied basic human rights (Eva Osorio-Nieto, past Co-ordinator, Halifax Refugee Clinic, personal communication, March 31, 2008). The women arriving in Nova Scotia appear to be largely from Eastern Europe, Latin America, or the Caribbean, on average they are in their mid-twenties, and they are often highly educated individuals (Eva Osorio-Nieto, past Co-ordinator, Halifax Refugee Clinic, personal communication, March 31, 2008).

**Policy & Legislation**

The international community has very little policy or legislation dedicated to the issue of marriage migration. The main international body of law that is referred to in the literature in connection to the ‘mail-order bride’ industry, is the United Nations Office of Drug & Crime:

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5 In the North American context, the first accounts of women immigrating for the purpose of marriage were the *fille du Roy* in French settlements in Canada during the mid-17th century, where French women traveled to ‘New France’ with the intention to marry a French man (Langevin & Belleau, 2000). In the US during the 19th century, men from China, Japan, and the Philippines immigrated to Hawaii and the West Coast to work on sugar cane plantations and farms. At that time, anti-miscegenation policies prohibited relations (i.e. marriage) between Asian men and White women. As a result, a “picture bride” system (which involved an exchange of photos between men living in the US and women from Asia) developed in the early 1900s and led to the migration of several thousand Asian women to the US (Shah, 1997 cited in Perez, 2003). The main distinction between the so-called ‘mail-order bride’ industry and the *fille du Roy* and ‘picture brides’ is the nationality of the two individuals involved in the relationship (Langevin & Belleau, 2000; Simons, 2001).
Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Especially Women and Children) (United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime, 2006). This body of law, for which Canada is a signatory, focuses on the recruitment, migration and exploitation of persons and is not exclusively focused on intercultural marriages (Skrivankova, 2006; United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime, 2006).

Australia and the United States appear to be the only two countries to have specific legislation on the ‘mail-order bride’ industry. Australia has recently introduced policy to provide residency to so-called ‘mail-order brides’ even if the marriage to the Australian national fails (Philippine Women Centre of B.C. and the Status of Women Canada Policy Research, 2000). The United States has three areas of legislation that offer specific regulations for the ‘mail-order bride’ industry (Simons, 2001). The first section is the K-1: Fiancée Visa which is intended for US citizens to apply for a fiancée to come to the US for the purpose of marriage (Simons, 2001). The K-1 Visa is only valid for 90 days upon entry into the country (Simons, 2001). The CR-1: Conditional Resident Visa is another option for US citizens to apply for to support the immigration of a spouse (Simons, 2001). In connection to both the K-1 and the CR-1 Visas, US law requires that all match-making agencies in the US provide information on the prospective groom (including his income) to the prospective bride prior to immigration (Simons, 2001). The final piece of legislation in the US is the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 which has a component that seeks to protect so-called ‘mail-order brides’ if they are in fact experiencing domestic violence (Simons, 2001).

There is no specific legal framework that regulates the ‘mail-order bride’ industry in Canada (Langevin & Belleau, 2000). There are policies within Citizenship and Immigration Canada that restrict the migration of minors; restrict sponsorship from Canadians who have committed violent crimes; and require that a relationship must have existed for at least one year for internet relationships/marriages to be considered for approval (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007). However, so-called ‘mail-order brides’ can find themselves in vulnerable positions due to the lack of sponsorship from their partner/spouse, and unlike legislation in the US and Australia, women migrating to Canada have few options to apply for status without the sponsorship of their partner/spouse (Langevin & Belleau, 2000; Philippine Women Centre of B.C. and the Status of Women Canada Policy Research, 2000).

Women who come to Canada as so called ‘Mail-Order Brides’ or as potential ‘Mail-Order Brides’ require spousal sponsorship in order to stay in Canada. They are often separated from friends and family and are often unfamiliar with laws, customs, and possibly language which place them in vulnerable positions (Brigham & Lacroix, 2006; Philippine Women Centre of BC and the Status of Women Canada Policy Research, 2000). Eva Osorio-Nieto, past Co-ordinator, Halifax Refugee Clinic, provides several examples of this. If a man should choose to sponsor his wife, “The husband is responsible for [his wife] for three years. But maybe he does not want to sponsor her. If she is sponsored she will have all the rights of a permanent resident. If he does not sponsor her he has more power. He holds that power over her” (personal communication, Eva Osorio-Nieto, past Co-ordinator, Halifax Refugee Clinic, March 30, 2008).6

6 Ms. Osorio-Nieto recalls several cases where Canadian men exercised this power. She explains that several clients have come to her asking, “This is my sponsor, how long do I have to stay with him?” These particular clients lacked legal knowledge about their rights in Canada. In other cases, the women were not officially sponsored and were in Canada on visitor visas. The women who did not have health insurance were placed in difficulty when in need of health care (visitors do not have access to free health care) or when their visas expired (e.g. when their husbands refused to reapply before expiration of visa. For contravening the Immigration Act [for being ‘out of status’] the women could be deported). Threat of deportation may be used by the Canadian partner to keep the non-Canadian
On-line Representations & Profiles of ‘Mail-Order Brides’ and Canadian Grooms

I’ve been getting emails from Bride sites for years but I just dump them, delete them…I received an email from a site and I thought, well I am single, I’ll have a look. So I looked at the profiles. And at the bottom it said post your profile for free…I thought what the heck. I’m single. It’s free. I’ll toss my profile in. And uh, I put my profile in and within three four days I started getting between 16 and 18 emails a day. So I started answering them. And it became a full time job to answer them. So I made a standard email. “I’ll talk to you. Tell me a little about yourself. Send some pictures”. Still I couldn’t keep up. I kept getting more and more.

There are virtually thousands of on-line sites connecting people seeking a relationship. Among these sites are agencies specifically designed to connect people from different countries. These agencies have different procedures, for example, some require payment to post a profile, while others have no fee to post a profile but a fee to obtain a potential partner’s address. Most of the sites are country or region-specific. They play up national sexualized stereotypes to appeal to certain male desires. Our Canadian research participant states,

I never thought I’d go to Russia to begin with….It was always like a fantasy sort of thing. And then it happened…I have always been attracted to Eastern Bloc women. Thinking they are more attractive. And the cultural differences, I always like the culture. ...[on the Internet sites] the Russian women are presented as sex objects. I wasn’t looking for a bed partner. I was looking for someone to develop a relationship with…. I’ve had like numerous relationships in Canada but they did not work out. This is predestination. It is something that just happened. It wasn’t really planned to go this far I guess.

The representation of women on ‘mail-order bride’ sites is equally diverse. Although no single representation exists on these Internet sites, women from Eastern Europe are frequently profiled in ‘sexually alluring’ ways, focusing on body image, weight, and age. Sites profiling women from Asia tend to be somewhat less sexually focused with greater attention to ‘traditional family values,’ feminized dispositions and skills. Despite the physical images utilized on the sites, a significant proportion of the profiles revealed a high level of education and a median age of over 25 years of age (Constable, 2005).

The service provider informants in our study note that, in general, the men are usually White, older than the women with whom they seek relationships, were previously married, were “failing at love,” have a range of educational backgrounds, and some have psychological or personality issues, or “exhibit unstable behaviours”. The women are often highly educated, on average in their mid-20’s, have some proficiency in English and some were previously married. Our research participants challenge and support some of these generalizations, e.g. they were highly educated, both had been previously married, he is older than his female partner, he is White, and she spoke some English. The following comments from our research participants highlight how the on-line representations are reinforced as well as inherently contradictory:

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[Russian women are] beautiful, clean, can cook, hah ha. I know men. I know what all men want. Joke. Not true. Russian woman very nice woman for family. And if Canada bring much Russian, it is very good because Russian woman very nice, she cook, she clean, she very nice wife, she nice woman, she nice mother, she know very much for baby, for husband, she smart, she very nice.

All my friends...at work are amazed because like she cooks food for me, I’m always bringing nice home cooked meals... for the most part, they don’t get that sort of treatment at home. ... and she made me fat. That’s a compliment. It shows that [she is] taking care of [me]....These things get lost [here] through time but in Russia it is normal. ...she did not like the colour of the buttons on one shirt and she did not like the colour on another shirt so she took them all off one shirt and all off another shirt and sewed them back on. For a North American woman they’d throw it in the garbage....And like I had some socks, like this one has a hole in it right now... I just noticed it. And she darns them. Others would throw them into the garbage. And she sews them.

My advice is to make sure it is a real relationship...and it is not just her looking to immigrate. And I’d be careful because I had women 20, 21 years old emailing me, wanting to come to Canada. And I think they are just looking to get out of Russia.

Conclusion

The ‘mail-order bride’ industry is a complicated, misrepresented section of women’s migration. Although grounded in a global and gendered context of women’s migration from countries of the South to countries of the North, the experiences of ‘mail-order brides’ and Canadian ‘grooms’ are diverse and complex. Even though each relationship involves unique challenges and experiences, it is apparent that there is lack of awareness of the issues facing ‘mail-order brides’ in Canada. However, one thing we can say is that women (and men) need to have access to clear information about their rights in Canada, the Immigration law, e.g. sponsorship, visitor visa; family law (marital, divorce, child welfare law), criminal law and civil law. They require information and access to language training resources, skills training, and other resources available for immigrants (e.g. business start-up loans). This information must be made accessible (translated in many languages) through ethnic/cultural/religious groups, web sites, Embassies, points of entry and on the Internet (for example, see www.lawforforeignbrides.ca).

As the Canadian ‘Groom’ interviewee states,

[There should be some way that they inform immigrants about any kind of opportunity] like some kind of immigrant portal, on-line or something where they can go and read it in their language what’s available for them showing them what they can do and how they can contribute back to Canada, because if they can get a loan to start a business then offer employment they can give back to the country that accepted them.

Local agencies could do a better job of serving this population of women, i.e. by advertising their services in many places, providing easy access to contact information, and access to translators and lawyers.

In Atlantic Canada, the buzz word around attraction and retention of immigrants is “welcoming communities” but what does this mean? Communities in the region need to assess
this notion and explore creative ways to ‘make welcome’ newcomers such as so-called ‘mail order brides’.

References