Introduction

Intimate Investments

Latinas are famous for their natural beauty, warm personality and family loyalty. Only in Latin America can you find a woman who is more tolerant, understanding, faithful, and true to the idea that marriages are forever.
—international marriage broker web page

Without a doubt, passion is our citizens best raw material.
—Colombian Tourism Ministry ad campaign, “Colombia Is Passion”

[Cosmetic] surgery is a way to invest in myself, invest in my future.
—Colombian participant at the Vacation Romance Tour

Latin America’s association with abundant love and sexual passion continues to structure gendered opportunities, mobility, and citizenship. Over 200 international marriage broker (IMB) websites, advertising romance and marriage between U.S. men and Latin American women, lure in male viewers with pictures of young women in skimpy swimsuits, bracketed by luscious tropical settings, casting salacious glances at the Internet viewer. Women’s bodies have long figured as the seductive force of regional and national trade, enticing investors and travelers from colonial times to current tourism brochures and, more recently, Internet marriage websites. In particular, the global marketing of women on cybermarriage websites borrows from Latin American tourism and investment campaigns, especially the most recent branding of one country’s best resources, titled “Colombia Is Passion.” With the goal of uplifting its global image, Colombia exports a respectable middle-class image of the nation’s gendered labor force through a video campaign depicting giddy shots of light-skinned married couples, alluring beauty queens, a sharply dressed woman speaking into a company headset, and the
passionate swing of pop singer Shakira's hips around the world. The Colombian state's marketing of its citizens' passion to court foreign commerce naturalizes heterosexual romantic exchanges, rendering patriotic the turn to foreign marriage as a viable route to happiness, while also opening up new avenues for women to invest in themselves and their futures. In fact, various women I met at a Vacation Romance Tour in Cali, Colombia, explained their desire to upgrade and beautify their bodies through cosmetic surgery. These images and acts of (passionate) conversion transform the body and nation into a moral but also productive surface, even as the body becomes a pliable tool for women to remake themselves; a natural resource that with the proper capitalist investment will yield the possibility of foreign marriage, mobility, and/or better opportunities in their everyday lives.

My inquiry into the cybermarriage industry underscores the deepening of free market capitalism into intimate desires. For example, participants' descriptions of love and marriage are told through the language of reciprocal exchange, investment, and risk. The commercialization of intimacy here, I argue, does not support the widespread association of this industry with sex trafficking. In fact, I aim to dislocate government scrutiny of foreign marriage and instead to elucidate the very practices of the state that espouse normative understandings of love and marriage as a technique of governing foreign marriage migration. Passion binds citizens to moral and gendered opportunities in Latin America, while romantic love and marriage ensures migrants mobility and citizenship in the United States. In the first chapter, I examine the United States' regulation of marriage laws to argue that marriage serves state interests in scrutinizing and adjudicating proper practices of intimacy and love in relations between citizens and noncitizens. It is love's democratic appeal that immigration laws and policies rely on to differentiate whether foreign marriages are chosen based on free choice or coercion and subsequently whether they are bona fide or fraudulent. My critical perspective of the cybermarriage industry (as a market that obliges women to particular kinds of sexual and intimate arrangements) also sees marriage as one that may transport participants into new lives. While there are constraints on women's mobility, the ties that tether bodies and emotions to particular intimacies and forms of governance should not always be thought of as conditions of force or enslavement but also as demarcations of what some women express as the desire for more equitable and enduring relationships characterized by mutual obligations between husband and wife. Thus, I contend that U.S. and Latin American states play a critical role—via the global governance of populations and trade—in shaping how foreign marriage migrants express intimacy and move across borders as middle-class, modern citizens.
versus undocumented (or exploited) subjects. These constraints do not, however, foreclose other desires for foreign marriage, such as the hope for more authentic intimacies and upward mobility. In sum, *Love and Empire* looks at how the squeeze of modern life directs intimacy into the virtual marketplace, rearranging notions of freedom and obligation across national borders.

Cybermarriage industries took root in Mexico and Colombia, as in Russia and Asia, in the mid to late 1990s, during a time of considerable global economic and social transformations.¹ The economic crisis in Mexico and other Latin American countries in the late 1980s, leading to the liberalization of “free trade” with the passage of NAFTA in Mexico in 1994 and increased trade between the United States and Colombia,² further entrenched these nations’ dependency on foreign loans, businesses, and tourism as the route to solve their economic woes. Furthermore, the opening of Latin America to foreign trade and commerce occurred at the time when the United States passed draconian legislation, erecting walls and entrenching border personnel and surveillance cameras to shut down migrant crossings at the busiest sites of entry into the United States.³ U.S. cybermarriage industries launched their web encounters in Latin America starting in 1996, when Internet technologies transformed communication, information sharing, and intimacy across otherwise difficult-to-cross borders. Of course, Internet-based romances are not entirely new. Newspaper ads assisted elite Mexican women in their pursuit of U.S. businessmen and diplomats living in Mexico City since at least the late 1930s and early ’40s, when President Roosevelt fostered good feelings, tourism, and business relations between the United States and Latin America through a series of cultural exchanges meant to promote his “Good Neighbor Policy.” Even as the Internet now stretches its reach to a more diverse clientele and mediates contact through a variety of interactive menus, Internet marriage brokers (IMBs) continue to market international goodwill across borders through the liberal logic of free trade and equitable exchange, redirecting personal strategies from the state to the marketplace, from the national to the foreign. These tactics of self-governance and participants’ expression of themselves as free-market actors warrant a critical inquiry of the neoliberal contours guiding these virtual intimacies. Accompanying Latin American countries’ swing to (rogue) capitalism and the feminization of labor, many women, from the lower and middle classes, find themselves responsible for the financial support of their families when traditional labor structures have fallen apart. Given the charge of women as head of their household during a time of great economic decline, an astounding number migrate into feminized labor markets—as service workers, maquila workers, nannies, and domestics—in urban centers in Latin America, the
United States, and around the world. Feminist accounts of these changes have forcefully challenged traditional understandings of migration, family, and the global economy, but the desires and experiences of aspiring and/or middle-class women who turn to foreign marriage, and the state's governance of intimacy more broadly, have been understudied.

Although the process and participants have changed since the pre-Internet era of “mail-order bride” industries developed in Asia and Russia in the 1980s, stereotypes of exploitation in the cybermarriage industry have endured. During one chat-room debate, U.S. men married to Latin American women swapped stories detailing the difficulty of overcoming the stigma of foreign marriage among friends and family. Especially poignant was one anonymous Latin American woman's response: “I have stopped speaking to some American friends who have implied that the only reason AM [American men] date latinas or any foreign woman is because they can control us. As though there is no other reason an AM would want us. . . . AM usually make more solid, less controlling, modern husbands” (Latin-Women-List, June 6, 2002). Her description of U.S. men as “modern husbands” complicates the popular perception that international cybermarriages are unilaterally exploitative, part of the trafficking-of-women trade, and entrenched in power relations between the victimizer and the victim. Equating foreign marriage with abuse negates the value and positive contributions of Latinas, while obscuring from view women’s own interest in U.S. men. The chat-room post just quoted is critical of the emphasis on exploitation or “control,” which reduces women to malleable pawns of male desire (e.g., prostitutes), thereby dismissing Latin American women's status as modern subjects with their own hopes and desires. Yet what exactly did she mean by a “modern husband”? Do women's aspirations for a modern relationship contradict men's desires, advertised on hundreds of marriage websites, for a more traditional and family-oriented Latin American woman, rather than a U.S. (feminist) woman?

For more than ten years, I conducted a virtual ethnography that traces the mutual desires of Latin American women and U.S. men who turn to the foreign cybermarriage industry. To do this, I followed the intimate iterations of foreign marriage in chat rooms and interviewed participants who attended the Vacation Romance Tours in Guadalajara, Mexico, and Cali, Colombia. I call my ethnography “virtual” not only to refer to my use of the Internet to conduct research and communicate but also to foreground my analytic lens for understanding how mediated fantasies assist in the proliferation of the global political economy of desire and mobility in cybermarriage. Virtual imaginaries, then, encompass the spectrum of past and present fantasies.
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that penetrate men’s and women’s everyday lives through technologies of foreign exchange produced via Internet and face-to-face exchanges, as well as media images, especially when language difficulties stunt the ease of verbal communication. The sometimes colliding fantasies between women seeking modern husbands and the men interested in more traditional-minded women flared up at the face-to-face encounters at the Romance Tours. In 2001, I attended my first Guadalajara Vacation Romance Tour, located in an upscale tourist zone. After several hours, the men were prompted to line up on stage and introduce themselves to the more than two hundred women clapping in encouragement. The most enthusiastic applause from women followed the Anglo-American men with sincere demeanors, those who made some attempt to speak Spanish, and especially those who were professionals such as doctors, lawyers, or pilots. The mood shifted, however, when a Latino from Texas in his late forties took the microphone. George, after describing his profession, announced proudly, in broken Spanish, that he was looking for a woman who would make handmade tortillas. The festive atmosphere suddenly went cold as women’s claps and cheers froze into waves of silence, erupting into a few scattered boos.

The tortilla comment and ensuing silence signal a rupture of desired gender roles that align Latin American women with tradition and domesticity and U.S. men with modern perspectives. These gendered expectations are complicated further as Mexican women’s transnational alliances with U.S. men result in their projection of difference and excessive tradition onto local Latin American masculinity and governance (see Chapter 2). Despite cracks in this eroticized imaginary at the tours, Latin America and its women are staunchly upheld as an erotic alternative to the crumbling of family traditions in the United States, whereas for these women, the United States and its men continue to hold the potential for upward mobility and a just legal system. For many middle-class, professional women from Guadalajara, this incident confirmed their association of white, corporate manhood with modern intimacy, or what some see as more equitable or even complementary gender roles. Various women I spoke with from Guadalajara and Cali explained their desire for a professionally minded suitor, one who was más detallista, or more thoughtful and considerate than local Latin men. The emphasis on modernity and a professional husband attendant to women’s needs and desires raises questions about how corporate modernity and intimacy intersect at the height of an era of global capitalism. What do these costly and highly mediated courtship rituals say about gender, nation, love, and intimacy in the twenty-first century? The emergence of intimate markets during a time when goods move more freely than people conveys not
only the importance of women’s eroticized bodies in their access to global circuits of trade. At the same time, the channeling of erotic sentiments—love and passion—into marriage and U.S. citizenship stimulate feelings of patriotic nationalism as love translates modern values of choice and equality in contrast to marital contracts procured out of necessity, economic exchange, or coercion.

This book is as much about understanding the desires that fuel foreign intimacies, marriage, and middle-class migration as it is about how local and global discourses and technologies shape transnationally directed desires. *Love and Empire* places the eroticized body and sentiments of love at the center of subjectivity, mobility, citizenship, and future possibilities, especially during a time when new technologies, state economic strategies, and media imaginaries promise virtual transcendence, to shuttle people into exciting futures that seem untenable within their local contexts. As my research in Guadalajara, Cali, and on-line uncovered, for some women and men, the Internet and the marketplace foster new connections between the interiority of feelings and one’s relation to the body, especially the idea that national borders, and even the body, are virtual and thus pliable terrains. To imagine oneself as pliable counters the various regimes of femininity enforced and stabilized by familial codes of female respectability, dominant definitions of beauty and attractiveness, feminized labor regimes, state immigration policies, academic scholarship and activism, popular media representations, and international marriage broker websites. Thus, throughout the book, I trace the tension between the forces of globalization, and especially the neoliberal marketplace—such as the idea that everyone has equal access to mobility—as they grate against regimes of governmentality. I analyze the political economy of desire in relation to technological and neoliberal discourses, state governance, and media images that disseminate romantic representations of the good life. When one privileges an understanding of the global through virtual intimacies, the foreign and the nation are experienced as prosthetics that extend the body in ways and places that confound the lines between here and there, the virtual and the real, the self and the other, and the traditional and modern.

Through virtual romance, participants find confirmation in a sense of belonging that unmoors them from identities and opportunities tied to geographic, racial, social, and cultural locations. The aspiration to upward mobility depends on and reconfigures three technologies for transcending one’s subjectivity: sentiments of love, virtuality, and entrepreneurialism. Each of these facets of self-making are predicated on the rewiring of mobility and citizenship in a global era. *Romantic love* invokes the religious and
secular in its promise to transcend the specificity and locality of bodies and borders, including social, legal, and economic barriers, and to dissolve differences into universal, or even divine, notions of the human. The virtual terrain of the Internet similarly promises utopian futures in which bodies are pliable (infinitely changeable and upwardly mobile) while rendering national borders and geographies meaningless. And lastly, neoliberal policies and entrepreneurialism promise to accelerate nations and individuals into the future of global capital and American ingenuity, into class strata otherwise unattainable.

Intimate contact with the foreign relies on the myth of remaking the self and national body, of purification, rejuvenation, and new beginnings. Latin American women describe their search for intimacy and marriage with foreign men on-line as a critical avenue for self-realization, of positioning oneself as modern and emotionally human and thus as deserving of love and devotion by men who travel a great distance. Not coincidentally, U.S. immigration laws force couples to demonstrate “true” love as an indicator of their innocence, or unselfish distinction from the potential economic benefits of immigration and citizenship. Furthermore, as Latin American countries restructure their economies toward “capitalist democracies,” states must “clean up” the image of the nation. More specifically, the Colombian state projects itself as productive—through images of enterprising workers alongside fertile raw materials—by wiping out dissenting, or merely poor, populations; displacing people from their farms, trade, and land; and projecting an alluring image of the nation as a pure, innocent, and eroticized woman. In a similar vein, some Colombian women turn to cosmetic surgery to project their enterprising spirit, while rendering invisible the compulsory nature of femininity and beauty permeating their everyday lives.

These forms of emotional innocence are central to the forging of what I call pliable citizenship, or the grounded ways Latinas become part of the most intimate structures of the family, the nation-state, and the global economy. Women's placement within transnational labor markets and entrance into U.S. citizenship rely on their role as raw materials and pliable subjects that can be remade by development and molded into U.S. citizens. Their perceived malleability, youth, and innocence assures they will not be a threat to the U.S. family or nation and that their eroticized sexuality will be productive rather than destructive of the moral boundaries of the nation. Gendered emotions are naturalized into the fibers of the body as the productive sphere of the market meets the reproductive capacities of women's association with domesticity and family. Women's mobilization of passion situates the Latin American nation in both the secular time of production, futurity, and profit.
and the sacred time of reproduction and eternal rejuvenation. Thus, rather than construe women’s erotic placement in the Western imaginary as simply the exploitation of gendered labor traded for the economic perks of marriage migration, I use the term pliable citizenship to underscore the ways women’s virtual remakings of their bodies and affective trajectories augment their local value but also reinforce how states authorize moral migration and national inclusion, while justifying the surveillance and exclusion of illicit and dangerous bodies. By moral migration, I refer to the state’s adjudicating of migrant inclusion based on an individual’s positive contributions to the economic and ideological order of the nation. Codes of morality here rely on proof of love as the criterion for individual (or exceptional) accounts of free choice versus the masses of migrants who are, in contrast, encumbered by economic necessity and thus a lack of freedom.9 There are intersecting dynamics at play between my conception of pliable citizenship and Aihwa Ong’s use of “flexible citizenship,” a term that highlights the dispersed connections that elite Chinese actors have to multiple passports and national belonging. For these actors, argues Ong (1999), national citizenship is less important for the feelings attached to a place and its forms of governance than for the desire to flexibly take advantage of uneven currencies and privileges offered by each nation. In the case of foreign intimacies, pliability stresses strategies of advancement and personal fulfillment whereby some women resculpt their bodies to emphasize emotions and practices that align them with entrepreneurial strategies, as well as with global and national citizenship. For many, their body is a surface that translates femininity and eroticized beauty when language differences compromise verbal communication, but it is also a raw material that women themselves cultivate as they adapt to changing global economic conditions and access to rights.

In addition, Elizabeth Povinelli’s approach to the relational binds between carnality and corporality clarify my approach to the entanglements of flesh and discourse, or the embodied consequences that contour how people are imagined.10 Rather than argue that power structures how men and women act, or presume a cause-and-effect relation between the discursive and material expressions and enactments of the body, I am similarly interested in their interconnectedness, how they “mutually oblige.”11 By examining the language used by participants in their desires for foreign marriage, this book seeks to understand how ideologies of American democracy, marketplace freedoms, and benevolent law are reinforced, repurposed, and sometimes broken down in the most intimate expressions governing desire. I am interested here in how the distribution of opportunities obligate, but does not fully contain, certain forms of embodiment and intimacy for Latin American women.
My focus on intimacy—heterosexual love, sexuality, and desire—is an analytic, drawn from women's accounts, to demarcate proximity or closeness to foreign nationalism, the human, and citizenship. When viewed from women's perspectives, foreign marriage translates as protest, or the refusal to abide by traditional gender roles and opportunities at home. Traditional roles—enforced by a middle-class structure of respectability, Catholicism, and a national economic strategy reliant on (devalued) feminized labor—feel out of touch but also restrict women's ability to fulfill everyday hopes and dreams. In contrast, foreign intimacy offers a coded political language for privileging marketplace values of equality, democracy, and an entrepreneurial spirit as well as entrance into global dramas of belonging. Women's turn away from Catholicism to Protestantism reflects the aspirational pull of the American dream in satisfying women's longing for hard work, rather than faith, to materialize goals and dreams. In this context, sentiments of love, then, necessitate a more expansive understanding of the political in relation to forms of belonging and citizenship. Ideologies of heterosexual love for migrant women enforce their compliance to traditional gender roles, as love translates patriotism but also offers a coded language to differentiate women's robust humanity and thus distance from a U.S. culture that some characterize through the symbolic of alienation. The last chapter of the book explores women's declarations of love to claim patriotic inclusion, while others come to understand the heavy cost of U.S. citizenship in their everyday lives. Women's turn to U.S. marriage through a marketplace that emphasizes their family-oriented tradition (as distinct from U.S. women) does not explain women's feelings of intimate proximity to modern U.S. culture. This shift in perception renders visible new transnational middle- to upper-class alliances and migration patterns across borders.

Throughout the book, I find seemingly innocuous forms of love at the heart of struggles over empire. Women negotiate Western structures of recognition through the state's governance of “bona fide” foreign marriages and moral migration that rely on women's erotic adherence to femininity. At the height of the global economy, women's hyperfeminized bodies communicate pliability and an erotic passion calibrated toward the service of man and country, yet they also provide the inroads to fulfill women's own intimate and economic goals. Given these complex entanglements between private strategies and the state, I am wary of overprivileging women's agency as this may perpetuate neoliberal capitalist notions of individualism and pliable subjectivity.

How, then, do we reconcile women's own desires for a virtual sense of themselves unencumbered by their social location, local opportunities,
and their bodies in relation to an industry that markets their value through familiar feminized scripts? How is it that Latin American women enter into marriage commerce as superior wives than U.S. women, even during a time of heightened militarization in Mexico and Colombia and across the U.S.-Mexico border and growing nativist sentiment against Latino/a migrants? Eroticized borders and the violence of state surveillance continue to shape intimacies, even as participants desire to cross, to transcend, and to become someone new.

Heterosexual marriage is a relatively safe avenue for crossing the border unmarked by economic need during a time when many Latino/a migrants are dying in the desert and when women migrants in particular are targets of violence, such as detention, rape, and murder, by state and corporate structures complicit in the devaluing of their bodies and labor.13 Thus, marriage appeals to (and is compulsory for) women who yearn not only for a more intimate and equitable relationship but also for social respect, the ability to move across borders, and class mobility that is unavailable to nonwealthy and nonheterosexual people of color throughout the Americas. At the same time, the utter dehumanization of women on websites, in state tourism ads, and in the fantasies of some men who traffic images of their bodies as erotic objects of pleasure competes with men’s and women’s turn to cyber-romance for heightened intimacy, value, and exchange. In sum, sentiments of love express an analytic of feeling difficult to disentangle from the global economy and state governance. Emotions communicate desire and become an exceptional strategy for some women to transcend moral codes of respectability, national boundaries, and state surveillance.

Transnationality across the Américas

This book engages in an analysis of the cybermarriage industry across the United States and two cities in Latin America: Guadalajara, Mexico, and Cali, Colombia. I had not initially intended this book to be comparative. Yet my initial interest in Mexico could not answer why Colombia soon replaced Mexico as one of the most popular Latin American countries for cybermarriage.14 As I write this introduction, one of the marriage agencies I have followed for over ten years no longer offers Vacation Romance Tours to Mexico. GlobalLatinas recently dropped Mexico, expanded service into more regions of Colombia, and added tours to Peru and Panama.15 The proximity of Mexico and the excitement of intensified commerce in the late 1990s proved ideal in the beginning of the industry, but interest in Mexico has waned greatly as the surge of corruption and violence, coupled with
heightened fears over smuggling and sex trafficking, has hindered the ease and legitimacy of commerce, marriage, and travel. Increased trade relations with Colombia and the remaking of the country as a land of “passion” brought even more beautiful and “untouched” women into the Western imaginary. Equally important, but unremarked on websites, is the political and economic context that contributes to some Colombian women’s motivation to leave the country, especially at a time when migration is on the rise for the Colombian middle class as a national solution toward a better life. Similar to U.S. corporate empire, this industry works through its ever-expanding reach into more “untouched” or virgin territories. Both countries’ popularity, however, reflects the continued relevance of imperial legacies animating the global circuits that bind Latin America with the United States. Both Mexico and Colombia have been drastically transformed (albeit unevenly) by economic and social crises, histories of migration to the United States, commerce, and trade, including trade policies and tourist markets that shape trajectories for a more prosperous future to be found elsewhere. Perhaps cybermarriage is more feasible today due to the feminization of labor, migration, and the normalization of an entrepreneurial ethos of self-help that makes contact with U.S. business culture and men attractive, rewarding, and desirable. And that both countries figure centrally as threatening sites for drug and human trafficking ensures that the United States plays a significant role in mandating how goods and people (especially women) cross borders, on the basis of moral categories of licit versus illicit, moral versus immoral.

In comparing two regions with such disparate colonial histories and their attendant formations of race, class, and sexuality, a complex story emerges, even as I followed couples through the same U.S. web-based company offering tours to Mexico and Colombia. Women’s representation through traditional femininity and/or an erotic imaginary affected where men traveled and how women navigated their relationship to these stereotyped categories. Women from Guadalajara, the majority professional and middle class—known for their ojos tapatías (dark, Moorish eyes) and light skin, reflecting colonial contact with the Spanish and French—maneuvered U.S. men’s perception of them as mysterious yet familiar and compatible because of their family traditions. On the other hand, mostly working-class women in Cali (who aspired to upward class mobility)—an Afro-Colombian region known for salsa and exotic mulatas—flaunted their sexual and entrepreneurial prowess, oftentimes through cosmetic alterations. In both countries, yet through distinct articulations, women emphasized their desires for foreign romance and marriage through a sense of themselves as entrepreneurial and
modern. Once again, women turned to U.S. men hoping for a more modern and equitable marriage than those found at home.

Intimacies across great geographic and cultural differences, such as between Latin American women and Anglo cowboys or even Spanish colonizers, remind us that contemporary cybermarriages are not new. The violence and death caused by colonization, war, industrialization, and global capitalism cannot be underestimated. But alongside these brutal contact zones arise unexpected alliances, intimacies, opportunities, and migrations. Colonial encounters and U.S. empire produce violent borders of inequality and categories of difference, but these territories have also been the locations where the exotic “other” excited the Western imagination. In a similar fashion, the theorization of the borderlands in Chicana/o scholarship documents the physical and psychic violence of U.S. empire but also the complicated negotiations with power that enabled the colonized, including women, to challenge Spanish rule and Catholic dictates through shifting alliances with U.S. culture and religion. These transnational intimacies capture the longings of aspiring Latin American women, many who have taken flight from Spanish Catholic dictates of duty and fate as the means for securing their spiritual and economic destiny. Instead, women turn to homegrown informal economies, local strategies that collide with Protestant and American corporate values of ingenuity, flexibility, and inventiveness. Similar to colonial studies that theorize hybrid processes through the lens of syncretism, this book bridges the ways contemporary entrepreneurial erotics merge local Latin American informal economic strategies with the U.S. drive toward global ascendency.

It is the legacy of these paradigms that inform feminist transnational approaches to cross-border phenomena, extending my analysis from the erotics of borders to the erotics of capital. The eroticization of difference not only relies on territorial borders and power imbalances between nations but follows the discrepant flows of capital. It is perhaps the figurative occupation that cyber-romance gestures to—the psychological, even productive, presence of the United States in the Mexican and Colombian imagination and vice versa, however conflicted and contradictory these sentiments may be. Border conflicts, produced during moments of empire and struggles over land and sovereignty, have been culturally resolved in the United States via representations of intimate affinities between the sexy señorita and the benevolent U.S. cowboy, a marriage that legalized U.S. men’s ownership of key trade industries and property. Cybermarriages persist in espousing the ideological belief that love can solve personal and global woes and usher in a world order characterized by free trade, choice, and individual freedom.
New corporate cultures and the rapid infusion of capital into Latin America, Russia, and Asia follow a celebratory logic of the inevitability of globalization, new markets, sexual cultures, and desires across global zones. Yet, as I discuss in chapter 3, interviews with U.S. men reveal other outcomes of global capitalism, as some express a sense of alienation and fear of being replaced in the home and workforce. They blame these feelings on intimate rearrangements and, in particular, former U.S. wives who fled the home for a seat in corporate America, rather than seeing their woes as connected to global profit and labor restructuring. It becomes necessary to understand social and cultural processes from a U.S. and Latin American perspective but also, in the context of virtual imaginaries carved at the borders of these fields and territories, to assess the flexibility of meanings and power relations across time and space.

Postrace Multiculturalism and the Virtual Imaginary

Given the heightened security of national borders and state sovereignty, virtual worlds and imaginaries offer a viable medium to transcend the limitation of bodies and borders. These imaginaries may prove fertile engagements with U.S. nationalism, itself a virtual space for generating dreams of a futurity beyond difference, race, pain, and suffering. The rise of the Internet in the early 1990s shuttled information and fantasies of elsewhere into one's everyday life, akin to other advances such as the railroad, ships, the telegraph, the postal service, the newspaper, photography, radio, and television. The spread of the Internet into Latin America accompanied the march of Hollywood and local *telenovelas* offering melodramatic solutions to economic and political problems—where chivalrous Western (or light-skinned local) men promise to transform any downtrodden situation into a glamorous romance. The romance of marriage also appeals to U.S. men, who, in chat rooms, discuss which countries and regions they should travel to in order to find a foreign wife.

Men's perception of difference is not expressed racially but instead through fantasies of global multiculturalism that celebrate individualized difference as a marketable trait that promises to rejuvenate the self and nation. The paradigm of individualism negates the possibility of pointing to structural inequalities informing racial and sexual categories inherited from colonization and U.S. empire. In cyber-studies on race, the rise of the Internet alongside the neoliberal marketplace discursively shapes the idea that identities are flexible and the stability of race, gender, and the body obsolete. Virtuality symbolizes a democratic palimpsest where all is possible for those
who connect, offering a tool for the subversive spread of information and the intermixing of bodies across otherwise closed borders. Nevertheless, the idea that everyone has equal access to transcending nation-state borders (or the social consequences of race, class, gender, and sexuality) and to becoming someone new merges dangerously close to neoliberal dreams in which all who connect are promised new beginnings, unfettered mobility, and democracy. It is in the virtual multicultural imaginary that a romantic ethic of individualism and an entrepreneurial, do-it-yourself romantic spirit comes to life. Through virtual romance, participants find confirmation in a sense of belonging that unmoors them from identities and opportunities traditionally tied to geographic, racial, social, and cultural locations.

To analyze global processes through affect foregrounds an individual’s craving to become someone special in the face of a culture of insignificance and alienation affecting broader sectors of the population at the margins of modernity and society. To focus one’s energies on romance, and especially foreign marriage, is to express one’s desire to be noticed and to arrest the attention of another across great distance. Similarly, becoming someone is inextricable from the desire to become valuable in a culture increasingly predicated on visibility. In culture industries and the state imaginary, romance and marriage offer respectable forms of female empowerment, placing intimacy and foreign love at the center of global dramas. In addition, desire is an act of becoming, of movement, of enacting oneself in the world through the image of how one is valued on a global stage. While media is a powerful venue for fostering collective desires and possible worlds, the Internet is a unique place where those who have access can play a leading role in these broader social dramas. The Internet fosters what Henrietta Moore calls “fantasies of identity,” which are “ideas about the kind of person one would like to be and the sort of person one would like to be seen to be by others.” While the colonial contours of Internet fantasies have material consequences, I am also interested in how women and men themselves occupy and destabilize what Lisa Nakamura calls “cybertyped” identities. Despite utopian claims that technologies such as the Internet will usher in a “post-body” era in which the stigma of race, gender, and class no longer matter, race continues to matter, albeit in forms that continually morph and restructure. The present national narrative of arriving at a postracial moment reflects the ideology of nation building. Individual migrants continue to be lured in with the ideology, “you can craft yourself anew on these shores!” Americanization is itself a virtual fantasy emptied of racial and class strife, a temporal present in which the violence of indigenous conquest and slavery reside outside national borders and in the past. This story of marriage
migration complicates where the lines of exploitation reside and how Latin American women who aspire to class mobility negotiate representations of their sexualized bodies in creative and meaningful ways, while also reproducing exceptional paradigms of the successful individual.

These virtual quests are just as much about the magnetic draw of romance with the glamorous life of visibility as they are about the desire to become normal and to live a life full of love, respect, safety, and comfort. Furthermore, while some Latin American women feel devalued by Latin men and a culture they feel takes them for granted, they take pleasure and find fulfillment in being sought after by U.S. men who travel a great distance to meet them. They also see opportunities for a better life for themselves and their families in these international romances. For men and women, being valued from afar confirms a sense of respect that positively shapes their sense of themselves at home and around the world but may also reproduce gendered power differences.

It is not simply women’s (or even men’s) bodies that are eroticized through desire, but nationality and citizenship itself. I listened to many U.S. men explain how empowering it felt to capture the attention of so many Latin American women (and vice versa), and both expressed a lack of value and general invisibility in their local contexts. Despite the fact that the majority of male participants were Anglo men, Latino and African American men also expressed a sense of displacement from the promise of national inclusion and empowerment, even when they achieved economic success in the United States. Most men experienced themselves as more valuable—via their heightened attractiveness and access to more rights as tourists with greater spending power—during their love quests in Latin America. Ironically, men use the advanced technology of the Internet to mediate their travel abroad in the hopes of finding a more caring, loving, and feminine woman, fantasized as unscathed by the spread of capitalism and modernity.

When Mexican and Colombian women describe feeling like an American even before they reach the United States, this says something about the need to reconceptualize the time and space of the foreign and the nation. What it feels like to be an American, however, changes once they marry and move to the United States. Affinity with the West (which differs depending on women’s class and regional location) follows women’s familiarity with U.S. culture, which can include years of schooling in private international education; the consumption of Western products and ways of life (such as watching U.S. films, news, and media programs); work with American corporations; or contact with U.S. tourists, migrants, or family and friends living in the United States. The range of Western intrusions instills deeply held desires for
living the American dream. When I was living in Guadalajara, some Mexican comrades and I experienced the collective shock of 9/11, which reminded us how strangely close we felt to a moment that came to affect all of us and our loved ones in unforeseen ways. The transnational reach of Mexican media caters to the majority of Mexican nationals whose daily lives involve entangled relationships and sentiments with the United States.

Other women I interviewed felt more American through their shared values of Protestantism or a culture of meritocracy based on hard work and the idea that one should live one’s life according not simply to custom, or through a religious cosmology preset by destiny and the afterlife, but a spiritual orientation tailored to one’s individual needs. To feel American, then, is expressed as potential, as a future. U.S. men’s chat-room discussions about traveling to Latin America and finding a wife there often included the pleasure of being treated “like a king” outside the United States, a virtual sense of self that may or may not translate when one returns home with a Latin American wife. Men feel that their “natural” role as head of the family, idealized during the 1950s, has changed dramatically, compromising their present moral placement in relation to the law, citizenship, and the national imaginary.

Their desire to reclaim this dominant position flies in the face of some women’s desire for an equitable relationship, although men in these discussions often qualified their role as head of the family as involving great care, economic support, and attention to their wives. To “feel like a king” and to feel like an American go hand in hand. Perhaps this desire explains why men spend many hours of their day, and in fact years, lurking and/or communicating with other men who share similar romantic desires in on-line chat rooms, whether they marry or remain single. For both Latin American women and U.S. men, feeling like an American is invented, deeply felt, performed, and enacted across virtual and face-to-face contact with others.

Despite the range of experiences with foreign marriage—some end up happy in a long-term marriage; others leave home full of hope only to be disappointed and forced to return; some use the system to attain citizenship; and a few were even killed—foreign cybermarriage fantasies flicker in the minds and hearts of many women as the route to happy futures and better lives. Heterosexual love within foreign marriage—as proof of one’s capacity for choice, modernity, and the ability to enter into contracts out of emotional attachments rather than economic (or selfish) rationales—translates as the moral place for equitable governance and value, in contrast to women’s potential as exploited objects, the most inhuman abuse of a subject disassociated from affect or value.
True Love: A Modern Value

My conception and use of the term cybermarriage refuses the genealogy of “mail-order brides” as merely exploited bodies of transit. Given the association of cybermarriage with trafficking, these industries must morally differentiate intimacies procured through the market (i.e., prostitution) from marriage, a domain historically tied to privacy, or authentic love and emotion-based sexuality. Current cybermarriage legislation—provoked by state rumors over trafficking “epidemics,” sensational media accounts, and a few feminist activists—demands better protection of women and acute surveillance of a potentially exploitative industry. Similar to the smuggling trade, international marriage brokers (and marriage migrants) are viewed as dangerous because they operate as an agent of migration, brokering the movement of female bodies across national borders and operating within the vast frontier of the Internet, at the margins of state control and scrutiny. State surveillance over foreign intimacies and marriage gains moral traction through the need to “protect” women, rendering invisible the complicity of state immigration policies in mandating foreign marriage commerce for the purposes of migration and citizenship.

My intent in the book, however, is not to prove whether or not cybermarriage is part of the sex-trafficking trade (a goal other scholars have persuasively argued against) but to question why foreign marriage intimacies symbolize such an important barometer of modernity and national inclusion but also a threat to freedom, feminism, and the U.S. state, thereby justifying more state surveillance and regulation. In getting to this question, it is useful to take seriously why many Latin American women view foreign marriages as more equitable, modern, and associated with freedom, while policy and immigration debates, influenced by some feminists concerned with women’s exploitation, characterize cybermarriage as a coercive industry that takes advantage of women who lack other choices. Part of the discrepancy between exploitation and choice can be explained through differing definitions and demands required of citizenship as an obligation that must be entered into freely by participants across the United States and Latin America.

Trafficking discourses project such a potent language of exploitation because they demarcate women’s “lack of choice” or bondage to patriarchal power in marriage and their forced mobility through a sexual labor contract. Cybermarriage industries, similar to sex trafficking, have attracted the attention of feminist scholars, activists, the media, and policymakers as a key arena for negotiating the lines between freedom and enslavement. Many dredge fears that foreign marriage may serve as a venue for transporting
women into enslaved conditions of forced sex in marriage. These debates pivot on differentiating choice from obligation or coercion, resurrecting older feminist concerns about universal gender exploitation and the idea of marriage as a patriarchal institution that exploits women’s labor. This return to a preindustrial separation of authentic intimacy from capitalist relations of exchange dovetails with state discourses on trafficking and contradicts the new direction of transnational feminist scholarship attendant to the complexity of structural power and agency across and within national borders, with which this book more closely aligns. The resurgence of U.S. feminist debates prompted me to consider not only how foreign romantic fantasies influence the everyday lives and choices made by U.S. men and Latin American female participants but also how this imaginary continues to inspire state immigration policies as well as some mainstream feminist theories and activism meant to protect women.

The separation of Latin American women from the spread of global capital, entangled in most relationships today via capitalism’s squeeze into our everyday lives, also informs U.S. men’s fantasies of Latin American women, whom they associate with spirituality, innocence, and tradition. And while these various contingencies cast doubt and suspicion on relationships that traverse national boundaries, U.S. Internet dating practices are normalized, thereby motivating me to ask, what investments in love—as it intersects with race, class, nationality, and gender—are threatened by foreign marriage migration? In turn, what consequences do struggles over foreign marriage migration have on who counts as a patriot, a citizen, and a human? In addition, how do we make sure critical portrayals and perceptions of foreign marriage do not collude with regimes of governmentality and citizenship that determine who should have access to life (value, respectability, futurity, migration, and the good life) versus death (evacuation of economic resources and opportunities, invisibility, and undocumented migration and possible death)?

The uniting of exploitation with the lack of choice are taken up and naturalized in immigration policies that determine authentic marriages and citizenship through the proof of “true love.” The separation of intimacies based on choice from those procured through family contacts or economic need relegates other intimate formations—such as the marriage of convenience, in which intimacies develop over time and through mutual obligation and support—as backward and exploitative. Today, state immigration debates classify the marriage of convenience (also known as the “arranged marriage”) as a “sham marriage.” Marriages orchestrated for personal gain or other strategic purposes raise suspicion and define the limits of national borders and
bodies. For mainstream society, from Hollywood to Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE), the marriage of convenience typifies a social contract that is not only outmoded but a threat to modern societies based on love, or the freedom of choice, individualism, and democratic governance based on equality (see chapter 1).

The state’s curious protection of love as the criterion for citizenship actually guards the virtual ideology of the nation as freely chosen, equitable, and democratic. Marital contracts procured out of need or gross inequalities, rather than altruistic love, continue to determine difference and the exteriority of U.S. national boundaries and kinship. Forced contracts depict conditions of enslavement and forms of governance that contrast with those that are freely chosen in the United States. It is the patriotic bonds of love and mutual gain that prop up ideologies of national equality and freedom in marriage, labor, and citizenship contracts. Thus, modern U.S. definitions of freedom, as constituted through free choice and equality, are intelligible as the freedom from obligation, while I argue that for Latin American women, the marketplace of foreign marriage symbolizes the freedom to enter into contractual relations based on mutual obligations. I contend that it is the West’s stubborn sense of negative freedom, the freedom from obligation that continues to define authentic intimacies, sociality, and even citizenship. For this reason, love encapsulates the ideal Western sentiment to express an obligation that is freely chosen and unconstrained by social obligation (family or oligarchy) or economic restraints.

My argument here is influenced by Elizabeth Povinelli’s book The Empire of Love (2006), in which she locates structures of governance—embedded in medicine, law, and rights—through what she calls the “intimate event.” Western ideologies of normative love, typified by liberal values of individual freedom in settler colonial societies, solidify in opposition to social constraint (or the genealogical society, traced through the Aboriginal community that Povinelli knows deeply). It is the interdependence of these imagined social worlds today that restimulate one’s adherence to the myth of national belonging.

I label these structures of obligation as they converge with citizenship liberal citizenship. U.S.-style liberal citizenship—the heightened focus on individual freedom through liberal notions of a nonbinding relationship to others (what some Latin American women define as a cold or alienating culture), or one’s entrance into contracts through free choice (unencumbered by economic desperation, family, or selfish factors)—coincides with the shift in governance from the welfare state to the neoliberal state, where individuals are encouraged to free themselves from an unhealthy dependency on the
state, instead being encouraged toward self-sufficiency and independence. Yet idealizing modern sentiments of freedom as the departure from obligation bolster neoliberal state governance at a time when the state has increasingly withdrawn, even pathologized, its obligation to citizens (evident in the demonizing of welfare recipients, the criminalizing and sexualizing of migrants, etc.).

Mexican and Colombian women express an alienated relation to citizenship not because of their exclusion or alien status (foreignness) from U.S. citizenship but because of feelings of abandonment in Latin America, especially their decreased value and disposability in the home, in the labor market, and in relation to state power and national belonging. During a time of great global changes, women's value and earning capacity has the potential to increase through their global marketability and access to foreign capital and markets. The foreign serves as a viable strategy during a time when economic and political conditions at home have made it difficult to earn a middle-class wage, have stressed familial and social ties, and have increased violent conditions for women. It is thus no coincidence that in interviews, Mexican and Colombian women blame Latin men and excessive state power for the breakdown of the family, law, and order (see chapter 2). In other words, women blame the failed contract with men in marriage and with the state, institutions that fail to provide economic security or personal safety in protecting women from violence inside and outside the home. Access to more equitable intimate and legal structures promise women closer ties to others and the state, a notion of reciprocity, rather than freedom, that eschews the alienation of a culture of individualism in the United States. Thus, women’s willing entrance into the foreign marriage marketplace as erotic objects of exchange not only demarcates how women’s sexualized bodies provide the conduit to labor exchange and citizenship status but also explains their subjective desires for more affective contracts that bind people together intimately and economically offering more legally binding obligations between citizens and the state. Relations with U.S. men and the nation-state are valuable for women who seek a more equitable exchange than local marriage, labor, and citizenship contracts.

These desires for mutual exchange challenge U.S. perspectives that attribute the increasing encroachment of Western modernity and technologies (i.e., capitalism) into human relations to heightened exploitation and alienation. Even within sociological studies that uncover globalization through a gendered analysis of emotions, scholars lament the rationalization of emotion and intimacies that collapse utilitarian values endemic to capitalism and business culture with nonmarket, private-sphere exchanges. Examples of
this collusion of affect and capitalism can be found in new studies in which
corporate life is generating more emotional-style management to project
democratic work relations; marriage is identified by companionate models based on friendships and the “team spirit” of the corporate shop floor; romance and sexuality are entangled in the culture of consumption, bought and sold on-line; and on-line sexuality and intimacy proliferate with others with whom one may never have face-to-face contact. Anthony Giddens’ influential theorization of the pure relationship, an intimate exchange of pure pleasure unencumbered by obligation (and most ideally found, he argues, in gay couplings), reinforces the divide between emotionally based relationships and the transactional relationship, marriage, or commercial sex. The collusion of love and sexuality alongside liberal ideals of democratic equality perpetuates the idea that sexual intimacy based on consent is more modern than “traditional” intimacies contracted by families and based on social obligations, differentiating certain social relations as the basis for a modern democracy.

Against the dehumanizing thrust of modern technologies and its potential alienation, participants in the cybermarriage industry emphasize sentiments of love to counter feeling devalued, deviant, or alienated from social norms. During my interviews with U.S. men, Mexican and Colombian women, and agency owners, sentiments of love differentiated moral business and personal practices from illicit avenues for profit or sexualized economies of trade. For most women, marriages based on love set them apart from traditional marriages based on uneven obligations; for married couples and immigration officials, true marriage founded on romantic love distinguished authentic from fraudulent couplings; romantic love assured middle-class moral status in contrast to the sex trade; and lastly, love determined authentic (and patriotic) citizenry.

Newly emergent desires and intimacies warrant more nuanced theories for the expression of modern subjectivities by the middle class in Latin America that go beyond one’s access to consumption and participation in the global culture of taste. In addition to consumption, sentiments increasingly translate, and bring into proximity, modern transnational affinities. In privileging sentiments, scholars argue that transformations in intimacy across the globe—due to changes in economic, political, and social structures—demonstrate a shift in marriage from an institution based on tradition, kinship obligations, social reproduction, and survival to one that privileges individuals and their desire for intimacy, pleasure, and individual expression. As Mark B. Padilla et al. argue, expressions of love are more often articulated alongside the lure of modernity, as individually chosen,
deeply felt, and “authentic.” It is through romance that modern values of individual choice, democracy, development, and utopian futures of abundance are enunciated.

A sense of oneself as modern, when examined from a transborder perspective, also confounds these divides as they may include inequalities, kin obligations, exchanges of services, and discrepant meanings of love. For marriage migrants, rights and citizenship status no longer rely solely on visual categories of race and birthright but also on affective claims to innocence (as another expression of whiteness). In the cybermarriage industry, both men and women describe themselves as marginal actors in their native regions but as more valuable subjects to people outside their respective nation. Through claims to an affective disposition with the West, some Latin American women reconfigure their bodies not through difference but through sameness. While websites and tourist zones rely on difference to sell the “other,” global citizenship depends on universal structures of recognition or sameness. Women, and even men, are caught in the middle of having to attract the other through niche marketing while also translating their worth as equitable, democratic partners through the language of romantic love. Western middle-class values of “choice” are also smuggled into intimate paradigms, such as Anthony Giddens’s assertion that the promise of democracy is evident in intimate relationships. The language of affect, or love, proves an appropriate technology for claiming individuality and innocence, or moral and proper engagement with the nation and citizenship. At the same time, women’s declarations of love confine them to certain speech acts and normative structures of desire. Their expressions of love also go beyond the state, gesturing toward the sacred and divine and thus transcending the governance and ideology of the West and that of the family as they touch a notion of the human that extends to all, challenging the binary position of self/other that plagues U.S.–Latin American relations.

Love and Empire’s analysis of the politics of intimacy draws from queer and transnational feminist scholarship that theorizes the political sphere as inseparable from and, in fact, produced through affective cultures and investments. As argued by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, intimacy has increasingly expressed the normative place of heterosexual politics and citizenship, especially as private sentiments including ethics, responsibility, and values replace state mandates for social justice and thus enforce the boundaries between moral persons and economic ones. They argue,

Ideologies and institutions of intimacy are increasingly offered as a vision of the good life for the destabilized and struggling citizenry of the United
States, the only (fantasy) zone in which a future might be thought and willed, the only (imaginary) place where good citizens might be produced away from the confusing and unsettling distractions and contradictions of capitalism and politics. In this book, eroticized emotions exceed personal and social fantasies; become the productive force driving Colombia’s and Mexico’s labor, tourism, and marriage markets; and delineate moral and immoral migratory movements and rights. Women’s eroticized emotions, virtualized onto their bodies, are national goods to be exported, critical symbols of the nation’s hospitality and safety, and abundant natural resources waiting to be developed by international investment. Thus, foreign marriage—while an institution idealized as providing access to privacy and a life protected from intrusion by the state—renders natural (or unnatural) middle-class affections, making it difficult to ascertain how emotions function as a moral passport facilitating passage across borders.

Gender, Sexuality, and Migration

Feminist scholarship on gendered migration gained momentum in the early 1990s, challenging traditional push/pull models of migration that privileged masculine actors and economic triggers. These approaches examined global restructuring and its effects on the feminization of labor and migration, while others reached back farther to question how colonial institutions shape gendered labor markets today, including feminized service industries such as domestics, nurses, wives, and sex workers. This seminal scholarship contributes to the broader context of eroticized femininity whereby Latin American marriage migrants are idealized for their sensuality, care, sexuality, and traditional family values. Much of this work has generated new understandings as to how impoverished women participate in gendered migration circuits as an economic survival strategy. Less examined, however, is this book’s focus on middle-class or aspiring marriage migrants whose rationale transcends strictly economic reasons or survival strategies to include affective claims to citizenship and belonging.

Other feminist scholars, refuting the inherited economic measurements of migration, have turned to the emotional repercussions of border crossing for individuals and families left behind when parents, and especially mothers, transfer their care from their own families to those of their employers. Rhacel Parreñas charts the intimate ties binding migrants in the Global South with their Western employers through what she calls the “chain of
love.”54 Building on this, Arlie Hochschild similarly argues that love and care are the new natural resources, the “new gold” excavated from the Global South, a form of labor rendered invisible by its naturalization onto bodies in the Global South.55 Drawing from a Marxist framework in which modern capitalism increasingly alienates subjects from the process and product of their labor, Hochschild asks, what happens when the labor produced is not a commodity but a feeling? What kinds of alienation and trauma do women from the Global South suffer when feelings are transferred from their own family in the Global South to another’s in the Global North?56 While marriage websites and company owners pitch the benefits of plundering Latin America for its natural resources of passion, abundant in images of available women, women’s own descriptions of love as a claim to belonging move the discussion beyond their alienation as usable commodities for U.S. profit and pleasure.

In the vein of rethinking the unintended consequences of global restructuring on intimacy, other scholars follow the recent surge in international marriages that cross uneven geographies and labor migrations among Asia and Pacific Island regions. The use of ethnographic methods here affords greater insight into the relevance of borders and difference on the ground as well as the complicated meanings of class, race, and power in cross-national marriages.57 These studies open space to assess the flexibility of meanings that permeate these encounters and the possibility for agency and press us to rethink dominant imaginaries and cultural norms. It is with these scholars, and those who look to the entanglements of sexual and economic relations in the Caribbean, including Jacqui Alexander, Kamala Kempadoo, Amalia Cabezas, and many others, that my work converses. Alexander argues that states of the Bahamas and Trinidad reanimate colonial laws through contemporary economic restructuring that legislates against certain deviant sexualities while profiting from a political economy of desire that relies on women’s hypersexuality.58 In an attempt to carve a space for alternative desires and economies, to deconstruct the macro depictions of global inequalities that reproduce the Global South as a mecca for hypersexuality, Kempadoo argues that Caribbean women accentuate their sexualized bodies as a decolonial tool toward their own economic uplift.59 If governments and pimps can exploit women’s global cachet as authentic sites for eroticized sensuality, then some women may also enact this stereotype for their own personal gain. Other scholars, similarly concerned with agency, acknowledge the complexities of sex work within specific countries, regions, and spaces as inseparable from economic pressures but also open up the possibility for mutual responsibility, intimacy, and sometimes even pleasure.60 Alongside these studies, this
book understands the importance of microstructures of power through pleasure but warns that the paradigm of agency may reinforce neoliberal models that privilege the individual.

In my analysis of eroticized sentiments, I am not interested in excavating an inner “truth” of sex (or of the subject). Queer scholarship, heavily influenced by Foucault’s theorization of sex as a technology of governance, foregrounds sexuality as a discursive construct (with material consequences) that is historically managed and produced through a variety of state institutions. Burgeoning studies on the intersection of sexuality and migration trouble the coupling of sexuality with the private or intimate sphere, leading some scholars, such as Eithne Luibhéid, to question the role of the state in making heterosexuality compulsory when crossing borders or through the marketing of bodies to attract foreign capital for sex tourism. It is here that my analysis of transnational intimacies concerns not only individual structures of desire but an understanding of how desire is inextricable from an engagement with power and its demise. These intimate stories dislocate obvious iterations of modernity and citizenship and are quiet cries for divine placement within universal understandings of the human premised not on sameness but on reciprocal relations of care, love, and respect.

Methodology: Virtual Ethnography

In order to follow U.S. men and Latin American women across time and space—from before and during their romantic encounters to after some of them marry—I conducted virtual ethnographies with men and women in chat rooms, sometimes as a participant in the discussion and other times as a “lurker,” or unidentified voyeur. In addition to interviewing couples at the Vacation Romance Tours in Guadalajara, Mexico, and Cali, Colombia, I translated for couples during their dates (and followed one man’s search for a bride for over a year by translating e-mail love letters) and then interviewed couples when they married and moved to the United States. In order to conduct longer interviews with women before and after the tours, I bought e-mail addresses from the marriage agency GlobalLatinas.

During the tours in Mexico and Colombia and within chat-room debates, I was struck by the fact that men and women rehearsed the same stories. Rather than assume that the repetition of these stories confirmed a “truth” about Latin American women and U.S. men, I found myself more interested in questioning why certain representations of Latin American women and U.S. men remained stable, even when men and women confronted each other face-to-face. How and why do these representational frames of Latin
American women in the U.S. imaginary and of the modern, feminist U.S. man in the Latin American imaginary—fantasies begun on-line, flickering on one’s monitor screen—continue even in face-to-face contact and despite the endless proliferation of experiences shared on men’s chat rooms? How might experience, and ethnographic evidence more generally, confound more than it reveals?

Alongside feminist debates about the radical possibilities and problems of documenting “experience,” women and men are caught within particular paradigms of knowledge and representational frames across transnational exchanges. I am hopeful that this book’s critical ethnographic approach will open up new ways of understanding the constraints and possibilities of transnational exchanges, such as how gendered forms of respectability and power interface, shaping what is possible for participants to say and what is possible for readers and myself to see and hear. Patricia Zavella’s analysis of the cultural poetics of silence opened up a space to discuss how Latinas indirectly maneuver various structures of power. It is this deconstructive approach to ethnography that generates a literary discussion about what is said against what cannot be said in the context of sexualized control. Feminist ethnography does not achieve a higher truth about the “other.” Instead, ethnography belies its fictional origins, and thus a feminist approach that explores the impossible moments of its trajectories may teach us more about the inherent betrayal and impossibility but also the need to engage in cross-cultural exchanges.

Keeping in mind the mediated fantasies, as well as the silences and limits of ethnography, this book turns to telenovelas, U.S. romance films, beauty pageants, cosmetic surgery, and state-sponsored advertisements in Latin America to provide a broader social context that contributes to the dialectic between virtual intimacies and everyday subject-making. In fact, I discovered that virtual mediations ingrain so deeply into women’s and men’s daily lives that the virtual feels more satisfying and real to participants, and the real more fictionalized and at odds with their expectations. Taking seriously the blurred nature of what is understood as virtual versus real enables an understanding of how and why eroticized representations of Latinas persist and morph in the U.S. imaginary from colonization to our current era of neoliberal capitalism, decontextualized from the specificity of the interaction, location, and temporality. Participants in the cybermarriage industry seek each other over e-mail exchanges, in short encounters on the Romance Tours, and during sporadic vacations. To be sure, these bounded encounters—the majority facilitated by some form of translation, whether language devices or actual bilingual translators—necessitate the
virtual to stretch meaning into the places that language and cultural mean-
ings of difference falter.

Language deficiencies challenged communication between couples and abetted the persistence of fantasies in face-to-face encounters. Most men I encountered did not speak Spanish, and women varied greatly in their ability to speak English. Female translators, hand-held digital dictionaries (and now voice-generated translations available on cell phone applications), and a romantic cultural imaginary mediated the fluency and intensity of transnational romance and marriage. For the nonbilingual, other aspects of the body—beauty, the eyes, gestures, and dress (professional attire for men and feminine clothes for women)—communicated gendered expectations and desires. Women often shouldered the burden of crossing language divides, while men absorbed the costs of this linguistic conversion as they paid translators to accompany them on dates and to translate e-mail exchanges and paid for women’s English classes in Latin America (and for fiancées in the United States). Though some women found this gap frustrating and typical of the uneven exchange endemic to Latin American–U.S. relations, many were also motivated to learn English as they were well aware of the global dominance of English and the opportunities it could lead to at home and abroad. Language discrepancies were hardly a barrier for men excited by the challenge to induce women into the American dream.

Structure of the Book

Because of my interest in the book in foregrounding the role of the state and citizenship in practices of intimacy, chapter 1 draws from immigration-hear-
ing debates, interviews with married couples, and recent films dramatizing green-card marriages, to question why foreign heterosexual intimacy has, since the 1980s, been so heavily scrutinized. In other words, what do these forms of marriage and intimacy threaten? I argue that it is women’s erotic citizenship—their moral standing, family values, superior reproductive qualities—that works to distance them from bodies in need—bodies of welfare, criminality, and trade—and to turn them into pliable bodies that produce and accrue value across borders. In chapter 2, I contextualize women’s stories of shifting desire from local to foreign men alongside broader transforma-
tions in Mexico that shape professional women’s conversion from the Catho-
lic Church to Protestantism. They express this shift through from the sense that their lives are spiritually predetermined to an entrepreneurial ethic that values hard work and individuals’ ability to alter themselves and their futures. Chapter 3 analyzes men’s chat-room exchanges alongside the emergence of
a self-help culture and the formation of global masculinity wedded to U.S. expansion, free trade, and empire. In line with website images and narratives, for U.S. men, Latin American women’s bodies figure centrally as the final frontier, as pure bodies and superior genes that are highly valued within a capitalist culture that men describe as devoid of domestic care, affection, and intimacy. U.S. men’s access to foreign markets and bodies promises to patriotically rejuvenate not only their identities (across race, class, and regional differences) but also the national stock and to provide an alternative to lonely and alienating lifestyles.

Chapter 4 situates interviews with women who attended the Cali tour alongside media representations of beauty and desire in *telenovelas*, advertisements, beauty pageants, and films, as well as in the current state campaign “Colombia Is Passion.” I analyze how working-class Afro-Caribbean women in Cali, Colombia, described their bodies as “pliable” in relation to the beautification process (and for many, this includes plastic surgery) in order to alter their class status, to move safely across space, as a form of pleasure, and as the compulsory reconfiguring of the body that is necessary to participate in local and global markets. Rather than understand women’s erotic bodies only through male clients and agency perspectives—as a natural resource to be exchanged and extracted from Latin America—for some Colombian women, the body can be remade as highly valuable within transnational romance, especially in the context of a local society where women describe high degrees of uncertainty, lawlessness, and stagnation.

Chapter 5 extends my inquiry into the role of love as a state-sponsored project of surveillance to a questioning of our own investment in scrutinizing particular embodiments of foreign love and marriage. In this chapter, I contend that Latin American women’s assertions of love and care for their husbands manage the lines between the “foreign” and the “native.” Influenced by Chicana, feminist, and queer scholarship, I argue that marriage migrants toe the line between their status, on the one hand, as erotic citizens, or as exceptional patriots through proper marital femininity and thus bodies deserving of rights and life, and, on the other hand, as alien or “antipatriotic immigrants” who threaten normative structures of the nation and thus must be deported or left with few rights and/or death.

The journey some women take to the United States via foreign marriage takes many turns, as do the journeys of U.S. men. Rather than engage in a moral debate over how to determine authentic marriages versus those based on the exploitative exchange of marriage for a host of other perks, I find the tensions between increased state surveillance over mobility and individual desires to transcend local meanings, norms, and possibilities key to
understanding the constrained desires for those who see a renewed interest in marriage on a global stage. Unfortunately, the critical role the state plays in shaping these desires is rendered invisible in these debates. Addressing the state head-on ensures that we understand this industry through individual or personal desires as they are shaped by unequal access to rights, migration, and citizenship.