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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20>

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Available online: 24 Jul 2007

To cite this article: Kathryn Robinson (2007): Marriage Migration, Gender Transformations, and Family Values in the 'Global Ecumene', Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography, 14:4, 483-497

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09663690701439793>

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Marriage Migration, Gender Transformations, and Family Values in the 'Global Ecumene'

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ABSTRACT *The metaphor of the market is a poor explanatory tool for the growth in international web-brokered marriages, between (mainly) men from rich countries and women from poor countries. States play an important role in regulating particular forms of migration including creating the 'need' for spousal migrants, as well as permitting their entry. The characterisation of the men who seek spouses through international agencies as powerful agents in the world system has to be mediated through understandings of the ways in which gender identities are not simple binaries that the contemporary global order is reproducing on an expanded scale. The characterisation of the women obscures the manner in which they are acting out of their own aspirations; and when a marriage is contracted, the man and woman enter into a personal relationship that cannot be reduced to a commodity exchange. These marriages involve people in negotiations about new forms of personal attachment involving intimacy, spousal roles and family relations. They are constitutive of the social networks of the 'global ecumene', a new kind of known world whose borders are constantly expanding. Gender relations are not constituted simply in the realm of the economic. We cannot assume family relations are merely expressions of dominant economic forms. The space of international web-brokered marriages is one in which women can be seen as active subjects in a transnational space that allows them to act outside, to certain degrees, of kinship-based power.*

KEY WORDS: Marriage migration; internet; family; gender identities; marriage market

Introduction

Marriage migration involving women from poor countries to spouses in rich countries arouses negative responses from the media, the general public and scholars. The shift from letter-writing to the use of websites, chat rooms and other internet media to broker the introductions has added to the anxieties about potential duplicity offered by these media to the 'moral panic' surrounding North–South marriage migration. Scholarly investigations of correspondence

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marriages have utilised pejorative symbolic referents like 'mail-order brides', or used an inappropriate metaphor of the 'marriage market' from which it follows that the women are characterised as no more than commodities.¹ The invocation of the market implies the condemnation of capitalism as a global force which intensifies inequalities. Gendered identities and practices are narrowly subsumed under its organising power as simple dichotomies coterminous with the economic axis of 'haves' (men) and 'have-nots' (women). It assumes a unified exercise of power (male/capitalist domination) and obscures the agency of the women, represented as commodified 'bodies', as 'dupes' of the brokers who run the websites and the men who seek to marry them. The critical fact that these transactions are dealing with emotional attachments is missing (see, for example, Halualani, 1995; Phelan, 2000; Ridenhour-Levitt, 1999).

The market metaphor invokes a sense of women using their 'sexual capital' to achieve economic gains through marriage and migration to a wealthy country: a view that essentialises a Western conflation of sex with the highest form of intimacy, and ignores the differential constitution of sexual subjectivities in differing social/cultural settings (see Kempadoo, 1998). And it is not only 'market forces' that order these global movements: in common with much writing on globalisation as an economic force, the exercise of state power is underplayed in this literature. State policies ordering citizenship, migration and forms of personal life are constitutive of gender regimes and impact on the reproduction of gender arrangements through marriage migration.

Contemporary studies of capitalism and its expansive form of 'globalisation' tend to use the term 'market' in a manner which bestows a coherence, as well as causative and purposive intent, to what is in the end an analytical construct. Globalisation as a discourse is 'a language of domination, a tightly scripted narrative of differential power' (Gibson-Graham, 1996, p. 120). In this 'script', capitalism extends its global spread through the inexorable penetration and reworking of non-capitalist forms which 'become damaged, violated, fallen, subordinated to capitalism' (Gibson-Graham, 1996, p. 125). In the literature on marriage migration, gender relations (subordinated women) inhabit this violated and subsumed position. Gibson-Graham draws on Marcus' (1992) paper on rape (which is concerned with feminist rewriting and reinscribing the female body) to suggest we might reconfigure the power dimensions of global capitalism by 'changing the script', by opening the field of understanding to 'discursive contestation' (Gibson-Graham, 1996, p. 128), and by rethinking 'capitalism', to divest it of 'some of its longstanding associations (for example, with dominance, natural expansiveness, wholeness, and systemacity)' (p. 213).

Drawing on this idea, of rewriting the discursive scripting of power, this paper examines the reconfiguring of gender arrangements, in particular personal identities, family forms and family values in the global space of transnational brokered marriages. It is argued that these rest on new and emerging imagined possibilities for emotional attachment, linked to negotiation of gender relations. The paper argues for an interpretative stance that moves beyond the invocation of the metaphor of 'the market' as the key to understanding new forms of social relations. Rather, there is a need to understand these marriages as an aspect of the new ways in which personal relationships are being renegotiated in social space constituted on a global level and facilitated by the global reach of capitalism. Globalisation involves a 'spatial reorganisation of social relations' in the context

of international flows and movements (Massey, 1994, p. 12) and a 'power geometry of time-space compression' (Massey, 1994, p. 14) which allows individuals multiple and different ways to access power in relation to those flows and movements. How do we view the men and women contracting brokered marriages in terms of this 'power geometry'?

This paper takes a critical lens to correspondence marriages brokered via the internet, identifying marriage as a site for the renegotiation of gender relations 'on the global stage' (Constable, 2003). This investigation reveals the narrow economism of the 'market metaphor' commonly deployed by commentators on such marriages. In addition, the globalisation of intimacy encounters the still significant role of the state in ordering personal relations, and shifting meanings of marriage. These issues are specifically addressed in the context of post-World War II Australian migration regimes.

Brokered Marriages and Global Markets

The phenomenon of 'North-South' marriage migration is an aspect of the 'new forms of global migration and growing ethnic diversity related to fundamental transformations in economic, social and political structures in this post-modern and post-Cold War epoch' (Castles & Miller, 1993, p. 2). This migration trend is characterised by the large volume of people moving from poor to rich countries, in search of work and improved economic circumstances. Many of these transactions in people mimic the processes for the movement of commodities in global markets: advertising on an international scale and the production of 'images' that are internationally exchangeable; middlemen who make a profit; and the unequal exchange between rich and poor economies. Mobility in the global economy has been predominantly male until the late twentieth century explosion of demand for women domestic workers (see Robinson, 1982, 1991), and the growth of international trade in sex workers. The lucrative international sex trade that does treat women as commodities is an aspect of this female migration; indeed some of the websites that promote potential spouses also sell sex tourism. This has fed the propensity of seeing the process of marriage migration mediated by brokers as a kind of trafficking in women (see, for example, Aguilar, 1987; Halualani, 1995; Ridenhour-Levitt, 1999; Seager, 1997).² The characterisation of the women as 'commodities' in an international trade akin to the slave trade obscures the manner in which they are acting from their own aspirations. Indeed, Massey (1994, p. 150) argues that the time-space compression associated with globalisation allows that the mobility of some groups may weaken the power of others.

The shift in commercial sites for brokering correspondence marriages from 'pen-pal' magazines to the Web has increased the attention on brokerage in international marriage migration and the critique of it as an 'illegitimate' activity (see, for example, Cunneen & Stubbs, 1997; Ridenhour-Levitt, 1999). On the whole, scholarly and political analysis has been of the commercial processes through which introductions are made and marriages are contracted, for example, through deconstruction of the websites used for introductions. There is no doubt this is a commodified process—the middlemen make money from the use of the women's ads and photos in the catalogues of addresses which they sell to subscribers (much in the same way as Asian airlines use the images of women to sell tickets, or governments use images of female docility to attract foreign

investors, or luxury car manufacturers use women's bodies to sell their vehicles). The internet sites can also sell associated commodities, in particular package tours (including sex tourism) and immigration services (see, for example, <http://www.fianceevisa.com>, last accessed 1 November 2006).

The women (or at least their photos, biographies and addresses) are represented as commodities in these catalogues, but the critics of the process also treat the women as commodities by exclusively focusing on the 'marketing' aspect of the pen-pal marriage phenomenon (see, for example, Halualani, 1995; Phelan, 2000; Ridenhour-Levitt, 1999; Tolentino, 1996). But unlike the commodities in a Sears Roebuck catalogue, the women actively seek their own disposition as brides, albeit at the same time generating profit for someone else—the intermediary, the travel agent, the immigration broker. The women and their struggles to realise their own dreams and ambitions too often disappear beneath the weight of moral indignation at the 'profiteering' by middlemen and exploitation by men who have, it is presumed, little currency in their own domestic marriage markets. For example, an Australian newspaper featured a story on men seeking wives in the former Soviet Union, through web-based brokers. The journalist characterised them as 'men who might be rejected, unrequited casualties of Australia's dating scene' who are 'transformed into internationally desirable commodities' (Phelan, 2000, p. 49).

The democratising aspect of the Web means that people seeking spouses are not limited to commercial marriage-broker sites. In a current research project exploring relationships established through the internet, the moderator of a chat room for 'Fil-West' families reported that about 50% of the subscribers had met through a dating or match-making site.³ Partners are meeting up through chat rooms, interest groups, or using the internet and chat rooms to pursue correspondence relationships with people to whom they have been introduced by friends and relatives. This, of course presupposes access to the internet, and while this is a precondition that limits opportunities for many, in countries like the Philippines and China internet cafes are widely dispersed and relatively cheap (see Constable, 2003).

Renegotiating Gender Relations

When a marriage is contracted the man and woman enter into a personal relationship, which cannot be understood solely as a commodity exchange: 'Globalisation is more than world money markets since it influences our perceptions of tradition and day-to-day family life, offers up new challenges to our emotions and raises new uncertainties' (Giddens, 1999b). New structures of intimacy and attachment flourish in the spaces opened up by global flows (see Massey, 1994, p. 154). Rather than constraining interpersonal/gender relationships into a market mode, subsumed under economic logic, these new spaces open up and depend on imaginative practices involving symbolisation and desire.

The constructions of masculinity and femininity, which are brought into play in the marriage by remote contact of men from rich countries and women from poor countries, cannot be analysed in terms of an assumed universal dichotomous regime of gender difference and inequality. Gender constructions are historical compositions, arising on the basis of power inequalities, the sexual division of labour, and the social patterning of desire, or 'cathexis', that is, 'the construction

of emotionally charged relations with objects (i.e., other people) in the real world' (Connell, 1987, p. 112). And neither can a unitary construct of masculinity be assumed (Connell, 1987, 2002). There is a tension between the characterisation of men seeking international marriages as dominant by virtue of their membership of the hegemonic group in global capitalism (white males) and their characterisation in terms of the market metaphor, as 'losers' with little currency in the marriage market at home, who can cash in their 'global value' as men from the rich countries in the global market. Femininity—and masculinity—'are products of diverse practices across a variety of social domains' (Lake, 1996, p. 10). Hence, the analytical task is to 'identify the variety of discourses in force at any one time and ... to explain why particular groups of women, in particular historical circumstances, [are] more likely to respond to some representations of their identity and experience than others' (Lake, 1996, pp. 10–12). Studies of the generation of 'mail-order brides' who met their husbands through pen-pal clubs, marriage tourism and so forth, reveal variety in motivations, processes and outcomes (Robinson, 1996). Global cultural flows expose the women to new and diverse definitions and performances of femininity, encompassing sexuality, independence and conjugal roles. Rather than assuming a static binary construct of gender relations, an analysis of correspondence marriages must encompass the reconfiguration of gender subjectivities and gender relations in the 'power geometry' of the contemporary global order (see Constable, 2003, 2004; Piper, 1997).

In the global social space mediated through the Web, gender identities and associated forms of emotional attachment which underpin spousal and parental roles are under negotiation. For example, the Western man's quest for an Asian bride can be understood as a response to the dissolution of a personal identity as a consequence of the decline of patriarchy which Castells (1997, pp. 133–138) argues is fundamental to the 'network society' in which we now live. He argues that its decline is partly a consequence of the women's movement but is also due to changes in the global economic order, including the 'massive incorporation of women into paid work, and the loss of traditionally male jobs' (Castells, 1997, p. 135). The desire by some Australian men for Asian wives encompasses a nostalgia for 'father right' felt to be eroded by changes in women's social power as a consequence of feminism, and, in Australia, with the 1975 introduction of 'no fault' divorce, and the success of women in winning custody disputes for children of failed marriages (see Robinson, 2000). Hence, the longing for 'father right' can be read as a response to the dissolution of a form of masculine personal identity. Men who are angry about the erosion of 'father right' express envy of the apparent certainty and immunity from destabilising global processes offered by the assertion of fundamental/primordial identities based in religion (Robinson, 2000). The men who embrace an image of Asian values as a way of articulating their experience of disempowerment in contemporary Australia express what Castells (1997, p. 8) calls a 'resistance identity', one that is 'generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination'. 'Resistance identities' emerge as a result of the 'dissolution of former legitimizing identities' (Castells, 1997, p. 356) and express a kind of fundamentalism, an assertion of a primordial base (in this case, a form of gender relations) for the organisation of civil society. This is but one manifestation of the shifting gender orders expressed through web-brokered North–South marriages.

Marriage-broker Websites

Whereas an earlier generation of international correspondence marriages relied on pen-pal clubs and advertisements in newspapers and magazines (including dedicated publications like *Australian Single*, as well as personal columns of the popular magazine *Australasian Post*—both now defunct), web-based services have come to dominate, from the mid-1980s. Constable (2003) estimated 153 international introduction sites in 1998 which had grown to a conservatively estimated 400 agencies in 2000. While some of these are businesses, charging for services and membership, some of the growth has been from not-for-profit sites, many run by couples who have had ‘pen-pal’ marriages (Constable, 2003). Most are aimed at men seeking brides, though a small number also have men advertising themselves as potential husbands. While initially most sites featured Asian women, from the 1990s there has been growth in sites advertising women from the former Soviet Union.

Websites like *Heart of Asia* reveal a nostalgia for an imagined past perfect world in which women are ‘not spoiled by exposure to western ways, western lifestyle or “women’s lib”’ (Heart of Asia, 2000). The webmaster Gary Clark expresses hostility to women from North America, Britain, and Australia with the same passion that he shows in his eulogising of Asian brides, referring to the ‘feministas and their sympathizers’, even ‘FemiNazis’ (Clark, 2000b). ‘*The feminist movement is to blame*’ (emphasis original) he proclaims, on the one hand criticising women for choosing careers rather than choosing to be wives—‘they have chosen for themselves a career path other than that of wife’—but, on the other hand, accusing American women of being too concerned with the status and wealth of the men they marry (Clark, 2000b). In his view, women from Asia and Eastern Europe are seeking American husbands because they are better ‘husband material’ than the men of their own societies. (The women’s attributes as mothers are rarely mentioned.) The Mail Order Bride Warehouse (Goodwife.com, no longer online) featured a logo with a drawing of a pair of seductive long-haired, long-legged twins, coquettishly facing the reader, with the domain name embellished with two bows of the kind featured on wedding invitations. The drawing represents the sexualised femininity which Marilyn Lake (1996) argues, at least in Australia, replaced a more domesticated femininity in the period after World War II.

The matchmaking websites divide the world up into categories of women with differential attributes as wives. While some use a broad categorisation of regions (such as Asian/Latin/Soviet), others are more specific. Goodwife.com proclaims that Filipinas exhibit ‘devotion to one’s husband’ as part of their culture; ‘Thai ladies’ are ‘more conservative and observe different customs’ while ‘Indonesian ladies... are renowned for the way they take care of and “pamper” their partner’. Other websites apportion different wifely characteristics or virtues according to their region of residence in the Philippines.

While the men seeking Asian wives in many cases exhibit nostalgia for a presumed lost paradise (Robinson, 2000), the women cannot be encompassed by the scripts of the men’s fantasies. They are trying to negotiate new kinds of responsibilities and possibilities in the ‘adventure in identity’ offered by a cross-cultural marriage; a dream of an unknown future which holds the promise of benefits of capitalist modernity and affluence rather than nostalgia for an utopic past. Postings on the ‘Fil-West’ site mentioned above, from men and women actively engaged in international cross-cultural partnering, display

an engagement with a powerful trope of romantic love in the way they relate the stories of their attachment. The men 'woo' the women and both men and women post stories of the 'spark' that accompanied their 'first meeting' or the moment when the letters or e-mails of the chosen partner leapt out at them from among the others. A divorced American man wrote:

I can't say what it was or what fate of 'chemistry' we had during our initial contacts which drew us together. But something between Maria and I definitely clicked . . . More so than with other Filipinas I had written to or spoken with over the phone at that time. My Maria stood out . . . like a searchlight in a dark forest!... I went to meet her for the first time . . . And to tell you frankly it wasn't like meeting some strange woman I had never met face-to-face. It was more like meeting an old friend I hadn't seen in a long time... It was the darndest thing that either of us had ever done in our lives. But it worked, and it's still working.

The decisions of women to choose spousal migration cannot be divorced from their family relations, their performance as good sisters, aunts, daughters, and wives, as well as their global positioning as citizens of poor countries. Motivations to assist family members are an important trigger for seeking spouses overseas, and these kinship ties retain a concrete form in both remittances and sponsorship of further migration (see Robinson, 1996). Moreover, many of the men posting on the Fil-West chat room show an understanding that citizenship benefits are an important part of the relationship. People posting on the website use signatures that list significant facts about their relationship, and important dates. The women might use a signature like 'meeting in November' but the men commonly provided a list of significant dates, of meeting and of stages of the visa application with special note of the award of a Green Card for women marrying Americans.

Some earlier forms of international marriage, such as proxy brides (see below) shared more with customary forms of arranged marriage, sometimes involving brokers, but carried out through the exercise of kinship-based forms of power over women. An important difference in these web-brokered marriages is that the contracting of the marriage occurs outside kinship-based forms of power, with the women directly negotiating with their potential spouses. They indicate significant shifts in cultural constructions of the social patterning of desire, from the preferred spouse being 'someone like yourself' to the desire for someone who in many ways is radically different. Symbolic constructions of gender attributes linked to nationality come into play, such as the presumed location of traditional family values in the Asian bride.

Many of the women who advertise on websites have children (especially women from the former Soviet Union); they seek spouses as 'good mothers' who wish to maximise the life chances of themselves and their children, in a world which is hostile to their well-being. For these women, the ideal spouse is described in words such as 'kind', 'caring', 'affectionate', financially secure', 'successful', having a 'good job'. One woman mentions that he should be 'willing to accept my situation which is that I belong to a poor family' (Sinangote Dumeuan, <http://www.filipinafriends.com/9vh30Oz.html>, 21 March 2000). She comments 'I want to help my future husband to run or start a business because that has been my dream since I was 5 years old'. Many of the Filipinas mention that they would like a Catholic husband. While one cannot know the degree of editorial control exercised on the commercial sites, the photos and

'self-descriptors' furnish a discursive field for the imaginings of both the men and the women.

The Role of the State

Arguments that see the growth in marriage markets as simply expressing a form of commoditisation in a new world order in which the market (re)orders all social and cultural processes, including flows of people, ignores forms of power outside relations of production, including the role of states in regulating migration. The state creates the 'need' for spousal migrants—and other kinds of gender-specific migration—as well as permitting migrant entry. Forms of marriage, family and household are formulated by states as ideological constructs and are sites for the exercise of state-based power.

The state takes an active role in the surveillance of overseas marriages. The couple have to demonstrate to immigration authorities the 'true' nature of their relationship, evidenced by letters and other indicators of an emotional bond. That is, the state imposes a particular view about the necessary qualities of a relationship that can be the basis of a marriage. Western states presume a model of attachment defined in terms of romantic love and are suspicious of marriages where the intimate bond cannot be demonstrated.⁴

Contributing to trends of spousal migration to Australia has been the Philippines government policy encouraging out-migration, beginning in the 1970s. This coincided with a liberalising of Australian immigration policy, including a conscious effort to weed out racial discrimination in selecting migrants, and a new emphasis on family reunion migration as part of a commitment to multiculturalism. The complex relationship between economic migration and spousal migration is indicated in McKay's (2003) research, which found that Canada was a preferred migration destination for Filipinas because of the potential for marrying what was regarded as a desirable partner (as opposed to say migration to Hong Kong or Singapore).

In the case of Australian men seeking wives overseas, single immigrant men and men from remote parts of the country are over-represented (see Jackson, 1993).⁵ The high demand for spouses from overseas can be seen as a consequence of an earlier generation of Australian immigration policy which led to an influx of single men—many of them from non-English-speaking backgrounds—who took up work as unskilled labourers in the great projects of Australia's post-war reconstruction (the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme) and economic development (mining). They frequently found themselves working in isolated areas where women were scarce, so there were few avenues for these men (who often spoke poor English) to choose marriage partners (Robinson, 1996). In the 1950s and 1960s, men from Southern Europe had marriages arranged by families, many of them 'proxy marriages':

Before World War II and in the postwar period of the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of Italian immigrants were young, single men. These men had little opportunity to marry in Australia, in part because of the language barrier. Often they preferred to marry women from their own village or region so that they could share the same background. For many women in Italy the problem of finding a suitable husband was also significant as a large percentage of the young men had emigrated. (Wardrop, 1996, p. 1)⁶

What is Marriage?

Notions of individual agency are especially powerful in the arena of emotional attachments: one of modernity's most powerful discourses is that of the autonomous individual seeking personal fulfilment in their sexual relations (see Giddens, 1992). Giddens suggests that romantic love is historically related to the realisation of the self as a quintessential fact of modernity. In developing his analysis of these changes in marriage and family life,⁷ Giddens argues that the valorisation of romantic love as a basis of a marriage predicated on an intimate bond between husband and wife is a relatively recent historical phenomenon and in his view one which developed along with capitalism, reflecting new forms of individualism. The elevation of this intimacy to a central role in the contraction of a marriage is at the heart of the critique of the 'legitimacy' of brokered marriages, as it is assumed that one of the motives behind women offering themselves as spouses for foreigners must be that they perceive their female sexuality as a convertible 'currency' on the global market to effect an escape route, for themselves and perhaps their families, from poverty. This analysis is a narrowly reductionist political economy of relationships which assumes a tension between economy and desire, an assumption which Constable (2003, 2004) problematises. The idea of romantic love as the 'spark' (see Giddens, 1992) is not a universal connection between conjugal bonds and sexual attraction; it is a common assumption in societies practising arranged marriage that sexual attraction and love follow the celebration of a marriage in which practical economic considerations underpin choice of spouse (see, for example, Robinson, 1988). In such cases, desire is assumed to arise on the basis of sameness. In the virtual space of the Web, though, difference is an element of cathexis, the constitution of desire, for partners seeking transcultural unions.

Romantic love, sexual desire and emotional attachment have proven to be extremely motile in the global economy. Their manifestation in particular settings, however, cannot be assumed to be the working out of a unilinear progress towards a better world. Giddens' argument does invite us to attend to the heightened significance of culturally mandated forms of emotional attachment as part of the 'assemblage' of modern gender orders, but the historical moment is not a cross-section in a linear path forward, but rather a particular assemblage which exhibits historicity. Marriage and the family are crucial institutions for the articulation of gender and class. But we do not need to posit a teleological connection between forms of capitalism and types of family—for example, that under conditions of global capital, families are understood principally as sites of consumption and the contraction of marriage is best understood as an aspect of this role in commodity exchange. Understanding personal relations through teleological explanations that see them as reflexively related to social forms like 'patriarchy' or 'capitalism', or to see them in terms of unilinear processes of change towards modernity, avoids addressing questions of agency and the gendered dimensions of personal life, in particular the social construction of desire.

The modes of representation used by 'brokers' replicate stereotypes of Asian and other 'exotic' women, which are typically highly sexualised. These stereotypes have a powerful purchase on the social imaginary, but serve as a brake as well as an enticement to particular men seeking partners in cyberspace. The stereotypes are discussed and challenged on websites connecting actors seeking transcultural marriages (such as the chat room noted above). Increasingly,

there are venues where women represent themselves, not in the commodified form of an advertisement, but through posted communications and in chat rooms where they choose how to represent themselves and directly engage with others. In any case, stereotypes are not necessarily endlessly reproduced as the basis of the real interpersonal relations established through commercial networks which may use them as a marketing tool. Couples enter into negotiation; men and women assert their own values in their relationships. Marriage as a social form varies across time and space, and new patterns of spouse selection can lead to new family forms—such as international family networks and interracial blended families—as well as new patterns of conjugal relations.

Globalisation and Personal Life

Beyond a reworking of economic relations in the global economy, globalisation invokes an increasing interconnectedness on a transnational level 'by way of interactions, exchanges and related developments, affecting not least the organisation of culture' (Hannerz, 1996, p. 7). Hannerz takes up the notion of the *ecumene*, used by the ancient Greeks to describe the whole inhabited world as they knew it: 'In our time, the corresponding unit is both larger, in the sense of encompassing more, and smaller, in the more metaphorical senses of connectedness and reachability' (Hannerz, 1996, p. 7). The global *ecumene* is the site for the forging of personal bonds and family relationships which offer new kinds of interpersonal connection and intimacy, 'a continuum of kinds of direct and mediated engagements' (Hannerz, 1996, p. 11). Negotiation of marriage partnerships in the global *ecumene* invokes and reconstitutes the social patterning of desire as an element of gender arrangements on a global level.

This social patterning of desire may involve the exercise of masculine power to engage in fantasies of a sexualised and subordinate femininity, exercised through the stereotype of the passive and subordinate Asian woman represented on many of the websites. While there are instances where people marrying outside their own culture never get beyond such stereotypes (the most extreme instances ending in violence — see Cunneen & Stubbs, 1997), there are many instances of the partners to a cross-cultural marriage—no matter how it is contracted—for whom desire is imbricated with the possibility of personal and family relations that go beyond the expectations formed within their own cultural setting. The space of the internet apparently frees up many men to express a romantic self in a way that is difficult in their everyday lives and familiar cultural milieu. The adventure in identity thus initiated includes gender-specific spousal roles and new personal networks extending from the conjugal bond. For some of the men (those in social locations where there are not enough female potential spouses) the sites for negotiating corresponding marriages provide perhaps the only means they have of realising an aspiration to be a husband and father (Robinson, 1996). Women who contract international correspondence marriages have taken a bold step in moving across the world to achieve their goals. Massey (1994, p. 179) demonstrates that women's lack of mobility has been a critical means of their subordination; these 'travelling women', however, are exercising agency and pushing the bounds, forging new kinds of gender relations.

Personal relations are being formed in a social and cultural context that is transnational and transcultural, and where the transnationalism rests on real social relations and not just the social imaginary. In this space, gender relations are

a critical arena of engagement. Women who choose international partnerships challenge forms of kinship based on power, often marrying against the wishes of their families, but becoming nodal points in new interconnections and networks that link their family to a wider world.⁸ These women are engaged in reformulation of the social patterning of desire that disrupts the exercise of gendered power. In some instances they may challenge and redefine patterns of hypergamy in their own culture by 'marrying up' in a wider social domain where relative status is determined by the economics of the global order.

While some of the men who seek wives overseas may be expressing a kind of fundamentalism, looking for a way to avoid what appear to be challenges to the social constructions of masculinity and femininity in their country of origin, the women may be taking up a different position in relation to forms of global power. Coming from societies (Philippines, Russia) where global economic inequalities provide the impoverished conditions of their everyday lives, the limits of their life chances, the flows of global capital also open up spaces for them to make new (albeit risky) choices where, for many, aspirations can be realised. The Western men can offer affluence and security, but also immigration status (the Green Card in the US, for example) that allows the women to work.

The commodified conditions under which partners may meet give way to the possibility of subsequent non-commodified exchanges (both emotional and material), for example remittances to their families back home, or allow them to support children from previous relationships. These marriages necessarily involve negotiation and reconstitution of the taken-for-granted aspects of personal life, for men and women. They involve forms of emotional attachment which are fundamental to gender identities.

Conclusion

Like innovative communication media in previous eras, the internet allows expanded sociality. Correspondence relationships are now becoming commonplace as people turn to the Web as part of their everyday social world. The men and women who have engaged in international correspondence marriages, now overwhelmingly conducted through the internet, have anticipated a trend. While this paper has been concerned principally with the negotiation of marriage, the internet is increasingly being added to the repertoire of a range of interpersonal and commercial relationships.

While essentially a personal commitment, the transnational correspondence marriage does not occur in isolation. State regulation of migration has created a 'need' for spousal migrants as well as permitting their entry. The scrutiny of applicants for spousal visas necessitates representation of the relationship in terms of taken-for-granted notions about the nature of 'authentic' marriage partnerships.

These transcultural marriages are constitutive of the social networks of the 'global ecumene', a new kind of known world whose borders are constantly expanding. Gender relations within this space cannot be understood as a simple dichotomy in which gender difference is mapped on axes of economic difference. Arguments that equate the growth in marriage markets as simply expressing a form of commoditisation in a new world order, in which the market is the ultimate arbiter of all conditions of everyday existence, hide behind the metaphoric force of the concept. The characterisation of the women as 'commodities' in an

international trade akin to the slave trade obscures the manner in which the women are acting out of their own aspirations, and also, in cases in which a marriage is contracted, the man and woman enter into a personal relationship that cannot be simply characterised as commodity exchange.

Personal relationships involve emotional attachments and the negotiation, even reconfiguration, of gender practices. The women exercise limited forms of agency in this transnational space that allows them to act outside of kinship-based power, although the decisions of women to choose spousal migration cannot be divorced from their family relations, their performance as good sisters, aunts and daughters, as well as good wives. The characterisation of the men who seek spouses through international agencies as patriarchs, as powerful agents in the world system, has to be mediated through understandings of the ways in which gender identities are not simple binaries that the contemporary global order is reproducing on an expanded scale. The social patterning of desire, which is related to the expression of gendered power, is transformed in the making of these unions. The space of international web-brokered marriages is a place of agency, where women make active use of the existing sexual order and where women can be seen as both active subjects, and subjects of male domination. Like sex work, the social practices in this space are transformative 'within the context of structural constraints and domination' (Kempadoo, 1998, p. 8). They exhibit the complex forms of 'power geometry' that Massey (1994) argues characterises the contemporary global order. New forms of gender relations including new kinds of emotional attachment and family forms, and transnational family ties are emerging in the space of the global ecumene.

Notes

1. The web-based brokers have taken up the term 'mail-order bride' as a referent for their activities. This term was coined in the 1980s to refer to the earlier generation of 'pen-pal' marriages. Gary Clark (2000a, 2000b) the author of a manual which he titles *Your Bride is in the Mail* advocates the virtue of a lengthy 'pen-pal' relationship before meeting and deciding to marry, in spite of invoking the 'mail-order' metaphor.
2. McKay points out the overlap between international labour migration (especially for domestic service) and marriage-inspired migration (2003).
3. Interview conducted in 2005, as part of a research project, Interpersonal and Family Relations in Transcultural/Transnational Marriages funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant No DP0451491. The researchers are Kathryn Robinson and Cleonicki Saroca.
4. For example, the British government clamped down on sponsored arranged spouses in the late 1970s (Shah, 1989).
5. The emphasis on recruitment of people in particular occupational categories in Australian immigration policy means that women are less able to migrate independently than men, leading to an over-representation in the fiancée category.
6. The dynamics of such marriages were poignantly represented in the play *The Promised Woman* (written by Greek-Australian playwright Theo Paterikareas) set in a boarding house in an inner Sydney suburb in the early '60s. The men—all European migrants, working in unskilled jobs, regardless of their skills—are either unmarried or separated from their wives. The play explores the complexities of the relations involved in international marriages when the 'promised woman' arrives from Greece to be rejected by her (Greek) fiancée whose fantasies are not realised when he comes face-to-face with his bride, as her family had sent him a retouched photo. The rejected bride, however, has a transformative effect on relations in the boarding house, underscoring for the men the lack in their lives. Her capacity to win trust, even love, from the other men evokes desire in her suitor (who had earlier spurned her). For the woman, his breaking of the contract has set her free from the obligation that her duty to her father (and her unmarried sisters at home) had led her to undertake. Thus, her journey across the world releases her from the bonds of filial (and wifely)

obligation. This play (written in the 1960s) provides an interesting contrast to the situation facing the women who have web-brokered marriages. These contemporary would-be brides are acting out their own agency to contact their prospective spouses and develop relationships leading to marriage, rather than accepting marriages as 'dutiful daughters', in accord with their family's wishes.

7. First developed in his 1999 Reith lectures (Giddens, 1999a).
8. International female labour migration reconfigures economic dimensions of gender relations, relative power in rural households are transformed when mothers are absent earning wages and fathers coping on their own (Constable, 2004).

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

La migración del matrimonio, transformaciones de género y los valores de la familia en el 'ecumene global'

RESUMEN La metáfora del mercado es una herramienta explicativa inferior para el crecimiento de matrimonios del Internet hecho por un corredor entre (en su mayoría) hombres de los países ricos y mujeres de países pobres. El estado tiene un rol importante en controlar formas particulares de migración, incluyendo la creación de la 'necesidad' de emigrantes conyugales, además de permitir su entrada. La caracterización de los hombres, quien buscan esposas utilizando agencias internacionales, como agentes poderoso en el sistema global tiene que ser intermediado por la comprensión de las maneras en que las identidades de género no son simplemente dicotomías que se reproduzcan el orden global contemporáneo en una escala ampliado. La caracterización de las mujeres ocultan la manera en que interpretan ellas sus propias aspiraciones; y cuando se hace un contrato de matrimonio, el hombre y la mujer entran una relación personal que no se puede reducir a un intercambio de mercancía. Tales matrimonios implican que gente negocie nuevas formas de apega personal envolviendo la intimidad, papeles conyugales, y relaciones familiares. Son constitutivos de las redes sociales del 'ecumene global', una nueva clase de

mundo conocido cuyos fronteras son ampliando constantemente. Las relaciones de género no son simplemente constituidas en la esfera económica. No podemos asumir que las relaciones familiares sólo son expresiones de formas económicas dominantes. El espacio de matrimonios internacionales del Internet hecho por corredores es uno donde las mujeres se pueden ver como sujetos activos en un espacio transnacional que les permita a ellas estar afuera al poder parentesco.

PALABRAS CLAVES: migración matrimonio; Internet; familia; identidades de género; el mercado del matrimonio