

**THE INTERNET BRIDE:
UKRAINIAN WOMEN IN VIRTUAL SPACE**

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ABSTRACT This paper explores the recent phenomenon of mass influx of Ukrainian women at the virtual bride market and the ways in which Ukrainian women construct their identities as brides-in-waiting for the international male consumer. Taking a gender perspective, I examine the manner in which the legacy of the Soviet politics of representation of women as mothers and housewives and the recent development of sexualized cyber-culture regulate representational choices and strategies of Ukrainian women who seek their husbands via the medium of the internet.

Different discourses that mediate the construction of a bride image by Ukrainian women position them in multiple, at times, contradictory ways: as subjects resistant to the global sexual commodification of women, as ‘biologically destined’ mothers and wives, as desperate brides-in-waiting, and finally, as sexual objects that attract the male gaze. My purpose here is to show how even in such an ‘innocent’ business as the bride market (ostensibly, it provides a common space for women and men who are looking for serious relationships rather than for short-term sexual encounters), the gender construct firmly anchors the behaviors of women-cyberbrides.

The paper attempts to initiate a discussion on how the critical reading of the social practices and meanings that regulate the process of creation of cyber-brides identities can illuminate the (dangerous) ways in which globalization can lead to the creation of new gender discourses and to write new sexualized and gendered identities into the emerging narratives of globalizing masculinities.

Exploring the New Frontier of Female Border-Crossing: Women's Virtual Identities and the Parables of the Internet

bodies move through various spheres.. passing through transnational spaces.. shopping for another body.. that represents desire.. that represents pleasure.. bodies turn to images.. bodies turn to words.. bodies turn to codes.. culturally coded.. always.. a simple electronic device.. has allowed to order bodies.. passing borders.. passing officials.. passing through transnational wires.. to some proper place..

Ursula Biemann, *Writing Desire* (video, 2000)

The emergence of new technologies has led to profound transformations in virtually every sphere of life of the modern society. Not only have new technologies altered established frames of knowledge, conventional social practices, and local and global political and economic transactions but they also offered a new site for the construction and performance of identity – where the social norms and regulations are rapidly losing their symbolic and legitimate currency. At present, new elements of our reality that existed only in the discourse of imaginative literature and in the world of futuristic writings are quickly making inroads onto the ways in which the modern world understands and narrates itself. The digital revolution brought the Internet and other information and communications technologies (ICTs) to the forefront of the contemporary global society. With the advent of the new technologies, many social actions and exchanges were transferred into the rapidly expanding digital landscape whose incredible possibilities for transgressing the categories of time and space and, on a broader scale, historically shaped ways of constructing human societies captured the imagination. The opportunities for forging transnational identities, finding translocal friendships and loves, and forming global communities, propelled the modern citizenry to further explore the opportunities of the new landscape called the cyberspace.

From a gender perspective, the emergence of new technologies signified the beginning of new debates in academic and popular discourses as to how gender, along with other conventional categories of identification such as race, ethnicity, class, age, and sexuality, are being performed in cyberspace. The diversity of stances and opinions with regard to the question of gender performance in cyberspace shows that at present there is little consensus as to how the intermingling of women and new technologies should be interpreted and represented. Recently some of the proponents of the ICTs have made claims as to the liberating potential of the internet in terms of erasing traditional identifications of the self/other through the categories of race, gender, ethnicity, and age. Since a virtual persona can inhabit cyberspace so, the argument goes, doesn't carry the characteristics of a biological body and, if so, capable of transgressing gender/race/sexuality divides (e.g., gender-switching in on-line communication).

A somewhat different elucidation of the relations between gender and new technologies can be found in recent inquiries. A large body of scholarship in a variety of fields has defined the relationship of women and new technologies as somehow problematic. For example, Jodi O'Brien in her recent essay *Changing the Subject* (2001) states that 'gender, conventional binary gender, is being transported into on-line interactions as a significant, perhaps, the most significant, feature of identity.' A similar claim has been forwarded by Sharpe who points to the way in which 'the liberating variety of imagined embodiments' (1999:1091) promised by cyberspace has been only marginally incorporated into the contemporary cyberculture. Moreover, insistence on certain kinds of visibility (race, gender, age) becomes increasingly normalized within virtual society of cyberspace. Sharpe refers to this aporia as a crisis of imagination: 'I

have begun to think of these issues in terms of a crisis of imagination: we continue to seek to regulate bodies and thoughts on the Net in the same ways we do in RL (real life)' (1999:1092).

Other articulations of the women-technology nexus revolve around the thesis of redefining technology for women's empowerment. Explicitly critiquing the overarching tendency in contemporary scholarship to represent women as victims of technology, Jennifer Light (1995) argues in her piece entitled *The Digital Landscape: New Space for Women?* that different forms of women's participation in virtual communities can 'recast traditional notions of the computer and its relationship with women' (1995:134). Light conceives of the electronic city not only as a site that allows women to overcome the isolation produced by previous technological innovations but also as a social space that harbours the possibilities for political mobilization and changing of women's socio-political status.

At present, the modalities of women's involvement in on-line communities range from participation in electronic networks, bulletin boards, chat rooms, on-line conferences to the rapidly expanding virtual market of prospective domestic workers, 'pen-pal' friends, and mail-order brides. New technologies unsettle the common understanding of border-crossing and migration as a discursive material space. Now the border-crossing often takes on a different hue: the virtual migration flows that manifest themselves through the circulation of virtual identities in transnational spaces open a new chapter in the contemporary chronicles of migration.

In what follows I will use the insights afforded by recent works on gender and new technologies to explore the emerging trend of virtual border-crossing among women

from different parts of the world. I will focus on a recent phenomenon of mass exodus of Ukrainian women at the virtual global bride market. For many women the modern saga of border-crossing oftentimes includes the component of the virtual border-crossing that prefigures the movement of the physical body in transnational spaces (Tolentino, 1999). As such, entrance into the cyberworld becomes a necessary prelude to the subsequent act of physical relocation and border-crossing. In the remaining part of this section, I turn to ‘virtual ethnography’ research with a view to examine the cyber-narratives of Ukrainian women who search for transnational love via the medium of the internet. My purpose here is to offer a critical account of how Ukrainian digital brides-in-waiting who aspire for translocal love and marriage market their identities within the reigning discourse of virtual border-crossing. I will argue that Ukrainian women, who en masse remain faithful (or claim so) to the ideal of one true love, romance, and family, market their identities and are, at the same time, being marketed by the rapidly globalizing politics of gender that mediates the space of virtual border-crossing.

Performing Gender On-Line: Ukrainian Cyberbrides, the Politics of Gender, and Virtual Border-Crossing

Words prefigure the body.. bodies are inscribed in words.. pleasure is implicated through words.. that perform the body.. that performs the words.. the acts of providing words and bodies.. and the act of consuming words and bodies.. are entangled.. the body is entangled.. in words that recount.. not a historical body.. but a nostalgic body.. in any case a narrated body.. imbued with electronic desire.. imbued with electronic pleasure..
Ursula Biemann, *Writing Desire* (video, 2000)

The development of ICTs is one of the main characteristics of global change (Hearn & Parkin, 2001). Not only did globalization open domestic economic markets,

but it also affected the positions of individuals in the global space (the phenomenon which Ulrich Beck coins ‘globalization of biography’). Yet for many of those who find it difficult to move freely in transnational spaces, the opportunities for physical relocation can be opened through movement in virtual space. Whereas before the opportunities to find a foreign bride were limited to the bride-order catalogues and ‘expert’ involvement (marriage agencies), the international bride market is now rapidly moving on-line. It is now much easier than a decade ago for a man from the North to find a wife from virtually any corner of the world. At the same time, for women from so-called Third World countries and transition economies the internet becomes a place that ostensibly harbours opportunities for border-crossing and relocation. As Marchetti (webpage) observes, ‘Although the under-age Philippine ”pen pals” and post-Soviet mail-order brides have been part of the transnational exchange of sex in the post-colonial and post-Cold War marketplace of desire before the digital age, the Internet had accelerated these transactions’.

In the Ukrainian context, this acceleration is caused by a number of factors, including the transition from a planned to a market economy and the cumulative impact of the collapse of the Soviet Block on Ukrainian women. The economic reforms hit the majority of Ukrainian women hard: of those who lost their jobs since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, more than 80 percent are women. The absence of legitimate local opportunities to pursue meaningful careers and a large-scale deprofessionalization of Ukrainian women have had direct consequences on women’s decisions to seek opportunities elsewhere. The loss of their professional identities intensified identity needs as women. The pragmatic element is undoubtedly there: by marrying a man from

an affluent society the Ukrainian woman is looking to restore a lost sense of financial security and to improve material conditions that deteriorated significantly in the past few years. The economic motive alone, however, cannot provide the full explanation of the mass flow of Ukrainian women into the international bride market. In many low- and middle- income countries women found themselves in similar or even worse conditions, yet, unlike Ukraine, those countries do not become the main suppliers of brides for men from economically advanced societies.

Globalization and the Growing Desire for Spatial and Socio-Economic Mobility among Ukrainian Women

Emails conquer distance.. emails maintain distance.. emails mark exchanges.. and promise fulfillment.. the fulfillment of promise .. the bride is the promise.. the groom is the promise.. no longer physically delivered.. but electronically generated..

Ursula Biemann, *Writing Desire* (video, 2000)

As mentioned earlier, the worsening situation at home and the possibility of a better life elsewhere pushed Ukrainian women to turn their bodies to foreign horizons. In the Ukrainian context, globalization did not destroy the Cinderella myth. Instead, it transformed it according to its canons: now Ukrainian Cinderellas are looking to land princes who hold a (Western) European or American passport. The opening of domestic markets, the global distribution of information, and the opportunities to travel abroad meant that Ukrainian women who for several decades of the Soviet regime were bound to domestic choices in marriage suddenly got an opportunity to go internationally. Some women seized the opportunity to go abroad for the purposes of employment or study. As

Pettman observes, “millions of women live in countries where they have no citizenship rights and either no or uncertain residence and work permits” (1999:213).

However, the restrictions on entry of foreign labour imposed by the governments in the North as well as difficulties in obtaining legal work abroad closed this opportunity for many Ukrainian women. Papastergiadis (2000) draws our attention to the fact that “despite the relative freedom of movement of capital and information, labor is subjected to increasing restrictions on entry and settlement” (76-77). Unable to access legal venues for cross-border movements, many young Ukrainian women become easy prey for transnational sex industries that under the false promises of jobs bring them into other countries for the purposes of sex exploitation. In the past decade, Ukraine has become a major source of young women for the international sex market. Hughes (2000) notes that in the sex industry markets today, the most valuable and popular women are from Ukraine and Russia. In 1998, the Ukrainian Ministry for the Interior estimated that 400,000 Ukrainian women had been trafficked in the past decade, although Ukrainian NGOs and researchers believe the numbers to be higher. A survey conducted by International Organization for Migration (IOM) among 1,189 women and girls aged 15 to 35 in ten urban regions in Ukraine showed that 40 percent of women in Ukraine are interested in emigrating or seeking employment abroad. In reality, these disturbing statistics point out that every second woman in Ukraine can be a potential victim of trafficking or of a different kind of gender violence.

The majority of Ukrainian women who stay in the country do not give up the dream of finding a husband abroad and relocating to the North. The technological changes that occurred due to globalization allow those who have access to the

information and communication technologies (ICTs) to obtain virtually any goods and services via the Internet. For those Ukrainian women who found it impossible, because of financial constraints or immigration policies, to go abroad in search of foreign husbands, the Internet became a powerful vehicle for attracting a potential spouse. The transnational narratives of happy marriages and happy lives in a foreign country that are being widely circulated in Ukrainian society add to women's desire to give it a try. The modern sagas of female happiness found in the foreign land largely include the following components that make them appealing for those who remain in Ukraine: (1) the appealing image of the foreign husband (comparisons are usually drawn with Ukrainian men who are perceived as having drinking problems, being lazy, demanding, and unfaithful); (2) the 'good' life abroad defined through the high standards of living in the Western society; (3) the material help that women who relocated are able to provide to their families in Ukraine (to the elderly parents who live on a small pension or siblings who struggle financially).

Although these narratives of transnational marriages overall present a happy picture of women's lives abroad, little empirical evidence exists as to what happens to Ukrainian women in their post-migratory lives. Indeed, knowledge is limited about the extent to which women become dependent on their new husbands (both financially and psychologically), about the social exclusion problems and the costs of psychological adjustments, and about the language barrier (many of the women have limited or no knowledge of the language of the country of destination). In this regard, the phenomenon that I will call 'chain marriages' and the formation of a foreign wives network might provide a good starting point for critical comparative analysis.

The recent trend of chain marriages manifests itself in situation where a Ukrainian woman who married a foreign national would find a husband from the same locale for one of her female friends in Ukraine. In this situation, the woman may 'screen' her husband's male friends, or some of her male colleagues at the workplace who show an interest in marrying a Ukrainian woman. Local newspapers and the Internet might be another option. The woman who migrates first, then, acts as an informal intermediary for those left behind. Oftentimes, the decision of a woman to help the other woman to find a husband abroad is, to some extent, based on the need to restore the social medium from which she withdrew due to relocation. Also, for the majority of Ukrainian women whose opportunities for spatial mobility were extremely limited during Soviet times, the marriage-related relocation to another country means the first encounter of another society and another culture. As a result, many Ukrainian women have difficulties establishing social links with people in the host society. Under these circumstances they turn their attentions to somebody in a similar situation. Usually, they find other women from Ukraine in language schools for immigrants that they are attending, at the workplace or simply by word of mouth. It is not uncommon for Ukrainian women who married a foreign national earlier and already lived a few years in the receiving country to play a mentorship role for those women who are just 'off the boat'. Not surprisingly, Ukrainian women find it easier to relate to other women of similar background and in similar circumstances than to their foreign husbands whom they barely know or to the women in the host society.

The new trends of female migration from Ukraine through marriage show that there is a growing desire among Ukrainian women to marry foreign nationals and

relocate to the West. Seeking to escape poverty, instability, and loneliness, Ukrainian women further and further dissociate themselves from the local bride market and turn their attentions to the foreign males who are at once supposed to bring improvement to their shaken material conditions and to fulfill their dream of an ideal husband.

Virtual border-crossing, however, entails multiple challenges for Ukrainian women. For most of them the Internet and the ICTs remain beyond their reach. Hence, most Ukrainian women have to be very resourceful and persistent in order to find an acquaintance or colleague who has more or less regular access to the Internet. Aside from the access problem, the limited knowledge of the use of technology poses another challenge for Ukrainian women. Lacking the skills that would allow them to utilise the opportunities presented by the ICTs for their specific goals as well as having limited (if any) proficiency in English, the lingua franca of the ICTs, women in Ukraine face a huge problem in entering the virtual bride market. Interestingly, in Ukraine many women use their meager salaries to attend English classes solely for the purposes of communicating with and ‘advertising’ themselves to the prospective husbands in cyberspace and thus for improving their chances for transnational marriage.

The Canons of the Cyberbride Market and Dilemmas of Constructing a Bride's Identity

she is beautiful and feminine.. she is loving and traditional.. she is humble and devoted.. she likes to listen to mellow music.. the smile is her rhetorical gesture.. she believes in a lasting marriage.. and a happy home.. she is the copy of the First World's past..

Ursula Biemann, Writing Desire (video, 2000)

In the past decade, the websites that advertise Ukrainian brides have mushroomed. Most of them offer women an opportunity to create their digital identities as brides free of charge or for a nominal fee. For a woman, marketing herself as a bride

at the virtual bride market involves some gender moves that are determined by the nature of the virtual space, or in other words, by the culture of the ICTs. In their discussion of the relation between globalization, ICTs and gender, Hearn and Parkin (2001:135) show how the Internet and ICTs are often used for the delivery of sexuality, sexual performances, and sexualized violence (e.g., cybersex, internet dating, sex tour advertisements). The difficulties of controlling and censoring the information channelled through the internet lead to the proliferation of texts and images that are openly sexist in their nature and that represent a woman as a sexual commodity that can be bought, used, and exploited by the men. It is important to note that cyberspace is embedded within the larger discourses of representation, including the real/non-virtual social reality as well as other forms of information and communication (e.g., media). The understanding of the interconnection between these different discourses can shed some light as to how the normative or sexualized images and representations of women circulating in their spaces are being transferred into the cyberworld, thereby reproducing the sexualized and gendered discourses that exist outside of the virtual space.

In what follows, I explore the question of how Ukrainian cyberbrides as inhabitants of the virtual space construct their identities and are, at the same time, being constructed by the masculinist discourse of the ICTs. The gendered and sexualised culture of the information technology mediates the actions of women who enter it for the purposes of finding a spouse. Women thus are required to follow the established parameters of the sexual economy while creating their virtual portraits/virtual bodies in the cyberspace. On the one hand, the virtual brides are looking for 'serious' men (who will be willing to go through the hurdles of immigration in order to bring them into their

countries) and for the serious relationships that would lead to marriage. Therefore, in presenting their virtual selves through the medium of technology, cyberbrides attempt to dissociate themselves from the Internet representations of women as sexual commodities that are easily accessible to the male consumer. Hence, Ukrainian brides need to construct their identities as ‘virtuous women’. To do so, Ukrainian women emphasize qualities that present them as good would-be wives and mothers. In their claim to be taken seriously by prospective husbands, the women refer to the traditional patriarchal roles and responsibilities that defined women in Ukraine for several centuries, that is the ability to take care of the children, to cook, to sew and so on. None represents her virtual self through the frame of being a professional, educated, and independent woman.

Interestingly, the analysis of professional occupations and educational attainment of the Ukrainian women who search for husbands via the medium of the Internet shows that most have completed (or are in the process of completing) some form of post-secondary education, and that the majority of those looking for husbands online have university degrees.

In constructing their virtual selves Ukrainian women are performing the ‘biological’ gender construct that represents them in natural roles as mothers and housewives: ‘I will be a perfect wife’; ‘I will be an excellent mother and wife.’ Haukanes (2001:12) points out that ‘the tendency to ‘biologize’ women is even more widespread now than it was during the communist era’. She goes on to give an example of the speech of the Russian Minister of Labor who in 1993 stated: “Why should we employ women when men are unemployed? Is it not better that men work and women take care of the children and do the housework?”(2001:12). Part of the cyberbride

identity construction lies in this dual process of resisting the sexualized discourse of post-socialist Ukraine as well as resisting the sexualized culture of the Internet ('I don't like men who see women as a way to satisfy their sexual needs') and at the same time, subscribing to the normative gender discourse that represents them as biologically destined for mothering and housework.

Although the virtual bride market is a relatively recent phenomenon, it has already established certain canons that regulate the process of taking up a virtual identity. The female body, for example, is symbolically constructed using two instruments: e-text that conveys the desires and the wishes of the digital body and the accompanying (photo) image that displays the physical characteristics of the 'absent' material body. The e-text (usually very laconic) speaks to unknown Internet (male) communicators and serves two main purposes: (1) to describe what the digital body is (*I am ...*); and (2) to describe what the digital body wants (*I want...; I am looking for...*). In other words, in the opening sections of the texts, the cyberbrides are expected to compress their identities into a brief self-description. Here, as stated earlier, Ukrainian women tend to present themselves as '*caring, loving, tender, honest, kind, romantic, sincere*'. Characteristically, all women use the adjectives that are traditionally associated with femininity and motherhood and almost never refer to such qualities as independent, self-reliant, strong, ambitious, goal-oriented and so on. Many Ukrainian women (especially those in their twenties) often use the well-known images of the romantic lovers or powerful metaphors in order to increase the emotional impact on the (male) communicator. The following quotes from women's e-texts aptly illustrate this point:

'I am Juliet... Does Romeo exist?'

'I want to find and I will find my Romeo who will be mine forever'.

'I want to build a Palace of Love and to raise our child in it'.

'I want to create a family that would have an ocean of love'.

Private Readings in Public: Global Desires and the Internet

in the sexual economy ..the body is eroticized.. is made generic.. is made anonymous.. emptied of its specific identities.. to signify the collective exotic... to engender desire.. the desire to be conquered..

Ursula Biemann, *Writing Desire* (video, 2000)

In their search for translocal love, the electronic personae of Ukrainian cyberbrides have to communicate their desires onto the global space of the Internet. Internet communication allows a transcendence of the boundaries and constraints that regulate the behaviour of the individual within the society. Hence, the digital body is more prone to communicate its wishes and desires and is less bound by external constraints involved in face-to-face communication. The nature of the information communicated by cyberbrides through the e-texts might be considered private, yet the fact that it becomes available to anyone who has access to the ICTs renders it public.

The primary goal of the virtual body on the bride market, however, is not to communicate its desires but rather, to make itself desirable for the global male consumer. In the cyberbride market where the competition for (Western) men is high, prospective brides should present themselves as desirable as possible for the male gaze. The (photo) images that accompany the e-texts are serving exactly these purposes of attracting the male's eye and provoking a desire to contact the 'real' woman who is hidden under the electronic persona of the cyberbride. The cyberbride market thus is a space of social actions where the performances of the cyberbrides should lead to material effects (finding

a husband). Unlike other virtual communities (chat groups, on-line conferences), the cybermarket is a social space where the discursive actions of the digital bodies are supposed to set a stage for the future contact of the real physical bodies.

Looking at the photo images of Ukrainian women, one might easily see the parallels with the colorful ‘bodily’ covers of the Western magazines that are now widely available in Ukraine. Wearing tight clothes, taking seductive poses and stressing their sex appeal, Ukrainian brides-in-waiting resemble the images of the covergirls from the popular magazines sold on Ukrainian streets. Waters’ (1995) notion of symbolic exchange is helpful for understanding the ways in which the symbol produced in one part of the world begins to circulate in transnational spaces. According to him, “Symbolic exchanges liberate relationships from spatial referents. Symbols can be produced anywhere and at any time and there are few resource constraints on their production and reproduction. Moreover, they are easily transportable” (1995:9).

Symbolic exchange within the circuits of the globalizing world accelerated the processes of exporting and promoting the Western canons of beauty and desirability across the globe. In Ukraine, the process of transforming the appearance and the female’s body to align it with the Western ideals of beauty is parallel to the broader gendered discourses that regulate the social behaviour of Ukrainian women in the wake of globalization. The emergence of so-called image schools and model schools in Ukraine where young women are being taught how to dress, walk, talk, and act in order to be successful not only invites a gendered definition of success but also sends a message that a woman can achieve something only if she knows how to use her feminine qualities and if she is able to perform socially according to what others (men) are expecting of her.

The parallels between the gendered ways in which Ukrainian women are performing their identities both on-line and otherwise are numerous. In the virtual space, revealing clothes and seductive poses are expected to catch the eye of the male viewer; in everyday life, the same clothes coupled with a transformed appearance and physical movements of the body (as learned in newly opened image schools) are supposed to help these women to get jobs, promotions and so on.

To summarize, the gendered and sexualized culture of the virtual bride market is implicated and at the same time implicates the existing normative frames which construct women's identities as first and foremost sexual objects. As I tried to show in this paper, today even in such 'innocent' business as the bride market (ostensibly, it provides a common space for women and men who are looking for serious relationships rather than for short-term sexual encounters), the gender construct of 'men' and 'women' firmly anchors the behaviours and actions of women-cyberbrides. On the one hand, in the cyberspace women enact regulatory norms that position them as housewives and mothers. On the other hand, the sexualized culture of the ICTs that has become the latest place for promoting sex tours, pornography and trafficking of women, further reinforces the tendency to represent women as sexual commodities for globalizing masculinities.

My main purpose in this chapter was to point out some troubling tendencies as to how women, who en masse remain faithful (or claim so) to the ideal of one true love and family, construct their identities and are, at the same time, being constructed by the rapidly globalizing politics of gender. The complexities and subtleties involved in the processes of seeking transnational love generate different discourses that position women in multiple ways: as subjects resistant to the global sexual commodification of women, as

'biologically destined' mothers and wives, as desperate brides-in-waiting, and finally, as sexual objects that attract the male gaze. Reading critically the social practices that regulate the process of creation of cyberbride identities can illuminate the (dangerous) ways in which globalization can lead to the creation of new gender discourses and to write new sexualized and gendered identities into the emerging narratives of globalizing masculinities. Most importantly, it can point to the possible sites of resistance within the existing discourses of globalization.

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